

# **The monetisation of personal blogging: assembling the self and markets in Malaysia**

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## **Abstract**

Although they represent the majority of bloggers, personal bloggers who follow the diaristic genre are underrepresented in academic studies of blogging. Arguing against the dichotomies of ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ spaces, gift vs. the market economy, and authenticity vs. inauthenticity, this research explores how these are illuminated by an analysis of the effects of monetisation on the affordances and related practices of personal blogging.

Based on participant observation over three years, this thesis uses data derived from maintaining two blogs, participating in on- and offline blogging collective practices, in-depth interviews, and a survey, to investigate the effects of monetisation on personal blogging in Malaysia. Most of the participant observation was attending events organised by a blog advertising network (known here as BlogAdNet) that coincidentally started about the same time the research started. BlogAdNet proved to be successful in mobilising bloggers and advertisers in order to create a market for advertising on personal blogs, and therefore also provides a good case study for investigating the interaction between a previously mostly non-monetised blogging assemblage, and the market economy – in particular the advertising industry. The methodological approach is informed by actor-network theory, emphasising tracing empirical connections and allowing for non-human agency within networks of sociotechnical devices.

The theoretical frameworks that have proved helpful in explaining the collective blogging and market related practices are derived from Deleuze & Guattari’s concepts of rhizomatic assemblages, and also Manuel DeLanda’s further development of the social assemblage. These are used to allow for individual agency, whilst not overlooking nonhuman agency and emergent properties of dynamic systems. Within this framework, the blog is conceived as a sociotechnical dialogical medium that enables interpersonal interaction, and emergent collective practices. These are understood to be enabled by base and emergent affordances that offer the potential of causal relations between relevant actors and actants and thus stabilise a contingent ‘blogging assemblage’.

To situate and analyse the effects of monetisation, and the influence of advertising, Michel Callon’s notions of the ‘economy of qualities’ and related ‘overflows’ are drawn upon, and further extensions of those concepts by Don Slater and Mark Foster to understand the interaction and entanglement of socioeconomic components.



This thesis proposes that bloggers can be understood as engaging in polycasting, and the blog is described as a dialogical medium that enables extended parasocial relations. It concludes by drawing upon arguments based on the relational self that run counter to the assumption of the unitary self inherent in the modern authentic self. In addition, an emergent genre of blogging, the lifestyle blog, is seen as a result of the monetisation of personal blogging. Its emergence results from the sociotechnical processes that have taken place in order to entangle the bloggers and their audience with marketing and advertising strategies aimed at developing social assemblages that include their goods and brands.

## **Statement of authorship**

This thesis contains no material that has been submitted for examination in any other course or accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in the university and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material published by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_25/04/2012\_\_\_\_\_

Candidate's name: Julian Hopkins

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# I. Introduction

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This research started with a personal interest in blogging that dates back to 2004. At that time, blogs were starting to become an increasingly important part of the media in Malaysia, challenging the monopoly of the conventional 'old' media of newspapers, magazines, and television. By 2011, blogs have become an integral part of the media landscape, the most visible of which are Social-Political (SoPo) bloggers – the self-nominated pundits and proto-journalists who write about current affairs. However, they are minority amongst bloggers, most of whom are personal bloggers who write about their life and thoughts, and generally have small audiences.

This is one reason for the focus on personal blogging in this thesis: many tens of thousands, perhaps even hundreds of thousands, of Malaysians use blogs to express themselves, to consolidate and extend offline social relations, and to make new relations online which may extend into offline relations too. Therefore it is worth understanding what are the implications and limitations of these relatively new, technologically specific, online mediated interpersonal interactions in terms of patterns of social formation, and also in terms of the relational self.

The other strand of interest that is interwoven into the above is a consequence of the internet that has been to engender a new cycle of interest in the gift/commodity dichotomy which had been revived and revised in the 1980s (e.g. Appadurai 1986; Bloch & Parry 1989), but took on another dimension when brought together with apparent social formations online. The characterisation of non-monetised online systems of exchange have been described as gift economies, but mostly by writers not very familiar with anthropological theory (e.g. Barbrook 1998; Raymond 1998a). The conceptualisation of online gift economies requires both the separation of the online and offline in a socioeconomic sense, and the separation of the online person from the offline person. This mistaken dichotomisation of internet-related social and personal dynamics has bedevilled otherwise interesting research and commentary on the social implications of the internet. This thesis therefore contributes to the debate by focusing on the monetisation of blogs, a practice which – by clearly integrating on- and offline systems – enables a further investigation into the interrelation of on- and offline practices.

# 1 Aim and scope

The aim of this thesis is to explain the effects of monetisation on personal blogging in Malaysia. More precisely, on the basis that blog affordances enable a degree of reflexivity in relation to the development of the relational self – a concept developed by Deleuze with regards to digital technologies (1992), and also explored by Marilyn Strathern (1991) – and that they also enable mediated interpersonal relations that can develop into a relatively stabilised social assemblage, this thesis looks at how the dynamics of both of these processes are affected by the monetisation of blogs.

The blog is proposed as a sociotechnical dialogical medium. Using as a basis the argument for viewing technology as a sociotechnology (Pfaffenberger 1992), and the concept of affordances (Norman 1999), a ‘diagram’ of blog affordances is developed that lays out the specific means by which a blog offers the potential for a reflexive articulation of the self, and for interpersonal mediated relations that develop into a relatively stabilised assemblage. The arguments of Deleuze & Guattari – specifically those that relate to assemblages, and the impact of capitalism – and the related actor-network theory (ANT) (Latour 2005), are used to allow for the inclusion of non-human agents into such assemblages – in particular, the blog can act relatively autonomously from the blogger, thanks to its quasi-permanent place on the Web, and the automated code that regulates its reaction to various stimuli.

Personal blogging is most recognisable through its diaristic format – the personal blogger regularly updates with anecdotes and reflections from their own life. A common assertion is: ‘I blog for me’ (Reed 2005), and a related understanding is that it is the prerogative of the blogger to blog in any manner they should choose. This emphasis on personal ownership and individuality has as its corollary a discourse of authenticity, a certain rawness of expression that is held to reflect the blogger’s true personality. Because of this, understanding personal blogging requires engaging with theories of the self, such as that proposed by Anthony Giddens with regards to the post-modern context (1991); however, the theories developed with regards to the partible person (Strathern 1990), or the “fractal person” (Wagner 2008) are more useful in understanding the role the blog plays in allowing the subjective expression of the contingent selfhood of bloggers.

From the early stages of research into the social aspects of the internet, there has been a close interest in the development of social formations online. Early work on ‘online communities’ (e.g. Baym 1995; Steve Jones 1997) led the way to an understanding of affordances that allow a rich

social interaction in spite of the absence of physical collocation and related nonverbal and visual cues that usually accompany social interaction. There is however a strong tradition of scepticism with regards to claims of community within anthropology (e.g. Amit & Rapport 2002), but this has not always been explored closely in the literature on internet studies. A way to avoid the presuppositions that accompany assertions of community is to draw upon the arguments of Manuel DeLanda (2006) regarding social assemblages; these focus on the contingent and emergent properties of sociotechnical networks, which are stabilised by identifiable relations that collectively resonate to form 'plateaus' of becoming. This thesis will draw on these arguments to focus on working outwards from dyadic relations, and critically examine claims of community on the basis that they often reflect the agendas of specific actors, and/or researchers, rather than empirically identifiable human groupings.

The market economy has often been contrasted with pre-capitalist systems based on non-market exchange and embedded reciprocal relations deriving from rich and complex cultural and symbolic systems. Ostensibly – if one is to imagine bloggers as a non-monetised subcultural collective – there exists a parallel with the introduction of monetisation into Malaysian blogging, and one of the main actors in this regards is BlogAdNet<sup>1</sup> – a blog advertising network that specifically promotes itself as 'building a community of bloggers'. This intertwining of commercial interests and community is tense, with the former often being assumed to undermine and contradict the latter.

However anthropological arguments, once they moved on from the romanticisation of non-European cultures, have tended to emphasise the widespread presence of pre-capitalist markets and the complex nature of non-market systems that interact with market systems, and also carry their own power inequalities and calculative incentives. With regards to the subject matter of this thesis, again the concept of assemblages is useful in avoiding a dichotomisation of market and non-market exchange systems. Although monetisation was not part of the earlier stages of personal blogging in Malaysia, all of the bloggers are fully integrated into a capitalistic socioeconomic system, and the internet has also been commercialised since its early stages. There were definite changes observed during the period of fieldwork, and BlogAdNet in particular transformed the opportunities for personal bloggers. There was also a power shift in favour of commercial interests, at least amongst those bloggers I observed. However, to argue for a takeover of blogging by commercial interests ignores the strategies that bloggers and readers use to bypass and resist commercial imperatives, and also the almost unlimited opportunities for bloggers to create their own spaces on the Web.

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<sup>1</sup> A pseudonym. All names of organisations and people are pseudonyms, unless otherwise stated (see Chapter III, Section 2.2; p70. Also Appendix G)

These issues are analysed here based mostly on arguments about the “economy of qualities” proposed by Michel Callon (1998a) that rise out the ANT traditions, and Don Slater (2002a) who develops them with regards to interpersonal relations. These arguments have been effectively extended to advertising by Robert Foster (2007) and have been useful in understanding the role of blogs in the advertising market, the principle means by which monetisation has been extended to personal blogging in Malaysia.

### **1.1 Limitations & paths not taken**

As noted earlier, there are many Malaysian blogs, and this thesis does not intend to represent the ‘Malaysian blogosphere’; there are too many blogs overall to engage with in a meaningful qualitative research, there are linguistic barriers with many being in *Bahasa Malaysia* (BM),<sup>2</sup> Chinese (Mandarin and various dialects), and other languages such as Tamil. There are also many genres of blogs ranging from the personal blog (the majority) to SoPo blogs, but also taking in tech blogs, parenting blogs, and others. Therefore the focus is on Personal blogs only; in practice, the ones I followed were mostly situated around the BlogAdNet network, but I did attend meets of similar organisations, as well as SoPo too. Those bloggers I interacted with were predominantly ethnic Chinese, English speaking, and based in the urbanised Klang Valley – influenced by my linguistic limitations, this was not out of choice, but it does also reflect the demographic of many bloggers.

Although the offline context is crucial to understanding the online, and I did meet up with bloggers offline as much as possible, there will not be a detailed discussion of the ‘Malaysian-ness’ of the phenomenon. I have lived and worked in Malaysia for nine years, my spouse is a Malaysian ethnic Chinese, and I have a lot of experience of the cultural subtleties of Malaysia. However, to translate this into a detailed analysis of the ‘Malaysian blogger’ would require further expertise of Malaysian history and culture, and in particular the Chinese ethnic groups. In addition, a lack of similar studies elsewhere makes any conclusions regarding Malaysian specificity difficult to ascertain. Therefore I will generally restrict myself to observations on the cultural patterns of those I interacted with and observed, occasionally drawing upon previous research where relevant. In the conclusion I will outline the parameters that an analysis of blogging as embedded in Malaysian culture might take, and make recommendations for future research.

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<sup>2</sup> The national language of Malaysia is alternatively called *Bahasa Malaysia*, or *Bahasa Melayu*. Here, it will be abbreviated as ‘BM’.

There exists a considerable body of literature, going back to the Frankfurt School, which focuses on the cultural industries, and the various means by which art and cultural expression have been appropriated to generate profit and to extend hegemonic control over society. In one sense, the subject of this thesis is relevant to that debate, but on the other hand blogs are personal media that do not lend themselves to the cultural industries model that assumes professional institutions producing more or less static content for a mass audience. The models developed in this tradition are of little use in explaining blogging, and for that reason this approach will be mostly left aside. Related to the above is what might be seen as the culmination of the cultural industries model, Baudrillard's reduction of the product to the sign and the model of hyperreality that treats the phenomenological world primarily as encounters between readers and texts (Slater 2002b: 72). Whether or not products are only signs, or signs of signs, there is still an objective network of relations that emerge around these products, people and practices, and by focusing on these we are able to shed more light on the dynamics and possible future developments. It is true that advertising is based on the creation and manipulation of symbols, but as far as the bloggers encountered in this fieldwork are concerned, it is a means to earn an appreciable income and therefore has a very real impact.

Another important theoretical tradition that is touched upon, but not used extensively, is the field theory deriving from Pierre Bourdieu's arguments. Field theory is very powerful and often explanatory, and indeed it was the theory that I started out with basing my assumptions on – postulating a field of blogging based around a fundamental law of the disinterested, authentic blogger, which corresponded closely to the disinterested artist' model described by Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1980). However, as explained more in chapter II, I eventually found that I found that I could not shoehorn the data into it. The principal problem that I came up against was that field theory requires a fundamental law, an essence that defines a field and opposes others, and in this respect the argument by Callon that the "notion of social capital is the Trojan horse of dualism" (1998a: 12) is apposite. Another more practical problem with Bourdieu's model of the artists' competing displays of disinterestedness, and the constant replacement of one generations of artists with the next, was that it is predicated on a limited space for the display and sale of art, i.e. through dealers, whereas in the blogosphere, there is an almost infinite space for any interested party to set up.

Blogging, like all creative endeavours, teaches us a lot about the dynamism of human culture, and offers many more research opportunities than this research was able to develop. Gender is one of



these, and the ways in which blogs can reinforce or challenge gender discourses would be a fertile area of investigation, Mia Lövhelm (2010) and Carmel Vaisman<sup>3</sup> have offered some valuable contributions to this area. There is also a specific strand of blogging known often as 'problogging' that focuses specifically on monetising blogs; although it would seem to be the proper area for this research to focus on, I found that many of them did not use blogs so much as a novel medium, but instead as a means to an end, thus meaning that researching their specific practices would not reveal as much about the blog as personal medium.

## **2 Overview of the thesis**

The thesis will proceed by starting with an outline of the relevant theories and literature on blogs, media technologies, the self, social formations online, and marketisation. Arguing against the dichotomisation of on- and offline, authenticity and inauthenticity, and gift and market exchange, it concludes by arguing that a productive way forward is to use the concepts of sociotechnology, affordances, social assemblage, the economy of qualities, and the relational self. The next chapter will explain the methodology used: this is primarily a participant-observation method, where two blogs were created to participate in online activities, and for offline activities many blogmeets were attended. One blog was also specifically intended to get feedback from bloggers, with some fieldnotes being posted online too. While the level of feedback through the blog was low, having a blog was essential in learning through practice, and enabling access to blogmeets and so on. In addition, an online survey was carried out, as well as in-depth interviews of bloggers.

Having laid out the theoretical and methodological basis of the thesis, chapter IV is a brief history of the internet and blogging in Malaysia, and the means of monetisation that have developed alongside of it, providing the context for the following three chapters that focus on the individual blogger and her blog, the blogging assemblage, and the meshing of monetisation practices with the aspects outlined in the previous two chapters.

Chapter V therefore outlines the situation that is presented by the individual blogger as she sits in front of her computer and decides to blog. First, it outlines the components of a typical blog, and the characteristics of the personal blog genre. Then it discusses the blog as extension of the self, and the different ways in which bloggers perceive their blog as being a representation of themselves online. Finally, it argues for understanding the blog as an actant, one which acts semi-autonomously based on computer code that is normally not fully understood by the blogger. It concludes with a

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<sup>3</sup> Personal communication, 11 October 2010

discussion of the relational self, and how this helps to understand the tensions between authenticity and partial presentations of the self online.

Chapter VI then traces the relations beyond the blogger and his blog, to other bloggers and other blogs, and asks how these are enabled by the specific blog affordances. The emergent interactive affordance is realised through hyperlinking and commenting, practices that stabilise the online blogging assemblage. There are also additional websites known as 'blogtals' (blog portals) that often provide a focus for online consociation. The blogmeets are then explained as the principle offline node for stabilising the blogging assemblage offline, and practices typical of blogmeets are shown to be useful in bridging the on- and offline assemblages, allowing us to consider there to be one overall blogging assemblage, albeit a particular, contingent, one that is based on a particular genre, location, and personal relationships that may or may not be related to blogging.

Chapter seven then draws upon the previous chapters to address the central questions of the thesis. It starts by outlining the ways in which the market for blog advertising was assembled; based on existing industry practices, new technologies were deployed to enable the calculation of the audience as a local and appropriate demographic segment for particular companies. This discussion leads into a discussion of labour, the concept of the 'produser' (Bruns 2008), and the economy of qualities (Callon *et al.* 2002) – concluding that the new genre of the 'lifestyle blog' is a result of desires by advertisers to entangle their goods with the personal blogs' audiences. Five particular areas of monetised blogging are explored in order to analyse the types of changes that happened: the advertorial, the disclosure of the advertorial, the comments, click fraud, and blogmeets. Finally, it concludes that there is definite evidence of change in both the conceptualisation of the blog as extension of the self, and the patterns of consociation in the blogging assemblage, although they cannot all be attributed to monetisation alone.

Finally the conclusion will include a section on recommendations for research into the Malaysian-ness of the monetisation of blogs and the intercultural possibilities. It will argue that BlogAdNet has been successful in stabilising a blogging assemblage, and that new bloggers are now faced with a different idea of the potential of blogs. It will also note that the changes to blogging that happened concurrently with increased monetisation also happened concurrent to increased blog audiences, and increased use of digital social media by a wide variety of actors, therefore it is difficult to tease out specific trends with certainty. The use of BlogAdNet of other services such as Facebook and

Twitter show that they are seeking to apply the same models to other digital social media, and this trend is likely to continue.

# II. Media, technology and blogging: an overview

---

## 1 Introduction

This chapter will lay out the basic theoretical concepts used in order to analyse the monetisation of blogs in Malaysia. This necessitates a model that integrates technology, media, social practices, and individual agency. First, media and the internet will be discussed, and the blog proposed as a sociotechnical medium. Following that, three main theories are discussed: actor-network theory, Bourdieu's field theory, and Deleuze & Guattari's 'assemblage'. These offer occasionally complementary approaches, but the focus is on using an 'assemblage perspective' to develop a sociotechnical model of blogging.

'Affordances' are introduced as a way of refining, or specifying, some of the particular processes that link causal relations in the assemblages. Following that, an overview of blog genres is developed, and the utility of genre as a means to understand the interaction of textual expression and the blog medium is discussed. Finally, a discussion of the means to theorise the monetisation of blogs is outlined.

## 2 The internet as meta-medium

A medium is understood as a sociotechnology that allows the extension of human communication beyond that which is inherently available (speech, and non-verbal language). I will qualify this definition, which approximates that of Marshall McLuhan (1964: 203), by arguing – similarly to Nick Couldry (2003a: 60) – that it is more useful not to include *all* processes of mediated communication which can extend to make-up, clothes, and even potentially a light bulb, but to centre around *the* media which Couldry argues is commonly understood to be “those *central* media [e.g. television] through which we imagine ourselves to be connected to the social world.” (Couldry 2003a: 60; original emphasis). Another useful distinguishing characteristic that can be used is suggested by O'Shaughnessy & Stadler who characterise the media as using “processes of industrialised technology for producing messages” (2008: 4). Blogs fit neither of these models perfectly, for the production of content is mostly decentralised, and production of the medium itself (i.e. the software) is to a lesser extent decentralised, thus conforming more to something akin to an artisanal

process of production rather an industrialised one. Nonetheless, these are appropriate bases for a discussion of the blog as medium.

Defining a medium in terms of its technological properties (e.g. the ability to transmit visual or audio messages) serves as an initial categorical device, but solely depending on these is not enough. A medium can also be understood as a process that moves through different phases of production, distribution, and reception. There are different theoretical traditions that focus on each of these phases. The transmission model tends to emphasise the production process, the resultant content, and its effects on society. Marshall McLuhan reacted against this and claimed that “the medium is the message” (1964: 9); this was an important reminder that the technological properties of the medium may affect the form of the message to a significant extent, but nonetheless he overemphasises the technologically deterministic aspect of media. Both of these traditions tend to understate the agency of the recipients of media messages – the audience: efforts to redress this have come from ethnographic studies of the audience (*cf.* Ross & Nightingale 2003) and critical theories from the cultural studies schools (Hall *et al.* 1996).

Blogs are often referred to as ‘new media’, or ‘social media.’ This thesis will not usually use those terms: all media is by definition ‘social’, and ‘new’ depends on an arbitrary historical cut-off. Lev Manovich has defined ‘new media’ as “graphics, moving images, sounds, shapes, spaces, and texts that have become computable; which comprise simply another set of computer data” (Manovich 2001: 20). Basically, new media are platforms that transport messages via digital means, as opposed to analogue (Poster 2001: Chapter 5) – in other words, new media is *digital* media. Using ‘digital media’ allows the incorporation of both the internet and all of the associated hard and software that is used to ‘carry’ messages from producers to recipients.

The difference between the internet and the ‘Worldwide Web’ (WWW, or the Web) also needs to be clarified. The ‘International Network’ (aka the Internet) is the collection of servers, cables, and communication protocols that enable the transmission of digital data between computers. The Web was launched in 1990 by Tim Berners-Lee; it is a system that enables one to directly access files on the internet via hyperlinks, which contain the Uniform Resource Locator (URL), without having to know where the document is actually located. The effect of this was to make data on the internet much more accessible, and in 1993 the first graphical browser, Mosaic, enabled anyone with even very basic computer skills to navigate the internet. It was at this point that the internet started to become the international multimedia platform that it is today. Although at first various closed

networks (e.g. CompuServe, AOL) competed for the public's interest and money, eventually the more open architecture of the internet won out.

In practice, what people encounter when they are 'on the internet' is not 'the internet', but a series of variously interactive webpages displayed on a Web browser; or, they may be using internet based services such as email or Skype. To describe the internet as a single medium masks the different economic and experiential practices that occur while using the Web and the internet. Apart from people actively involved in its governance (The Internet Society), and network engineers of various types, the internet has no practical prosaic reality for people – it is something that is only thought about when it is not functioning smoothly.

It is useful therefore to consider the internet as a 'meta-medium' that 'carries' other media such as email, forums or blogs – these media can be identified first by the modalities afforded by their interfaces, and also by the practices that are associated with them. For example, the modalities afforded by a forum are textual, and images are used – this would describe most web content, but forums are distinguished by the practice of engaging in threaded conversation and a (mostly) egalitarian access to interactional space. Podcasts, however, employ audio modalities only, and correspond more to the classic one-to-many broadcast model. The internet *per se*, in most cases, is as relevant to the analysis of digital media as are the specifics of radio frequencies and audio recording equipment to an understanding of radio as a medium.

## **2.1 Blog as medium**

The earliest approach to blogs was to classify blogs as a genre (with sub-genres) that operates through the medium of the internet. Plotting a continuum of “web genre[s] [along...] three dimensions of comparison [...] frequency of update, symmetry of communicative exchange, and multimodality” Susan Herring *et al.* (2004: 10) argue for the blog as a hybrid genre that bridges the gap between the more static web page, and asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC). Expanding from Rebecca Blood's three 'types' (“filters, personal journals, and notebooks”), they use five 'blog types' in their study: Personal journal, Filter, K-log, Mixed, and Other (2004: 2–6). However, the difficulties inherent in classifying an emergent mediatic form can be seen when, in 2004, Bonnie Nardi *et al.* said that in spite of evidence of genre conventions, it was “too early to say whether blogging is a “genre” [and] the extraordinarily diverse content of blog posts would seem to burst the bounds of a single genre” (Nardi *et al.* 2004: 230).

A more useful approach, that takes into account the specifics of the blog affordances, is suggested by Terry Teachout, who argues that blogging is “an end in itself, a medium whose distinctive properties arose from the opportunities for personal expression that it offered” (2005: 45). This approach is well developed by danah boyd (2006) who argues that the use of metaphor and comparing blogs to other types of genres (such as a diary) obscures the specificity of blogging practices, which shape the blog as medium. She argues that blogs should be conceived as a “culture-driven medium” (*ibid*: para 39), rather than having “technologically defined” boundaries (*ibid*: para 36). Following McLuhan’s definition of media, she notes that blogs “allow people to extend themselves into a networked digital environment” (*ibid*: para 32), communicating facets of themselves. Like paper, television or radio, blogs support the expression of many genres – journalistic, diaristic, and so on. Thus she concludes that “blogs are not a genre of communication, but a medium through which communication occurs” (*ibid*: para 58).

Her argument affirms the limitations of defining a medium by its technical properties, but not their irrelevance, and this approach is consistent with the sociotechnical arguments and the use of affordances that is developed below (see section 4; p29). This thesis will also consider blogs as a sociotechnical medium, and because of the vast amount of literature on the many uses of the internet, it shall generally not touch upon other aspects of the internet apart from blogs.

### **3 The medium as sociotechnology**

Technology can be defined as the collection of material artefacts and associated techniques that are used to extract and/or manipulate resources for subsistence, or other socially defined purposes. There is a considerable amount of scholarly literature that focuses on the question of technological determinism – i.e. the causal relationship between technology and society, which also applies to media and society. There is not the space here to revisit this debate in detail (although specific aspects will be discussed when relevant), apart from noting that the generally accepted premise is that society and technology are intricately interrelated, and understanding their relationship requires grappling with fundamental questions of agency.<sup>4</sup>

With regards to digital technologies, an example of technological determinism is what David Hakken (1999) calls the “Computer Revolution” (CR) discourse, a techno-determinist argument that sees information communication technologies (ICTs) as the agent of a profoundly transformative social change. The shortcoming of techno-determinism is that it overlooks the way in which social

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<sup>4</sup> MacKenzie and Wajcman (1999) provide a good reference point for the debates.

imperatives may determine whether a particular technology becomes widespread or not, and Bryan Pfaffenberger has argued for the use of the term “sociotechnical systems [...] the distinctive technological activity that stems from the linkage of techniques and material culture to the social coordination of labour” (1992: 497). Pfaffenberger’s argument is mostly aimed at debunking what he calls the ‘Standard view’ of technological evolution – one that assumes linear progress driven by necessity, and the gradual destruction of authentic cultures and sensibility as hand wielded tools are replaced by machines. The argument has parallels with some CR standpoints that contrast a ‘virtual’ online culture with ‘real life’ offline – thus dichotomising activities based on the use of a particular technology. He also makes the important point that, whereas the introduction of new technologies have often seemed to coincide with social change, in fact this is more likely to be attributable to new forms of social domination and inequality (such as colonialism) that have incidentally brought the new technology, rather than the other way around.

In qualifying the impact of technologies, it is important not to overstate the case – for, as MacKenzie & Wajcman note, “to say that technology’s social effects are complex and contingent is not to say that it has *no* social effects” (MacKenzie & Wajcman 1999: 4). Therefore, it is necessary to consider the limiting and potentiating effects both of technologies and their human interactants – something that actor-network theory (ANT), which is discussed in the next section, does well.

### **3.1 Actor-network theory & sociotechnology**

The sociotechnical approach requires a dissolving of apparent boundaries between the material and immaterial, the social and the technological. A useful approach for this is ANT, as developed by Bruno Latour (1993, 2005), and others such as Michel Callon (e.g. 1986). Developing out of science and technology studies (Latour 1987), ANT rejects the “sociology of the social” and proposes a “sociology of associations” (2005: 9). By this, Latour rejects presuppositions of invisible entities – such as ‘society’ – that tend to narrow the field of investigation, and create boundaries on what he argues is the first task of the sociologist, to ‘follow the traces’. Thus:

the social is not a type of thing either visible or to be postulated. It is visible only by the traces it leaves (under trials) when a new association is being produced between elements which themselves are in no way ‘social’ (*ibid.*: 8).

Rather than assuming that the ‘social’ is something “which has already been assembled and acts on the whole” (*ibid.*: 43), it is understood only as a contingent collective of components that was able to act in a particular instance. This is not to deny that people are influenced by structural factors, but



only that these structures are always shifting depending on the complex of components that influence each other. These sites are 'actor-networks': this term encompasses both the multiple components and the agency of those components – both as separate entities and as a whole actor-network. Arguing that "any thing that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor – or, if it has no figuration yet, an actant" (*ibid.*: 71), ANT allows agency for both human and non-human actors/actants, as well as "non-individual[s]" (Latour 1998: n.p.).<sup>5</sup> More precisely, it rejects the division between human and non-human (Latour 2005: 109). This is why ANT is a useful complement to a sociotechnical approach. The 'network' aspect highlights the connections between components, by following the connections it is possible to avoid being hemmed in by predefined entities such as 'society', 'community', and so on.

It is important not to replace the 'social' with a 'network', and Latour emphasises that "[n]etwork is a concept [...]. It is a tool to help describe something, not what is being described" (*ibid.*: 131). In this regard, as argued by Hopkins and Thomas, "we need to be wary of allowing technical analogies from the World Wide Web to creep into our definition of network" (2011: 142); a computer network may well be an actor-network, but so may a computer, and the processor at the heart of the computer, as well as the person operating the computer. ANT is also a 'relativist' approach, in the manner that that relativism in physics is used to explain simultaneous events in multiple frames wherein different relations apply (Latour 2005: 12). Depending on the level of analysis, one may focus on particular actor-networks and 'black-box' others – that is, take their overall impact as given and not delve into its inner workings. As Callon notes: "Either you focus on the group itself [...] in which case you have an actor. Or you pass through it into the networks that lie beyond, and you have a simple intermediary" (quoted in Abramson 1998: n.p.).

All actors/actants may be intermediaries that "transport meaning or force without transformation," or mediators that "transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry" (Latour 2005: 39). There can be complicated intermediaries (e.g. a computer) and simple mediators (e.g. a conversation), and vice-versa. Claiming that a particular technology is 'neutral' would be an example of casting it as an intermediary – however, for ANT there are very few intermediaries, because connected actants in networks engage in 'translation'. This is a central concept in ANT, also called the "sociology of translation" by Callon who describes it as a process "during which the identity of actors, the possibility of interaction, and the margins of manoeuvre are negotiated and delimited" (1986: 206). Latour describes translation as "a relation that does not

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<sup>5</sup> NB: Where there are no page numbers in a document, this will be indicated by 'n.p.' (i.e. 'no page').

transport causality but induces two mediators into coexisting” (2005: 108); that is, there are relations of causality, but the process is recursive – both creating and produced by the intersection of particular nodes.

Some nodes may be uniquely placed so as to provide the only means of translation for other nodes, and in this case they may become “obligatory passage points” (Callon 1986: 205–6). Imagine a household computer with a modem that connects it to the internet – the modem becomes an obligatory passage point, that connects a household to a plethora of entertainment, news, services, and so on. The implications of this are multiple, but in the first instance it creates a dynamic around which other actants need to negotiate positions. Identifying such obligatory passage points, which may be material, like a modem, or otherwise – such as an oath to the constitution for a new citizen – is an important goal in using ANT.

This approach therefore implies an empirical and inductive methodology, one that sees traces of emergent collective activity in observable events, but does not lead to an objectification of a purported social entity that is projected back onto groups that are being studied. Instead, it is understood that the actors themselves are best placed to understand the intricacies of complex social interaction that they engage in constantly. ANT therefore offers both a method and a number of useful concepts.

Nick Couldry looks at the use of ANT in media theory, noting that “ANT offers a precise and non-functionalist account of how actors become established as powerful through the stability of the networks that pass through them” (2004: 7) – and the more networks in which an actor/actant has such a position, the more power she, he or it has. He thus approves of the insights ANT offers, but argues that it is not able to provide a basis for a media theory because of its “insufficient attention to questions of time, power and interpretation” (*ibid.*: 11), a point also alluded to by John Postill who has pointed to weaknesses of the explanatory power of the “connectionist strand of social network analysis [...] when it comes to structural or ‘field’ questions” (2008: 421).<sup>6</sup> Both of these authors have turned to versions of field theory to address these issues, as discussed in the next section.

### **3.2 A field of blogging?**

Pierre Bourdieu proposes the ‘field’ as a relational concept describing particular clusters of contingent practices and goals of agents who, “occupying the diverse available positions [...] engage

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<sup>6</sup> NB: Postill is referring to social network analysis rather than to ANT, but the limitations of a descriptive approach is again highlighted.

in competition for control of the interests or resources which are specific to the field in question” (Randal Johnson 1993: 6). One of the ways in which the prominence of any agent is attained is through the accumulation of *capital* which can be of different kinds – political, economic, cultural or symbolic – and is mediated through language, expressions of taste, and other discursive practices. Capital accumulated in one field may be transferrable to other fields, the valuing of particular capital is normalised through habitus, and “Habitus is always constituted in moments of practice” (Schirato & Yell 2000:42). Overall, the model provided by Bourdieu, and used by many, is a holistic one that emphasises the dynamic interaction of three main elements: habitus, practice and capital.

In a particular example that has relevance to this thesis, when talking about 19th century writers in France, Bourdieu talks of the “*fundamental law* of the [writing] field, i.e. the theory of art for art’s sake” (1993: 62; original emphasis) and how this is represented by the artist who occupies the ‘post’ (i.e. the ‘job description’) which has “the appropriate dispositions, such as disinterestedness and daring” (*ibid.*: 62-3). This “‘pure’ writer or artist” who has made “heroic sacrifices” is “constructed against the ‘bourgeoisie’ [...] and against institutions [...] state bureaucracies, academies, salons, etc.” (*ibid.*: 63); these oppositions are reproduced in position taking, where the cultural product is classified in opposites such as “‘pure art’/‘commercial art’, ‘bohemian’/‘bourgeois’” (*ibid.*: 64).

‘Capital’ is a key concept in Bourdieu, and much of his theory is couched in quasi-economic terms, wherein individuals engage in accumulation and exchange various forms of capital. In an analysis of the art business, where “disavowal of the ‘economy’ is placed at the very heart of the field” (1980: 265), he outlines how these questions of authenticity and disinterestedness are negotiated by using ‘symbolic capital’ – this is capital whose value is determined purely in terms of field-specific discourses. The art dealer needs to maintain his/her symbolic capital by navigating between a disavowal of economic interest, and a focus on the economic value of the art they choose to trade in. Thus, for example, the art dealer needs to promote new art by avoiding the “hard sell [and using...] softer, more discreet forms of ‘public relations’ [...] a highly euphemized form of publicity” (1980: 264). From this, the practice of ‘euphemisation’ is derived, whereby activities symbolically coincide with the terms of the field, but mask underlying contradictory objectives (see also Webb *et al.* 2002: 26–9).

The literature on blogging suggests that there is a ‘fundamental law’ of blogging, which is the ‘authenticity’ of the blog. It is a theme that comes up frequently (e.g. Blood 2002a; Lenhart & Fox 2006; Reed 2005; Schmidt 2007a). It is reflected in practices such as accusations of bloggers “of

using strategies cynically conceived to attract traffic” or deviating from “the conventional ethos of journal blogging (‘I blog for me’)” (Reed 2005: 237), being a “hitslut” (Clark 2002), flagging post-facto edits of a post, and explaining moderation or censorship of comments. The comment by Dave Winer that “as long as the voice of a person comes through, it’s a weblog” (2003), shows us how the blog is seen as indexical of the authentic blogger. There is also a relation to the diary genre, that embodies the romantic conceptualisation of the modern individual. Also coinciding with an individualistic approach, there is another possible ‘fundamental law’ which I have called the ‘independence principle’ – i.e. the assertion and belief that everyone can do what they like with their blog. For example, an early guide to blogging by Cory Doctorow *et al.* suggests three ways – each of which are variants of ‘It’s my blog’ – to explain to a reader why a hyperlink he/she suggested was not put on the blog (2002: 6).

The Bourdieuan analysis has relevance, particularly in explaining the quotidian practices of bloggers, such as the displays of taste that enable the accumulation of cultural capital. However, the overall model and dynamics of the field – which in this case would be the blogosphere, or the field of blogging – are less helpful. The particular historical process of the expansion of monetisation opportunities for Malaysian bloggers can be understood as the expansion of the economic field (or perhaps, the field of advertising) into the previously ‘autonomous field’<sup>7</sup> of blogging. Field theory is heavily biased towards the reproduction of field, and whereas Bourdieu describes a dialectical process within a field, based on the premise of new generations of artists overtaking the old by restating the fundamental laws of disinterestedness (1980: 289 ff.). As discussed further in Chapter III (Section 4; p81), although I had expected to observe a similar dialectic with regards to the monetisation of blogs, it was not salient in my fieldwork.

Although being paid to blog runs counter to the principle of authenticity, there is simultaneously a widespread acceptance of monetising activities, some of which may even enhance the prestige of the blogger. One reason for this is that the independence principle may take precedence over the principle of authenticity. Another more structural reason is that the ability for any internet user to create their own blog differs from the model outlined by Bourdieu, where artists compete for access to the public via a limited number of art galleries and media outlets, which are dominated by small elite of art critics and buyers. Also, given that most bloggers are part-time participants, this means that any model that tries to build an objective Bourdieuan field would have to sideline many intersecting practices that are brought to bear in the personal blog. As Deleuze & Guattari state, “a

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<sup>7</sup> For example, mathematics “in which producers’ sole consumers are their competitors, that is, individuals who could have made the discovery in question” (Bourdieu 1998: 61).

social field is defined less by its conflicts and contradictions than by the lines of flight running through it" (1987: 100).

This raises the problem of the relationship between fields – that is, how do fields connect, overlap, and how do practices that are based on ‘fundamental laws’ become reconfigured? In a discussion of the influence of the television journalism on print journalism, Bourdieu highlights “heteronomous intellectuals [who...] constitute the Trojan horse through which heteronomy – that is, the laws of the market and the economy, is brought into the field” (1998: 63). Webb *et al.* have discussed a similar case with regards to amateurism in sports, and discuss ‘heteronomous’ fields that can result from the intrusion of one field into another (2002: 29). These are fields that are subject to different ‘fundamental’ laws. This seems to be something of a contradiction in terms, and one result of adopting the field perspective is that one finds oneself struggling with the boundaries of fields and subordinating the actions of relatively autonomous agents, who adapt and rationalise their activities according to contingent contexts, to the structuring dynamics of the field. The ‘fundamental laws’, in practice, are highly personalised and dynamic.

Also looking the relevance of media, Couldry questions “what underlying mechanism field theory has at its disposal to explain the convergences of sets of fields in a fast-changing economic and cultural environment” (2003b: 659). Rather than relying on homologies between fields, he offers “meta-capital” as something that connects between fields in two ways: “by influencing what counts as capital in each field” and by having agenda-setting, framing, role that sets up categories of understanding (*ibid.*: 668).

Couldry’s argument in effect proposes a ‘meta field’, which brings us back to the issues around defining a field. Gil Eyal points to the relational aspect of field theory, that enables an understanding of shifting contingent position taking within fields, but states that Bourdieu “does not do the same thing with the distinction between *fields themselves*” (2006: n.p.; original emphasis). He argues that most activities (such as art) have a “double meaning,” and that the meaning depends on the particular context, on the particular relations involved and invoked (as implied by the existence of euphemistic practices), and thus “there is no easy, clear cut, self-evident criteria by which the various fields could be distinguished in terms of the content of the activity that takes place within them” (*ibid.*) John Postill seems to have encountered a similar problem in an account of a developing suburb in Malaysia: identifying a “field of residential affairs,” he nonetheless argues that the “‘fundamental laws’ [...] of the field differ from one sector to the other” (2008: 423). Arguably, every

field should have its own fundamental law(s), but he finds it necessary to split the field into different ‘sectors’ in order to accommodate governmental and non-governmental actors. His response to this is to argue for plural socialities “distinguished by the nature of their interactions, discursive practices and field articulations” (*ibid.*: 427). This is a useful approach, and will be discussed further in Chapter VI (Section 2.1143), but these two cases demonstrate a weakness of field theory, where fields are held to be objectively determined by the practices that constitute them.

In the case of personal blogging, whereas there is an identifiable clustering of broadly similar practices, the bloggers also traverse a number of ‘fields’ in daily life – from their home, to their work, to their online blogging practices, and – in the case of those who participate in the monetising activities – into the field of advertising. Postill refers to a similar process, how in their daily “embodied engagements with the world, people traverse and (re)produce a variety of internally regionalised, variously mediated ‘stations’” (2010: 18). Other matters also become relevant – how does one qualify to be part of the field, or are there different fields of blogging such as personal blogging and journalistic blogging? Field theory assumes a certain boundedness that may make sense when there are sufficient formal constraints on individual action – such as succeeding in the academic field, with the requirement for degrees and peer-reviewed publications, or in politics, where the obtainable positions are limited and the means to accede to them carefully circumscribed. In the case of blogging, however, access is very open, and there are no formal limits on activity.

A fundamental flaw in many studies of the internet is the dichotomisation of the on- and offline practices of internet users. Miller and Slater (2000) were among the first to emphasise the intertwining of the so-called ‘virtual’ and ‘real’ worlds, and this can be described using both network and field perspectives. The blogging field can be held to extend over the on- and offline interactions (e.g. in blogmeets and online interaction), and networks easily engages with whichever component that is connected. However, when one tries to define the ‘field of blogging’, the need to identify fundamental rules, and define the field in terms of common practices, capital and habitus leads to what Eyal calls “essentialized spheres [i.e. fields]” (2006). The online blogs in this instance provide the strongest context for defining the field, and one finds oneself relegating offline activity to a supporting role. This analysis makes sense if one is looking for a ‘community’ of bloggers, but ANT argues that this would be putting the cart before the horse.

Overall, therefore, Bourdieuan fields have a tendency to develop through a dialectical dynamic that predicates dichotomies and bounded spheres which limit its usefulness, although its focus on the quotidian and contextualising micro-level practices is helpful. A network approach, one that dispenses with bounded categorisations of collective behaviour, but instead concentrates on following actors and noting privileged positions within the networks, is therefore more suited to studying the emergent aspects of personal blogging. In addition, field theory does not have a sustained approach to the agential potential of sociotechnologies, something that is offered by ANT. However, as argued above, the ANT approach has limitations, and therefore I now turn to Deleuze & Guattari, and the concept of assemblage which I will argue provides a better way to integrate an understanding of technologies and the range of expressive and social practices that traverse them.

### 3.3 *The assemblage perspective*

On a first, horizontal, axis an assemblage comprises two segments, one of content, the other of expression. On the one hand it is a *machinic assemblage* of bodies, of actions and passions, an intermingling of bodies reacting to one another; on the other hand it is a *collective assemblage of enunciation*, of acts and statements, of incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies. Then on a vertical axis, the assemblage has both *territorial sides*, or reterritorialized sides, which stabilize it, and *cutting edges of deterritorialization*, which carry it away.

(Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 97–8; original emphasis)

This thesis draws upon the concept of the *assemblage* to explore the intermingling of material, technological, sociocultural, and personal components that are relevant to an analysis of the sociotechnical medium that is the blog. Although, as Brown (2009) points out, Deleuze & Guattari did not address social sciences directly, their ideas have been fertile in a number of social-scientific analyses, as demonstrated for example in some edited volumes (e.g. Jensen & Rødje 2009a; Ong & Collier 2005; Poster & Savat 2009). The work on social network analysis (SNA) has much to contribute to this approach too, but for the moment it remains more descriptive than analytical (e.g. Hogan *et al.* 2008).

Actor-network theory is useful methodologically, and assemblage fleshes it out theoretically – there is clearly a lot in common between both Latour and Deleuze & Guattari’s work, although they barely mention each other.<sup>8</sup> Like ANT, Deleuze & Guattari also develop a theory that opposes essentialism and dichotomies, and allows for the integration of a multiplicity of actors/actants, often visualised as

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<sup>8</sup> Jensen & Rodje note that Latour is directly inspired by Deleuze & Guattari “to which ANT owes a great deal” (2009a: 2).

being on a 'flat' plane that avoids presuppositions of predominant force or meta structures. The description of an assemblage that opens this section (above) provides much of the basis of what is used in this thesis to explore the effects of monetisation on personal blogging. It describes a contingently assembled group of heterogeneous components, coalescing around axes of content and expression, and territorialisation and deterritorialisation.

The horizontal axis, with a machinic assemblage that lies "in reciprocal presupposition" (Bogard 2009: 16) to an assemblage of enunciation, resembles the conventional division of material and immaterial, signified and signifier, technological and social. However, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro argues that Deleuze & Guattari invoke such dualisms in order to discard them, and that "the duality changes its nature as it is taken from the standpoint of one and then the other pole;" to explain this, he uses the concept of "intensive difference" (2009: 227). In Deleuzian terms, intensity indexes change, but it is a difference in properties that is not reducible to cumulative components, like how boiling water takes on particular properties that were not present when the water was at ninety-nine degrees Celsius. This emphasis on heterogeneity and fractured progression is also present in the use of 'multiplicity' as opposed to 'multiples'. The latter implies a cumulative progression of discrete and homogenous components, whereas multiplicity describes heterogeneous collections of discrete components (Currier 2003: 330).

The vertical axis, of territorialisation and deterritorialisation, relates to the constant process of mutation and change of any assemblage. The (re)territorialising forces stabilise the assemblage, by reducing or regularising the differences along the horizontal axis, and excluding deterritorialising influences. This can happen in a spatial sense, such as building a fence around a portion of land, thus legitimising and delegitimizing particular types of behaviour, or a state affirming its monopoly of force within a given territory. It "also refers to non-spatial processes which increase the internal homogeneity of an assemblage" (DeLanda 2006: 13) – for example, the ethnic homogenisation of a neighbourhood. The deterritorialising forces are those that "destabilize spatial boundaries or increase internal heterogeneity [for example...] communication technology [...] which blur[s] spatial boundaries of social entities by eliminating the need for co-presence" (*ibid.*). These are ever present, and also called 'lines of flight' – forces and desires that spin off, 'cutting through' existing configurations, and are capable of forming new assemblages. This process of forming new assemblages is described by Aihwa Ong as how "particular alignments of technical and administrative practices extract and give intelligibility to new spaces by decoding and encoding



milieus” (2005: 338); this process of ‘de/coding’ has a parallel with the process of translation in ANT.<sup>9</sup>

As with ANT, Deleuze & Guattari reject “organic totalities” (DeLanda 2006: 10) such as the ‘social’, and assemblages are multiplicities that hold together “singular bodies in relations of exteriority” (Brown 2009: 112). An assemblage has no more properties than those which emerge from the causal relations of its parts, and those properties exist only as long as that particular force of territorialisation maintains a ‘plateau’, “a continuous self-vibrating region of intensities” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 24). Plateaus are thus relatively stabilised, emergent, consequences of the movements of rhizomatic and arborescent connections. These movements occur over planes, which may be relatively smooth, or striated. Both striation and smoothening machines can operate as territorialising and deterritorialising machines, enabling and disabling movements of difference (Bogard 2000).

The rhizome is another central concept in Deleuze & Guattari’s theories. It describes the movement of connections between components of assemblages – the rhizome has multiple nodes, each of which is capable of generating new rhizomes, and the direction and progression of the rhizome is unpredictable and depends on interactions with its environment. Importantly, “any point can form a beginning or point of connection for any other” (Colebrook 2003: xxviii). The arborescent movement however is one that has roots that feed a stabilised trunk, which grows in a particular direction and has a relatively predictable outcome and form. Each can be part of a process of territorialisation or deterritorialisation, depending on their relative direction. It is important to note that “the root-tree and canal-rhizome are not two opposed models” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 22) – there is no dualism, not even between arborescent and rhizomatic processes which can each include the other. Nonetheless, each has a different mode of communication, and system of circulation, which has a direct impact on the organisation of the assemblage (*ibid.*: 23).

At any given time, the relatively stabilised assemblage is a multiplicity of heterogeneous components that resonate, and has consistent effects on its constituent parts, and the other assemblages with which it interacts. As Dianne Currier notes, “nothing comes first and there is no originary moment or transcendent structure” (2003: 329) – its progression and properties are not traceable to a defining

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<sup>9</sup> DeLanda proposes a third axis for assemblages, that relates to how “specialised expressive media” (such as language or genetic code) are particularly implicated in the coding and decoding processes (DeLanda 2006: 19). However, this proposal is not developed in order to avoid an extensive discussion of Deleuze & Guattari’s theoretical arguments, and because it does not alter the argument here significantly.

genesis, but it is always *becoming*. The 'becoming' is a state of affairs as distinguished from 'being', which has essentialist implications, and it is an inherent part of the assemblage, both an effect of it and an ever-present part of it as the different components move and interact in response to the tensions of territorialisation and deterritorialisation, within the machinic assemblage and the assemblage of enunciations. As Currier puts it, "[t]his movement of differing, whereby a thing differs in kind from itself, is the movement of becoming" (Currier 2003: 334); another commonly used phrase in this regard is 'always already' – that is, it is immanent, the assemblage either exists as it is, or it doesn't, there is no necessary precursor or sequel.

The immanent state of becoming is important in this approach – by drawing a state that is always in flux, Deleuze & Guattari emphasise the difference between the 'actual' and the 'virtual' (this should not be confused with the 'virtual' as often discussed in internet studies). The actual in Deleuze & Guattari's thought is that which has already been realised, but it is only an aspect of the immanent virtual plane that is a constant flow of desires and forces which is drawn upon and actualised, through the operation of 'abstract machines' that are the driving force of deterritorialisation.

DeLanda develops a concept of social assemblages, which "at the very least involve a set of human bodies properly oriented (physically or psychologically) towards each other" (2006: 12), this can be limited to face-to-face interaction, also extends to the nation-state. They include many other elements such as particular technologies that take on expressive roles, and play a role in forming the relations between people. Non-material components can be linguistic (e.g. expressions of loyalty, or myths of legitimacy), or behavioural (e.g. the practice of obeying commands in public, or displaying status via material possessions). Assemblages have emergent properties that are only possible because of the particular configuration of the heterogeneous components. Citing Roy Bhaskar, who argues that emergent wholes "are real because they are causal agents capable of acting back on the materials out of which they are formed" (*ibid.*: 34), he applies this to social assemblages which "have objective existence because they can causally affect the people that are their component parts" (*ibid.*: 38). Thus, we can identify social assemblages through their effects. Referring to concepts of weak and strong ties, he notes that denser social assemblages are more able to provide resources, and constrain activities, in contrast to more dispersed assemblages. Thus the former are more likely to become recurrent. Nonetheless, in spite of the existence of objective, emergent, assemblages it is important to address the particular causal relations at the appropriate scale of operations, avoiding

the recasting of an essentialised 'society' (for example) that categorises and arranges all of its constituent components.

An assemblage also resembles the field in many ways – for example, Aihwa Ong explains that “particular assemblages of technology and politics not only create their own spaces but also give diverse values to the practices and actors thus connected to each other” (2005: 338). However, assemblage also benefits from the networked approach that enables a consideration of all the elements that make up (for example) a blog, and the relations between blogs, bloggers, readers, and advertisers – these can be laid out 'flat' as ANT asks us to, without presuppositions that privilege human agency, or overarching structuring forms.

The focus in this thesis on media technology means an emphasis on the machinic assemblage, but as noted above, the sociotechnical approach already recognises the interconnection with the assemblage of enunciations. The focus on monetisation (which for Deleuze & Guattari falls under a consideration of capitalism) requires a greater consideration of the assemblage of enunciations, but the machinic assemblage is also important. Thus, two overall concepts to be used – assemblage as discussed above, and affordances which, as will be argued in the next section, provide a useful means to analyse sociotechnology in the context of an assemblage approach.

## **4 Affordances**

Affordances reflect the possible relationships among actors and objects: they are properties of the world.

(Norman 1999: 42)

The concept of 'affordances' is often used with regards to technology, and has also been used in studies of the internet and blogs. Before reviewing some examples (Section 5; p55), the relevant debate will be outlined, as well as its suitability in relation to a sociotechnical and assemblage perspective. Finally, particular blog affordances are proposed as analytical tools for analysing the role of blogs in social assemblages.

Affordances is a term originally coined in 1977 by James Gibson, a psychologist, who was concerned with the different ways in which the physical environment can be understood to offer opportunities to animals to interact effectively with their material environment. According to Gibson, material objects have inherent and fixed affordances, which may or may not be actualised by an actor, and

the same object may offer different affordances to different actors – thus water ‘affords’ a surface to be walked upon by a water insect, but not for a human (cited in Hutchby 2001: 448). Donald Norman, quoted above, introduced affordances to industrial design in 1988, and from there it has drifted into studies of human computer interaction (HCI) and other technology-related fields.

Affordances addresses the central issue of materiality and culture in technology, and here I take the lead from Hutchby who suggests a “third way” that

involves seeing technologies neither in terms of their ‘interpretive textual’ properties nor of their ‘essential technical’ properties, but in terms of their *affordances* [...] [which are] functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object. (Hutchby 2001: 444; original emphasis)

Using affordances avoids the dangers of materially based technological approaches that reduce technologies to the “doctrine of Necessity” (Pfaffenberger 1988: 502). This concept does emphasise the material limitations of the environment upon human action, not by extrapolating human action from the environment, but instead emphasising their interaction and human agency. It is mostly used in relation to tools and technologies, and as Dant explains, it “neatly avoids the tricky idea of ‘function’ in which we become concerned with the specific intention behind an object’s design and manufacture” (2005: 73) – the use of an object is contingent upon the relationship with other actors it interacts with.

Seeking to clarify the use of this popular term, in 1999 Norman made a distinction between “real affordances” from “perceived affordances” – the former are those that Gibson described, and the latter are “visual feedback that advertise the [real] affordances” (1999: 40). An example in the context of the internet would be the way in which a hyperlink is highlighted by having the text change colour, or a line appear under it, when the mouse cursor moves over it – thus indicating the presence of a hyperlink. The hand shaped cursor is even more specifically designed to suggest to the user to ‘push’ or ‘tap’ on the highlighted text. Perceived affordances are very important when it comes to users of blogs, and software in general, for without some visual signal (an icon, a pop-up window, etc.) the real affordance will probably not be used at all by the average user. However, it is clear that recognising the symbols on a computer screen is a learned process, and thus the question of the interaction of culture and technology again arises, as it does with real affordances.

## 4.1 Critiques of affordances

Responding to Hutchby, Tim Dant argues that affordances fail to take into account the way in which sociocultural factors affect perceptions, and subsequent use, of objects. He concludes that “imagination and mind create affordance at the immaterial level and continually mould and remould the material world to achieve that effect [and affordances are not...] determinative of what things can do” (2005: 76). Also critiquing Hutchby, Brian Rappert argues that affordances state the obvious, and do not help to understand “the ‘actual’ constraining and enabling features among those identified by social actors” (2003: 575). Both of these arguments tend to project a dichotomy between material determinism and social constructivism, but fail to discuss how the materiality of artefacts and the objective limits of particular technologies are to be integrated into analyses. Arguing that affordances are always relative to their social context does not deny their usefulness, but instead emphasises their *relationality*: for example, blogs afford the possibility to pretend to be of another gender, but most bloggers do not do so. The medium of the blog is not determinative of their decision, but the affordance actualises differently according to the agent it enters into relation with.

This relational aspect is also addressed by Huatong Sun, who provides a comprehensive overview of the use of affordances in field of human-computer interaction (HCI) studies. Arguing for the inclusion of sociocultural contexts into the concept of affordances, she points to Brerentsen & Trettvik for whom affordances emerge “as activity-relationships between actors and objects” (quoted in Sun 2004: 56). They argue that affordances can be inherent physical properties of features of the physical environment (such as the edibility of something), which however “*only* become affordances when some organisms relate to them in their activity” (Brerentsen & Trettvik 2002: 54; original emphasis). They also point to the affordances of objects external to the environment, such as tools, which are “designed for use in specific forms of societal praxis” (*ibid.*; see also 57); this latter point is important, in that tools (such as blogging software) are always made within a social context, and thus are explicitly designed with particular relational outcomes in mind.

From the sociotechnical perspective, Pfaffenberger also addresses affordances and criticises an application that derives functions from exclusively materialistic properties. Using the example of a plain bench in a Victorian hallway, he emphasises “the *equally* prominent role of ritual in defining the function of material culture” (1992: 503). This bench, having no back, no decoration or upholstery, was used for servants and tradesmen to sit on – thus having the ritual function of

inscribing the status of those who were told to use it. Therefore: “‘style’ (the bench’s austerity) turns out [...] to be the very ‘function’ of the artifact (to remind servants of their status)!” (*ibid.*: 504).

Given that Pfaffenberger emphasises the equal importance of affordances and ritual, and that he notes that “the most useful artifacts [...] are associated each with a specific Master Function, given by the physical or technological properties of the object itself” (1988: 495), it would seem that the sociotechnical approach allows for a consideration of both material limitations and sociocultural constructions of technologies. However, in the example of the bench, he privileges the ritual function of the bench; in that regard, one can argue that it would have been just as possible to let the lower status visitors stand in the hallway, or even stay outside. Therefore, the bench is also used to allow people to sit and rest their legs – this affordance persists, and the same bench one hundred years later, now an antique and still used to enhance the status of the owner, continues to afford sitting upon.

This suggests that there are physical properties that do remain consistent across time and culture. Affordances may or may not be actualised, but this does not deny their potential to afford particular actions – given a particular set of relations. The above critiques all recognise physical limitations, but mostly sideline them as less important – this results in a bias that privileges social constructions and ignores the agency of non-human artefacts, which in many situations are what ANT calls ‘obligatory passage points’. It is clear that there are certain uses that are not possible – for example, the bench cannot be used as a window. Therefore, we have to recognise the technical and material limitations of artefacts, and affordances is a suitable concept for this – by recognising limitations, it narrows the analytical focus.

Using affordances means retaining the non-determinative functional aspects, but also allowing for varied uses, which reflect the assemblages that these objects are a part of. In an assemblage perspective, it is not necessary to place either of these functions in the foreground, but rather we can argue that both are contingent, potential, aspects of the bench. In other words, the bench affords *both* the opportunity to rest one’s legs, *and* to enhance the status of the owner, as well as many other affordances (to use as firewood, to stand on, etc.). A rhizomatic perspective argues that any particular affordance may come to the fore at any time – sometimes entirely unexpectedly, and sometimes in a more predictable manner. Understanding how the affordances are actualised brings us to the contingent, sociocultural context, i.e. an assemblage.

## 4.2 *Affordances & assemblage*

Even technology makes the mistake of considering tools in isolation: tools exist only in relation to the interminglings they make possible or that make them possible.

(Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 99)

The above quote by Deleuze & Guattari shows how the relational conceptualisation of affordances is compatible with an assemblage perspective. In addition, regarding the opportunities and limitations of technology, David Savat – introducing a volume on “Deleuze and New Technology” – notes: “any technology, or machine, opens up a specific field of action [and thought]. At the same time, any technology or machine may close off certain forms of action (and thought)” (2009a: 3).

In a way similar to actor-network theory, which is not inspired by computer networks, the frequent use by Deleuze & Guattari of ‘machines’ is not because they place technology at the forefront of their theories. The ‘machinic’ relations are those that are causally connected, and the ‘virtual machines’ operates with inputs and outputs, and all parts of assemblages influence each other, as do the components of a machine. Nonetheless, in the following extract, there is a direct and useful reference to a “technological ‘plane’”, which is

not made up simply of formed substances (aluminum, plastic, electric wire, etc.) or organizing forms (program, prototypes, etc.), but of a composite of unformed matters exhibiting only degrees of intensity (resistance, conductivity, heating, stretching, speed or delay, induction, transduction...) and diagrammatic functions exhibiting only differential equations or, more generally, ‘tensors.’ (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 562)

Tensors or differential equations are mathematical formulae that enable the calculation of the outcomes of the relationship between different factors that are not inherently related – such as directional forces (e.g. gravity) and time (Nelson 2008: 430–1). This thesis will argue that affordances also provide such a ‘diagrammatic function’ – they describe a potential relation between non-necessarily related factors. An affordance is one way of estimating the potentials and limits to the conjunction of persons and technology – i.e. it is a diagrammatic function of sociotechnical assemblages. Using a mathematical parallel is not meant to imply the same degree of predictive certainty, but it is useful in order to indicate the possibility of a prediction, or the assertion of iterative regularity.

Escobar & Osterweil argue that “[i]n the actualization of the virtual, the logic of resemblance no longer rules, rather that of a genuine creation through differentiation” (2009: 190). Thus the Deleuzian virtual is not a Platonic ideal form, in abeyance of actualisation, but it enables a dynamic movement of difference which becomes the actualisation. The machinic assemblage is composed of bodies reacting to each other, and the affordances will limit – though not determine – how these bodies interact, and therefore certain contingent properties of the assemblage. These emergent properties are however consequences of the assemblage, not causes – they are observed or deduced from the operation of the assemblage, but this does not mean they can be inferred as antecedent causes.

DeLanda also offers support for using affordances with assemblage when he argues that it is possible to “distinguish [...] the properties defining a given entity from its *capacities to interact* with other entities” (2006: 10; original emphasis) – these capacities may or may not be exercised, and have unknown potential given that their future positioning with regards to other entities will actualise new capacities. These ‘capacities’ parallel the way in which affordances are conceptualised here, and the next section will discuss how affordances can be applied in relation to blogging.

## 5 Blogs & affordances

There are only a few studies that focus on blogs and affordances (Al-Ani *et al.* 2010; Graves 2007; Luehmann 2008; Eik Chor Christopher Tan & Sale 2010), but the term is quite widespread (see the following section). Affordances has also been used in relation to the internet, and a well known paper by Wellman *et al.* laid out a number of internet affordances, which are summarised in Table 1.

Internet affordances (summarised from Wellman <i>et al.</i> 2003)	
Affordance	Comment
Broader bandwidth	More data can be transmitted
Computers can be always connected	Communication can be spontaneous and instantaneous
Personalisation	Individuals have more control over their own communication
Wireless portability	Person-to-person communication supplants place-to-place, and where you are becomes less relevant
Globalized connectivity	Local boundaries become less restrictive, collective and interpersonal ties between people can survive geographical separation

**Table 1: Internet affordances**

More recently, Nancy Baym has taken a similar approach, in relation to the internet as a whole, and adopts seven concepts, or affordances,<sup>10</sup> to “productively compare different media to one another

<sup>10</sup> As they are referred to in the conclusion (2010: 152).



as well as to face to face communication.” These are: “interactivity, temporal structure, social cues, storage, replicability, reach and mobility” (2010: 7).

It is important to recognise that software, like all sociotechnologies, emerge complete with sociocultural biases, and the affordances reflect the values and interests of those who wrote the software. With regards to blogs, Manuel Castells’s overview of the sociocultural contexts of the development of the internet is relevant (2001: 37, 54–8); broadly speaking, blogging software developed in a context that owed much to American neo-libertarian values – drawing upon discourses of individualism, enlightened self-interest, and the pioneer. However, affordances may be actualised in a variety of ways: thus Han Park & Randy Kluver, in a study of Korean politicians’ blogs, found that “values of Western democratic liberalism” (2007a) did not automatically accompany the use of the internet, and that blogs were used in ways that “reify the [Korean] political values and habits that are inherited from earlier generations of political expectations,” in particular the use of blogs to reinforce offline broad-based local and personal ties (see also Park & Kluver 2007b).

It is also important to note another particularity of computer software, compared to other types of technologies. On the one hand – particularly in an open source environment<sup>11</sup> – the ability to quickly develop and iterate changes means that software is extremely flexible and open to innovation by many people. However, these people who have the necessary skills are in the minority, meaning that, for most software users, a program is necessarily taken as given. From that perspective, computer software is less open to adaptation than many other technologies have historically been; for example, the workings of a bicycle, or a barbed fish hook, are clear to any person of normal intelligence.

Blogging software provides templates for users, and Scheidt & Wright (2004) found that most bloggers make only minor changes to it – those that do, mostly make the changes in the sidebar (Chapter V, Section 2; p120). With regards to the use of the Blogger template, Papacharissi also found that 46.4% of the bloggers did not manipulate the template at all, and only 6.4% did so “significantly” (2007: 30). Similarly, in language that coincides with the use of affordances, Schmidt states that

Software code is fundamental for blogging episodes because it enables or restricts certain actions, for example including pictures, changing the blog layout, or specifying social relations in blogrolls [...] a

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<sup>11</sup> i.e. Where the source code is available to all, and tools are available to adapt and test new versions of software. An example of such software is WordPress – one of the most popular blogging platforms.

blogger can modify and personalize the software to a certain degree, depending on individual skills.  
(2007a)

Thus, for practical purposes, a blog can be considered as having a set of affordances that can only be changed by specialised operators. Understanding blogs means understanding the opportunities and limitations allowed by these affordances, and the following section reviews literature in this regard.

## **5.1 Previous literature**

With regards to blogs, Lucas Graves lists the following affordances: “many eyeballs”; “fixity”; “juxtaposition”; “editorial freedom” (2007: 340–2), but states that “These [...] can’t claim to be a complete or definitive list of blogging’s journalistic affordances” (*ibid.*: 342). The focus on “journalistic affordances” reveals the instrumental and displaced use of affordances here – like many studies of blogs, their (usually fraught) relationship with journalism is the real focus rather than blogs themselves. Al-Ani *et al.*’s descriptions of blog affordances are very general – i.e. “forming communities, expressing identity, receiving support from others, and expressing views of the war” (2010: n.p.). Discussing the uses of blogs for teaching, Tan & Sale do not engage with the specifics of what affordances are and instead simply refer to Wellman *et al.* (*op. cit*) and argue that the “[m]ost significant is the capability for ongoing organized knowledge building, incorporating the integration of a range of hyperlinked multimedia” (Eik Chor Christopher Tan & Sale 2010: 2). Also regarding education, April Luehmann (2008) demonstrates this frequent lack of focus on the theory of affordances by failing to define affordances, in spite of using the term in the title.

There is thus a need for a more developed understanding of the role of affordances in blogging. When the specific term is mentioned, there is rarely any detailed discussion of what it means; and there are many examples of discussions of the role of technical features that could benefit from using the term. In a general sense, the impact of user-friendly blogging software is widely acknowledged as being important in the uptake of blogging as a practice (Halavais 2002a). The rapid iteration of software versions, aimed at developing particular affordances, is an important aspect of blogging that underlines both the importance of affordances, and their relationship with the users and producers of the software. In a more specific sense, Efimova & De Moor (2005) provide an example of how a particular feature of blogs, the blogroll (a list of links in the sidebar) changed as new affordances became available. Blogrolls were often initially used as means for the blogger to keep a list of his own favourite links, which others could be interested in too. This became less important once RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds – which delivered updates from blogs directly to a reader, or to an email client – were introduced. Blogrolls remain a feature of most blogs though,

but they may be used as a means of displaying affiliations with other blogs or interests, as well as way to encourage reciprocal links from other blogs (Chapter VI, Section 3.1; p148).

## **5.2 *The blog affordances***

In the affordances outlined below (Table 2), I am proposing a list of affordances that I hope will contribute to a generalised heuristic modelling of blogging. Taking the different ways in which the medium of a blog can enable interpersonal mediated interaction, and also allowing for the blog itself to stand as a relatively autonomous actant, the affordances offer a practical framework for analysing blogs. Not, in the first instance, considering blogs as derivative forms of journalistic practices, or offline communities, but as autonomous actants which operate within, and as, assemblages. However, the way in which I will direct my enquiry will be focused on personal blogging; inevitably highlighting certain affordances rather than others. But by looking at the change in genre, and the various influences of monetisation, offline meets, increased audiences and so on, the affordances will be developed as appropriate concepts to express the rhizomatic range of possibilities blogs offer.

Sun's discussion of affordances distinguishes between 'instrumental affordances' which emerge "from use interactions in the material context," and 'social affordances' which are "the affordances on the activity level emerging from use interactions in the socio-cultural and historical context" (2004: 57). In the table below I also propose a distinction between affordances: the first type – 'basic affordances' – are those that are essential to the medium itself, for example, perfect reduplication is a requirement for the blog to be able to be read by anyone accessing it. These are affordances that derive directly from particular programmed aspects. Thus the ability to hyperlink is actually an affordance of a discrete component of a blog – a functioning semi-autonomous piece of code. Nearly all the components of a blog could be separated out, and an alternative analysis could explore these relatively autonomous blocks of programming code as assemblages in their own right, interacting with microprocessors, but that is beyond the remit of this thesis because it is not relevant to most bloggers. The basic affordances are, in addition, also intrinsic to the blog medium itself: a blog cannot exist without the ability to hyperlink – hyperlinks are not only surface level elements, but they also connect the webpages and blog database together internally.

I bracket the sociality of these affordances to some extent – for example, the storing of digital memory is afforded by the microprocessor, which itself developed out of a contingent sociotechnical process (e.g. Ceruzzi 1999). A blog cannot exist without the internet, nor the personal computer – but this thesis focuses on the blog, and takes such technologies that afford the blog as is, unless

there is a reason to delve into their relative causal dynamism. For example, the strong spirit of personal independence that accompanied the development of personal computers (e.g. Pfaffenberger 1988), and the internet, finds a parallel in the strongly valued autonomy of the blogger – the independence principle.

The other blog affordances are termed ‘Emergent affordances’: these arise from the overall interaction of the components of the blog, but are not reducible to any particular programmable code. An example of this is anonymity. The ability to interact anonymously with other bloggers and readers is not the result of any one piece of program code explicitly written to enable anonymous interaction. One could see it is a result of an absence, as it is probably possible to force everyone who goes online to reveal their identity,<sup>12</sup> and there are many ways in which commenters can be encouraged to at least take on a formal pseudonym – for example, by requiring readers to register before commenting.

Affordances refer to a range of possibilities – thus the extent to which the interactivity affordance is actualised depends on the actors involved. It may even be involuntary to some degree, in that a visitor to a blog will leave traces of which webpage they came from, how long they stayed, where they are geographically located, etc. A determined reader can also block such information by using an ‘anonymiser’, a software tool that hides such data from websites and servers.

By drawing up a table of blog affordances, I am proposing a form of ‘virtual diagram’. The significance of this is that the model that is being proposed is not purporting to detail a fixed set of *actual* properties, for the virtual diagram represents potential nodes, opportunities for causal relations that become the lines that deterritorialise. The *actual assemblage*, the blogs, bloggers and associated collective practices, is what is in motion at any point in time, and the affordances – as actualised, used, and observed – can be used as explanatory vectors.

Table 2 outlines these affordances, with descriptions and related personal blogging practices; following that, each affordance is discussed in more detail, and references are made to relevant literature where appropriate.

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<sup>12</sup> To enforce a situation where online anonymity was impossible would require the intervention of the state – e.g. the “real name policy” in South Korea (Kim 2007).

Blog affordances			
	<i>Affordance</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Personal blogging practices</i>
Basic affordances	Storage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Memory is automated and expanded.</li> <li>Archives and search functions make retrieval relatively easy.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bloggers often speak of using their blog as a way to store memories.</li> <li>A new reader can go over old posts, and get an idea of the blogger over time.</li> <li>Virtually unlimited storage means virtually unlimited opportunity for interested persons to have their own blog.</li> </ul>
	Perfect reduplication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This enables multiple readers to access the blog simultaneously, to see the same content, and to interact via the comments.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Original content is prized, and unattributed duplication is condemned.</li> <li>Undisclosed post-facto changes of posted material are usually disapproved of.</li> </ul>
	Asynchronous communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Flowing from storage and perfect reduplication, asynchronous communication enables one-to-many two-way communication.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Blog posts are usually read within a few days. Anything older than that loses attraction. Timeliness is important in maintaining relations.</li> <li>Blog posts can continue to attract visitors indefinitely; this is an attraction for companies that pay for blog posts.</li> </ul>
	Multimedia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A range of media modalities are available: written text, visual, audio, audio-visual. At least one is necessarily used.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The overall style and design (colours used, fonts, header, etc.) are important as expressions of taste and in indicating genre.</li> <li>Photos and/or pictures are usually present.</li> </ul>
	Modularity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A blog is constructed through relatively autonomous blocks of code, each of which enables particular functions and mediatic displays. The most fundamental module is the blog post organised in reverse chronology.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It is easy to add and subtract components, for example: advertisements, hyperlinks, hits counter, music player, etc.</li> </ul>
	Hyperlinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It is possible to connect other sites quickly and simultaneously, inserting a blog into a network of potential relations.</li> <li>The blog requires hyperlinking internal to the website in order to maintain structural consistency.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Incoming links increase overall visibility of the blog due to search engine algorithms.</li> <li>Reciprocal linking is an important social practice, and non-reciprocal linking an indication of relative status.</li> <li>Linking is not as widespread as often assumed.</li> </ul>
Emergent affordances	Anonymity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ostensible anonymity is easy to achieve. However, most internet users can be traced, given the appropriate resources (usually limited to specialised operators or government agencies).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Most bloggers are identifiable through their own choice.</li> <li>A stable pseudonym, at least, is required for sustainable social relations.</li> <li>Anonymity is sometimes used strategically, for example in commenting on blog posts.</li> </ul>
	Disembodiment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Social interaction is possible without physical collocation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This enables functional anonymity.</li> <li>The use of photos, profile descriptions, and consistent performance is important to stabilise relations.</li> </ul>
	Accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>For any computer literate person with access to the internet, the barriers to starting and maintaining a blog are minimal.</li> <li>One person may communicate to millions of people for the same price as communicating to one person.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maintaining a popular blog requires regular updates. Owning a computer will help substantially.</li> <li>The practically unlimited opportunity for creating blogs supports the 'Independence principle'.</li> <li>Free blogging platforms (e.g. BlogSpot, WordPress.com) are ultimately supported by advertising revenues, and the provision of other services.</li> </ul>
	Personalisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A blog can be maintained by a single person, therefore eliminating any formal gate keeping process.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Group blogs are a small minority of blogs, and often associated with professional organisations.</li> </ul>
	Interactivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It is possible to have direct interpersonal interaction via a blog, in particular in the comments area.</li> <li>Interaction also occurs passively, with readers leaving traces in server logs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A blog without comments is rare, and usually comments are answered. However, every blogger has a different way of interacting with their readers: email, instant messaging, telephone, etc.</li> </ul>

**Table 2: Blog affordances**

### 5.2.1 *Storage*

Blogs are stored on a server, and the increased availability of memory means that opportunities to store data are, for most practical purposes, unlimited. David Brake reports an example of a blogger feeling uncomfortable with someone reading over all of her old posts (2009: 154), but he questions the importance of a blog as ‘external memory’ – noting that although many bloggers reported this as a desired feature, few actually used it for that (*ibid.*: 158). Adam Reed reports a blogger removing old posts so as to prevent a partner from seeing particular moments of his past (2005: 232).

The easy availability of space to create and host a blog relates to the emergent accessibility affordance – which contributes to the ‘independence principle’.

### 5.2.2 *Perfect reduplication*

The reduplication of a blog is perfect in a practical sense, although Lev Manovich (2001: 54–5) points out that compression and corrupted data means that it is not ‘perfect’ in a technical sense. The ease by which content may be copied and pasted means that originality of content is carefully scrutinised – hyperlinking is used to refer readers to sources of content.<sup>13</sup>

### 5.2.3 *Asynchronous communication*

Asynchronous communication is a fundamental feature of blogs. Like other asynchronous media – such as books – it enables a disconnect in spatial and temporal terms between the producer and the audience. Therefore each can engage mostly on their own terms: the blogger can review and revise blog posts before putting them online, and readers can read when they want to. However, readers usually expect regular updates, and older blog posts are often ignored. Because the interaction is based around what is posted – as opposed to a common space such as a forum, or a Facebook ‘wall’ – irregular or infrequent posting reduces the sustainability of these relations. Therefore, regular postings are essential for a sustained collective to emerge around the blog.

### 5.2.4 *Multimedia*

Blogs can contain a variety of media modalities, enabling a wide range of expressive capabilities – written text remains the standard, however. Blogging platforms have a number of templates available to suit different tastes in terms of visual design such as colours, fonts, or layout.

### 5.2.5 *Modularity*

Normally, each blog post is a separate web page with a ‘permalink’ (i.e. with its own URL). It can also be displayed partially or in full on the front page, where it moves down with the latest post

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<sup>13</sup> There are also automated blogs – known as ‘splogs’ (spam blogs) – that harvest and reproduce content from blogs in order to provide a platform for advertising space and for search engine optimisation (SEO) purposes.

appearing above it. The sidebar, the title of the blog, and other structural elements usually appear on every page. Each of these are discrete components, and other components such as a hit counter, or a Facebook 'Like' button, can easily be added. Sometimes, these components might interfere with each other, causing the blog to slow down or be interrupted in some manner.

#### 5.2.6 *Hyperlinks*

Hyperlinks are frequently cited as an essential aspect of blogs, but there has also been evidence of blogs having less outgoing links than expected: Herring *et al.* found that 42% of their sample "appeared to be social isolates, neither linking to nor being linked to by others" (2005: 10); a sample of Persian blogs had a similar amount of 'isolates' at 45% (Esmaili *et al.* 2006); and in Poland Trammell *et al.* found that only 8.9% of blogs had in-post citations (2006: 713).

These are external links, and they are usually used to index inter-blogger communication and, by implication, community. However, blogs also depend on internal hyperlinks, which is why I include them as basic affordances. The relative lack of use of hyperlinks between blogs is an example of the dynamic of the relational affordance, and they can express a range of intentions – as Park & Kluver put it, "A hyperlink on a blog might mean agreement, disagreement, mockery, or any other range of human responses" (2007a).

#### 5.2.7 *Anonymity*

A very frequent misperception of blogs – and indeed of online interaction in general – is that anonymity and identity transformation is widespread (e.g. Hookway 2008). Studies show that a minority of blogs are anonymous: for example, a survey of German language blogs showed 29.5% were anonymous or pseudonymous (Schmidt 2007b: 8). It is important to note that the use of a pseudonym is very common, but this does not necessarily mean anonymity: looking at anonymity and self-disclosure on blogs, Hua Qian & Craig Scott (2007: n.p.) note that anonymity may be visual (e.g. in using photos) and/or discursive (i.e. depending on what is said), and is in part "shaped by the features and affordances of the technology," in that options to add photos, or have an online profile, may or may not be present. In Korea, Jeong Kim has noted the requirement to use the national identity card number to register with popular blogging platforms and other websites (2007: 6).

#### 5.2.8 *Disembodiment*

Although this is not a necessary part of a blog, it is an inevitable result of any computer-mediated communication (CMC). It relates to anonymity, in that it enables it, but usually efforts are made to overcome the lack of physical presence by providing photos, references to places, and so on (*cf.* Slater 1998).

### 5.2.9 Accessibility

Anyone capable of setting up an online email account is also capable of setting up a blog. This ease of access to a publishing tool is one of the most novel features of the blog, and also helps to explain the high number of abandoned blogs, many of them ‘single post’ blogs (e.g. Perseus 2003). However, access to the internet is still only available to about 30% of the world (Miniwatts Marketing Group 2011), and political decisions can be made to block access to blogs – e.g. in Turkey (Parfeni 2011). It should also be noted that although there are free platforms for blogging, these are supported by revenue generated mostly from advertising, as well as other means – thus, while bloggers own the content of the blogs, the hosting company has no obligation to keep the platform available, and will presumably only do so as long as they are commercially viable.

### 5.2.10 Personalisation

The ‘personal medium’ is a concept well developed by Lüders *et al.* (2010). A blogger is able to publish directly, and is personally responsible for the content. The blog may also be felt as an extension of their personal life, a means to maintain friendships, and for creative expression (e.g. Reed 2005, 2008). The lack of filters between the blogger and her blog mean that, over time, there can be an accumulation of minor, quotidian, details that enable a regular reader to have a strong sense of the blogger as person – something that rarely, happens in other media.

### 5.2.11 Interaction

The ability to make public comments on blogs is very important, and a 2006 report found that 87% of American bloggers have comments enabled (Lenhart & Fox 2006). Comments allow readers to address themselves to the blogger, as well as to other readers – often, regular commenters will become familiar with each other, and for some the comments are an integral part of the blog post. Nardi *et al.*, however, note the importance of the “limited interactivity characteristic of the blogging experience” (2004: 231): this relates to the asynchronous affordance, in that bloggers and readers appreciate the ability to choose how much they interact.

## 5.3 Analysing blog affordances & blogging practices

This thesis will discuss how blog affordances are actualised in terms of causal relations between actors and actants which, as Table 2 implies, are apprehensible in terms of personal blogging practices. Practices are understood to be, as Postill states, “the embodied sets of activities that humans perform with varying degrees of regularity, competence and flair” (2010: 1). With regards to blogging, that means looking at the range of activities that include, or have as an objective, the use of blogs. This would also include those who read blogs only, but this thesis focuses on bloggers, i.e. those who produce blogs. Practices associated with the affordances are important in understanding



personal blogging, but those practices change depending on contingent factors. For example, functional anonymity is very easy to obtain,<sup>14</sup> but is not usually practiced: for personal bloggers, this may be because many start with the intention of sharing with friends, and thus anonymity is not necessary.

By orienting the investigation around blog affordances, we can learn about the particular ways in which blogs are linked in causal relations to the other actors, and draw conclusions about dyadic interactions and emergent patterns that form with and through them. It is a complex picture that shifts through time, depending on contextual perspectives. Blog affordances both limit and expand different types of interaction, and articulate relative to each other: for example, disembodiment affords anonymity – this can enable greater honesty and emotional closeness, but it can also enable disruptive and aggressive behaviour.

Similarly, the affordances offer a means to develop a dynamic framework to analyse how bloggers interact with other actors/actants such as the blogs, BlogAdNet, and the clients.<sup>15</sup> Such a consistent framework enables conclusions to be drawn, although this classification inevitably has a certain arbitrariness to it, in that this approach fixes what is a dynamic form, one always shifting through movements of difference. As such, it should be seen as an analytical tool, and not a claim of representational ontology.

Affordances also allow us to develop a virtual diagram of the rhizome of relations that the blog, as an actant with agency but without conscious intent, is able to bring into being. Another way of seeing the blog is as a machine that affords mediated interactions, within limits that inscribe the actors, or striates the plane that is the ‘blogosphere’. It differs from other media – for example television – in its greater potential for rhizomatic as opposed to arborescent movements of difference and flows of meaning. In this study, the specific technology is a medium, the blog, and exploring the ways in which the affordances are actualised will illuminate the social relations that develop amongst bloggers and with their audience. In addition, the affordances devolve from semi-autonomous packages of computer code, and these also interact with emergent effects.

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<sup>14</sup> With caveats: in most situations the IP address can be traced and the specific computer located. However, this can normally only be done by law enforcement or specialised operators.

<sup>15</sup> NB: as is common practice in the advertising industry, ‘client’ shall be used here to refer to the company who is paying for the advertisement.

The blog affordances I propose are based on my own experience of using blogs for five years, as well as on interviewing and observing other bloggers, but I do not claim it to be necessarily exhaustive. There may be things I have missed, and – importantly also in the fluid context of the internet – tomorrow someone may introduce a new piece of computer code that shifts blogs’ affordances radically. The increased use of location-based tracking and mobile access to the internet, for example, could do this. Thus, I would like to emphasise the creative and positive aspects of the concept of affordances, the way in which it helps us to frame the range of sociocultural uses of sociotechnology.

As noted above, affordances and practices are closely related. Postill argues for the importance of practice with regards to media and makes two points in particular that are useful here. First, that media can be conceptualised “as practice” (Postill 2010: 2; emphasis added), is exemplified by blogging and other digital media practices where “consumers are often simultaneously producers, distributors and consumers of new media contents” (*ibid.*: 24); this emphasises how the blogging assemblage is a dynamic, resonant, plane – a ongoing construct of practices that actualise affordances and is subject to territorialising and deterritorialising influences. Secondly, the point that “practice theory is a body of work about the work of the body” (*ibid.*: 11) is noted, and as Chapter V will discuss, personal blogging has a close relation with affect and the immediacy of experience that parallels this conceptualisation of practice. Personal blogging thus represents a particular contingent regularity of blogging practices, and is analysed as a blog genre, a discussion of which we now turn to.

## **6 Blogging and genre**

Having examined the theoretical approach to media, and blogs in particular, this section argues that the concept of genres – “text types or forms of communication associated with a social purpose and occasion” (Schirato & Yell 2000: 56) – can be added to assemblage and affordances in order to develop a model of the personal blog.

Rebecca Blood’s basic definition of a blog as “a frequently updated webpage with dated entries, new ones placed on top” (2002b: ix) is still sufficient to distinguish a blog from other websites, though now the great majority of blogs also have comments enabled, and use a variety of media modalities. Thus, I propose the following as a working definition:

A blog is a sociotechnical medium that enables a single person to publish multimedia webpages, displayed in reverse chronological order. Readers are usually able to make publicly visible comments on each post, although this is controlled by the blogger. The personal blog genre focuses on the life of the blogger, as opposed to any particular specialised topic.

This thesis is focused on the personal blog – a genre of blogging that has roots in the personal diary (McNeill 2003), and the content of a personal blog is understood to reflect the daily thoughts and experiences of the blogger, and may thus cover a variety of topics. However, there is the crucial difference that it is usually made available on an ongoing basis to an indeterminate audience. There are other related genres – in particular video blogs, known as ‘vlogs’ (Griffith & Papacharissi 2010), and ‘microblogging’ of which the most well-known form is Twitter.com. They are again based on the principle of a person expressing and sharing aspects of their life with a relatively indeterminate audience online.

Recalling the limitations of considering blogs as a genre (Section 2.1), Bruns & Jacobs argue that it makes more sense to discuss the “specific subgenres which are variations on the overall blogging theme” in the same way that television is more accurately analysed in terms of “what genres and contexts of use we aim to address” (2006: 2-3). Although they refer to ‘subgenres’ rather than genres, their advice is followed here. Genres reflect and constitute particular communicative patterns that stabilise particular social contexts, and the variety of blog genres reflect a variety of social assemblages. Using Herring, Scheidt, *et al.*’s “blog types” (2004: 2–6) as a base, this section reviews some of the literature on the different blog genres, expands on the personal blog, and discusses the significance of genre on media theory. Later, in Chapter V, I will be proposing a categorisation of genres more specific to Malaysian practices.

## **6.1 Blog genres**

The most commonly studied blog genre is the ‘*filter blog*’. Although a filter blog can in principle focus on any type of content, as long as it principally comments on material from other sites, they are most often associated with opinionated political comment on current affairs. In one sense, it replicates the conventional opinion column genre of the newspaper – however the blog affordances allow some key differences: they may link directly to other bloggers to support or criticise them (e.g. Efimova & De Moor 2005); and, readers can interact directly with the blogger and other readers in the comments area. The latter helps to develop the filter bloggers’ relationship and credibility with readers which is based on her personal opinions, as well as social and rhetorical skills (Armstrong &

McAdams 2009: 441). Calling them “current event blogs”, Melissa Wall argues that through their personalisation, and the use of a fragmented narrative interwoven with other websites, filter blogs represent “a form of postmodern journalism” (2005: 165–6). Christopher Harper compares the ethical practices of bloggers with journalistic ethics, concluding that blogs may be more self-correcting than the mainstream media, but also tend to reject its “preoccupation with fairness and objectivity” (2005: 23). There is a tension between journalists and bloggers that revolves around the latter’s perceived lack of professional ethics and standards, and the former’s perceived subordination to corporate and institutional interests (boyd 2006: para 21).

It should be noted that although the points above refer to filter blogs that focuses on political commentary, there are other examples of the filter blog that correspond roughly to different spheres or interest that are also found in the mainstream media. For example: the entertainment gossip blog by Perez Hilton;<sup>16</sup> the tech blog Gizmodo;<sup>17</sup> fashion blogs, and so on. The popularity of this model has led to a convergence with many mainstream media outlets adopting the blog as a complementary format, known as the ‘j-blog’.

The ‘j-blog’ (journalist’s blog) is an example of the success of the blog medium in penetrating the mainstream media – it differs from the filter blog primarily because it is produced by a mainstream media organisation, or a professional journalist. Susan Robinson details seven types of blogs that journalists produce – from an online column similar in most respects to a newspaper column, through a confessional diary, to a “rumor-mill blog that the reporter uses as an off-the-record account” (2006: 70). She argues that the j-blog has developed as journalists seek to respond to the popularity of blogs and complement and supplement their more formal articles with blogs (see also Matheson 2004; Singer 2005).

Another category related to the political sphere is *politicians’ blogs*. These enable politicians to have a direct link to the public, as a counter against media representations. In Chapter IV, some of the uses of blogs by politicians in Malaysia are discussed. Han Woo Park, with other authors, has provided a series of hyperlink analyses of South Korean politicians’ blogs (Park & Jankowski 2006; Park & Kluver 2007a, 2007b); and in Europe, Coleman & Moss (2008) analyse the blogs of three leading European politicians, concluding that they use the blogs to communicate a sense of their own ordinariness, adopting a spontaneous style and timely style, and offering the possibility of interaction with readers. These again reflect the affordances of blogs.

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<sup>16</sup> <http://perezhilton.com/>

<sup>17</sup> <http://gizmodo.com/>

'K-logs' or 'knowledge blogs' are a category introduced by Herring, Scheidt *et al.* (2004) and which "functionally resemble hand-written project journals" (*ibid.*: 10). Here I would cast the definition a bit wider to include all blogs that are focused on a relatively narrow area of knowledge. *Hobbyists' blogs* would come under this genre (e.g. Wei 2004) other examples are blogs focused on religious topics (Teusner 2010), photography, travel (Karlsson 2006), food, fashion, and so on. Blogs have also been adopted by some academics, particularly those interested in digital media, and a common theme is that a blog enables the academic to share explore new ideas and 'think by writing' (Gregg 2006; Hopkins 2009; Mortenson & Walker 2002; Saka 2008; Vaisman n.d.). Academic blogging sometimes challenges the conventional production process of academic texts, and as such is another example of blogs destabilising existing textual production regimes (e.g. Halavais 2006: 122–3).

A *corporate blog* is a blog created by, or financed by, a company for the purposes of furthering its business interests. By 2005 it was claimed that between ten and twenty percent of Fortune 500 companies "were using blogs in some way" (Cook 2006: 52). A public relations agency suggests six types of blogs that a company may develop: a CEO blog, a company blog, an expert blog, a topic blog, a guru blog, and an industry blog (van der Wolf 2007: 8). The benefits claimed are heightened visibility and credibility. Visibility in this context is usually estimated in terms of search engine results, and a company that created five blogs written by employees who were given "lists of keyword suggestions" by a specialised SEO company improved their search engine visibility and helped to reduce their "paid search costs" by 40% (Bannan 2008).

Corporate blogs thus are a particular genre carefully developed so as to integrate with the profit-making activities of companies: their ability to compete with other online voices, presenting a controlled – but personable – voice, and to engage with consumers by attracting feedback are the key attractions. These factors leverage the interactivity and personalisation affordances of the blog. There will be more discussions of the ramifications of commercial interests in blogging in Chapter VII.

Whereas corporate blogs are created as a complement to existing companies, some bloggers have managed to make a business from their blog (Tozzi 2007). Sometimes known as '*problogs*' (short for 'professional blogs') – they are characterised by their focus on income generation, rather than self-expression or other motives. Their primary mode of operation is summarised by a newspaper article about Darren Rowse, a successful problogger, whose "talent is writing content that is engaging enough to attract a massive audience and loyal community, while using the correct key words to

attract the most relevant advertising for his audience” (Charles 2008). One of his blogs is dedicated to making money from blogging, and others have content relevant to consumers – such as digital photography. For the consumer-oriented problogs, attracting an audience, and selling advertising space is the primary objective; but for the blogs aimed at explaining how to make money online, there exist an additional number of strategies mostly aimed at recruiting participants into affiliate networks, paid reviews, selling links, selling e-books (on how to make money from blogging), and similar techniques (Starak 2007: 44–8).

Problogs, therefore, represent in some respects a truly ‘indigenous’ genre, in that they leverage the particular affordances of blogs to develop a particular product that draws in Web traffic, and commoditise that audience in various ways. In terms of providing an advertising platform, their business model is similar to mainstream media models, but they also benefit from particular affordances such as accessibility and hyperlinking.

Overall, it is not possible to deliver a definite categorisation of blogs. Individual blogs overlap and develop in their style and topic matter, alongside the interests and motivations of the blogger herself, and the shifting relevance of affordances. Other types of blogs would be *blogshops* and *parenting blogs* (aka ‘*momblogs*’). In the next section, personal blogs, the genre that is the focus of this thesis, will be discussed.

## **6.2 Personal blogs**

As stated above, a personal blog focuses on the quotidian life of the blogger, as opposed to any particular specialised topic. Personal bloggers are a category underrepresented in academic studies, despite constituting the majority of bloggers (Brake 2009: 22; Cenite *et al.* 2009: 589). In 2008 Technorati defined personal bloggers as those who “blog about topics of personal interest not associated with [their] work” (Sifry 2008), and this non-exclusive self-categorisation constituted 79% of the total respondents. The 2009 Technorati survey classified most respondents (72%) as ‘Hobbyists’ (defined as those who do not make any money from their blog), and their most likely topic was “Personal musings” (Technorati 2009).

There are other numerous surveys that demonstrate the same predominance of the personal blog internationally. It was the most common Malaysian blog genre reported in a 2005 survey (Jun-E Tan & Zawawi 2008: 38); two surveys by Hans Kullin (2005, 2006) in Sweden have “Everyday life experiences” as being the most popular category of blogs; in the USA a survey by Viegas (2005) saw 83% of the bloggers describing their blog as mostly containing “personal musings;” Schmidt (2007b)

found that “bloggers seem to use blogs primarily as personal journals,” although this was more common for teenage bloggers (*ibid.*: 11); a content analysis of a random sample of Blogger.com blogs by Papacharissi found 76.3% of blogs “possessing a personal orientation [...] a diary format” (2007: 28); an international survey (with a majority of American bloggers) found 73% of “personal bloggers” (Cenite *et al.* 2009: 583). There was one apparent exception in an international survey by Su *et al.*, who found that “Japanese blogs were dominated by hobby and recreational blogs (40%), whereas personal blogs dominated for the other cultures” (2005: 178).

Due to the different methodologies and contexts of these studies, it is not possible to draw direct comparisons. For example, a survey in Poland by Trammell *et al.* states that 92.2% of blogs were “like a diary or journal” as opposed to 1.4% “being used for professional reasons” (2006: 170). This is not a categorisation that tells us much about the diversity of content of the blogs. Nonetheless, it is clear that ‘personal blogs’ – variously defined – are in the majority.<sup>18</sup>

One probable reason for the underrepresentation is categorical; in some cases, online ‘journals’, or ‘diaries’ were not considered to be ‘blogs’ (i.e. filter blogs). Blood argued that blogs are “[‘native’] to the Web, rather than carried over from off-line genres” (quoted in Herring, Scheidt, *et al.* 2004: 3); highlighting the hyperlinking affordance, Mortenson & Walker stated “Links are vital to the [blog] genre; take the links out of a weblog and you are left with a web diary” (2002: 265); and, Zuckerman seems not to consider ‘diarists’ as bloggers, saying “Between the journalists and the diarists are bloggers” (2007: 51).

Herring, Kouper *et al.* (*op. cit.*) note the existence of web journals in 1995 (see also McNeill 2003: 28), but also note how these were usually not considered to be ‘blogs’. LiveJournal, in particular, was long considered not to be a ‘blog’. However, by 2004 at least one study included LiveJournal and Diaryland as blogs, noting that they constituted “about 28% of all blogs registered in the US through June 2003” (Lin & Halavais 2004); and other studies since have focused on LiveJournal (Alexanyan & Koltsova 2009; Brake 2009; Hodgkinson 2007). This highlights again the difficulties of comparisons across studies of blogs which use different definitions, and which are reacting to rapid changes in the online environment.

Another possible reason has been highlighted by using a gender analysis: Herring, Kouper, *et al.* (2004: n.p.) delve precisely into the question of the lack of interest in personal blogging, and note an

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<sup>18</sup> Though it is possible that ‘splogs’ – semi-automated spam blogs – are more numerous. For example, Kolari *et al.* detected 25% of splogs in a sample of Technorati-indexed blogs (2006: n.p.).

association of personal blogging with younger, and female bloggers. Filter blogs are more likely to be hosted by men and to favour topics which are more likely to be seen as relevant “for their ‘democratizing,’ ‘socially transformative’ potential as alternative news sources.” Melissa Gregg echoes this approach and notes that there is often a hierarchy of blogs with the “‘filter’ blog [as] the authentic form against which other styles of blogging must be judged” (2006: 151). She also references some other feminist arguments, noting that many bloggers are amateurs, and men are less likely to have commitments in terms of housework and child care, freeing them to do the reading and research necessary for an A-list blog (*ibid.*: 156).

Overall, there are two stereotypes that frequently appear: the teenage female ‘Dear Diary’ blogger, and the serious older male pundit (*ibid.*: 155). The two reasons outlined above – the categorical exclusion, and the gender analysis, may also be connected. Overall, the underrepresentation of personal blogs seems to reflect a relegation of the personal to the conventionally female and less powerful private sphere, as well as younger internet users, while the political debates and aggressive posturing of the political bloggers retain the dominance in the public sphere. Thus Herring, Kouper, *et al.* conclude that not only has the role of females in developing blogging been understated, but “more attention needs to be paid to ‘typical’ blogs and the people who create them in order to understand the real motivations, gratifications, and societal effects of this growing practice [blogging]” (*op. cit.*).

### **6.3 Genre as sociotechnical assemblage**

The above categories of blog genres are based on content. This is useful in the first instance to give some direction to research, but attempting to construct a representational model that assumes fixed genre-types is not workable. As Lüders *et al.* have argued, with regards to ‘personal media’ (which includes blogs): “Genres emerge or adapt where digital technologies and society, or the media and the message, meet in the dimension of time. In this regard they are similar to other time-biased phenomena like traditions and rituals” (2010: 950). A similar argument is made by Graves, who states: “a genre embodies what those emerging technological capabilities suggest to a particular society at a given moment, giving the technology meaning and purpose in human affairs. In this respect, genre can be considered part of the mechanism of emergence” (2007: 343).

Thus, properly conceptualising genres means including the technological and social contexts within which they operate, and for which they may act as de/territorialising influences. There are a few approaches to genre that develop these aspects, and will be discussed below.



One approach to blog genres is discussed in relation to Iranian blogs by Alireza Doostdar who uses a linguistic analysis based on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the speech genre and dialogue, and the 'deep play' approach of Clifford Geertz. Describing blogging "as an emergent genre of speech tied to particular modes of sociocultural production" (2004: 660), he documents an episode where emergent practices such as commenting, hyperlinking and the temporal property of blog posting, interact in a debate where deliberate use of ungrammatical and 'vulgar' language is used in order to challenge claims to authority based on the formal use of language, and state censorship and moral discipline.

Miller & Shepherd (2004: n.p.) also analyse blogs in terms of genres, arguing that the blog is an evolution of rhetorical-social trends that are epitomised in reality TV (RTV), whose popularity stems from "a hope for connection, for community, and at the same time a more traditional voyeuristic enjoyment of stealth and the possibility of a glimpse of unguarded authenticity." Stefanone & Lackaff directly interrogate links between blogging and RTV, and find that "[h]eavy viewers of RTV were significantly more likely [than general TV viewers] to maintain a blog" (2009: 977). This is an interesting finding, and the arguments by Rose & Wood (2005) that the popularity of RTV relates to a search for authenticity in a postmodern world have relevance to the personal blogger's ability to project relatively unmediated aspects of their self into their blog (a point returned to in Chapter V). The comparison of RTV and blogging is a fertile area for research, but not one undertaken here.

The notion that blogs will foster western-style liberal democracy echoes this idea of genre – suggesting that the proliferation of a particular mode of textual expression, enabled by technology, will influence changes in power. As will be discussed later in Chapter IV, Malaysian 'social-political' (SoPo) blogs are sometimes denounced as a 'Western' mode of communication, and there is an influential school of thought that promotes 'responsible blogging'; this localisation of the political blog genre emphasises consensus and the avoidance of 'sensitive' issues of race, religion, and the position of the Malay community (Jun-E Tan & Zawawi 2008: 55; for an example from China, see de Vries 2009). In another example, the account of Korean bloggers who used the personalisation affordance to express non-majoritarian views in their blog, saw another affordance – interactivity – being used to attack them on patriotic and nationalistic grounds, eventually leading them to self-censor (Kim 2007). These examples show how genre and affordances are useful concepts to situate blogging practices in their cultural context, and provide a measure for intercultural comparison of blogging practices.

One way of visualising an expanded conception of genre is to consider the textual component as one 'dimension'. Focusing on filter blogs, Krishnamurthy (2002) moves beyond content alone by proposing a two dimensional model of blogging that adds a structural element – the production by an individual or a 'community' – to the type of content, which has either a topical or personal focus.

In the Korean example above, another dimension is relevant – the relative positioning in the network of blogs. Being relatively prominent, the bloggers attracted more attention with their opinions – whereas an unknown blogger may have never had any attention paid to their 'unpatriotic' blog post. This aspect is approached by Stine Lomborg (2009: n.p.); in an overview of genre approaches to blogs,<sup>19</sup> he proposes an interesting "typological framework [as] a tool for classification of weblogs into sub-genres based on central communicative and social characteristics: content, directionality and style." The content and style categories are similar to those undertaken previously, but the 'directionality' axis provides an interesting perspective that situates an understanding of blog genre within network theory by describing blogs in terms of the relative position in networks, the monological or dialogical interrelationships, and quality of ties (strong or weak). For example, A-list blogs are usually embedded in asymmetrical networks, characterised by a lack of reciprocal interaction, and weak ties.

This original approach is useful, especially the emphasis on the relationality of blogs, and the ability to allow for overlapping classification rather than exclusive categories – the need for the latter often being dictated by content analysis methodologies (e.g. Herring 2007). Still, the difficulties of classifying personal blogs are demonstrated when he notes that, "Regarding directionality, the personal weblog can be anything from pure monologue to highly engaged dialogue, so on this axis, the personal weblog cannot be delimited" (*op. cit.*).

Using a structuration theory approach, Schmidt (2007a: n.p.) points to "three structural elements [of blogging as social action]: rules, relations, and code." The rules are those that relate to motivation, types of content, forms of expression and conventions for interactions; the relations are those that develop between bloggers and with readers, using the interactivity affordance as well as other forms of communication; and, the code is "the blogging software and its underlying architecture." Echoing the argument made here regarding affordances, he states: "The analytical dimension of code is most often excluded from studies, although changes in functionalities and features might have a great impact on blogging practices."

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<sup>19</sup> Although he classifies a blog as a genre, which is not the stance taken here, his arguments are relevant to classifying what I argue are blog genres (and he calls 'sub-genres').

Lüders *et al.* also look at different dimensions: “Genres operate dynamically as interaction between two interdependent dimensions, *conventions* and *expectations*, both of which are constructed or ‘afforded’ by media and specific texts.” (2010: 953; original emphasis). Conventions are those particular textual features (style, rhetoric, materiality) that are expected – they are dynamic ‘rules’, connections between texts that are always changing. Expectations build up over time, and are based on experiencing texts and using them as a reference for future texts in the same genre. They emphasise the importance of media technologies in influencing “radical interventions in conventions [for example...] when the web and the mobile telephone appropriate existing genres, conventions often change so radically that social expectations change as well” (*ibid.*: 954).

Overall, therefore, different blog genres reflect different assemblages of technological, social and expressive components. Doostdar, and Miller & Shepherd emphasise the interaction of media texts and social patterns. In addition to this Schmidt, Lomborg, and Lüders *et al.* all emphasise the importance of the affordances of blogs, while Lomborg and Lüders *et al.* tie these to genre as well.

In assemblage terms, the blog-as-code is the machinic assemblage – along with the computer, the bloggers, and so on. On the other pole, in ‘reciprocal presupposition’, is the collection of signs, expressions and enunciations that constitute the expressive manifestation of the genre. The territorialisation of a genre operates in its effectiveness as a communicative actant, and tendency to reproduce certain social patterns through their iteration and repetition (Lüders *et al.* 2010: 951). New bloggers learn from other bloggers – in particular central prototypical figures – and choose particular styles and conventions; for effective communication, there needs to be a congruence of textual practices, and thus there is a centralising tendency. However, lines of deterritorialisation cut through this, such as the example above by Doostdar, and new technologies as mentioned by Lüders *et al.* There are many possible lines of flight, and this research focuses on the spread of the monetisation of personal blogging, which is covered in the next section.

## 7 Blogs and marketisation

So, if markets are conversations (they are) and there’s no market for messages (there isn’t), what’s marketing-as-usual to do? Own the conversations? Keep the conversations on message? Turn up the volume until it drowns out the market? Compete with the new conversations?

(Searles & Weinberger 1999: n.p.)

This statement from the seminal marketing work *The Cluetrain Manifesto* announced a new paradigm for businesses in the age of the internet. The phrase “markets are conversations” has particular relevance here, in that the argument is that the internet is changing the market in way that makes phony commercial messaging impossible. This argument both enlightens and fails; one mark of its failure is the uncritical repeating of Eric Raymond “The thing about the Internet is you can’t coerce people over a T-1 line, so power relationships don’t work” (Raymond quoted in Searles & Weinberger 1999: n.p.) – one only has to consider some of the gender based arguments (e.g. Consalvo 2002), or discussions of race (Nakamura 2002), to understand how power offline reproduces itself online. It also fails because it has the fundamental error of classical economics at its core: in arguing that the “Web is the best medium ever created for sales” (*ibid.*), they assume the ‘perfect market knowledge’ of the *homo economicus*, recast in this instance as the netopian collective agency of the *homo internet* ‘group mind’ – thus, with regards to marketing experts who are skilled in “the art of impersonating sincerity and warmth” they argue, “[t]he market will find out who and what you are” (*ibid.*).

Nonetheless, their message is influential, and the discourse of markets as conversations is omnipresent in online marketing discourse. The epigraph above is also relevant for two reasons: first, it speaks directly to the subject of this thesis, the monetisation of blogs, and in particular ‘advertorials’ – paid blog posts. With regards to the Malaysian blogging situation, the answer of BlogAdNet and their clients to Searles & Weinberger’s question ten years later is apparently to make a market out of the messages, and to ‘Own the conversations’. As we shall see, advertorials are paid for and vetted by clients, rolled out online in carefully calibrated marketing campaigns that extend across different digital and analogue media, and are accompanied by different ways to initiate participation with bloggers and their readers both on- and offline. Secondly, the idea that ‘markets are conversations’ points to the cultural basis of markets – that is, one of the key critiques of studies of markets is the separation of culture and economy, something primarily done in economics and often perpetuated in other social sciences, as outlined by Slater & Tonkiss (2001 *op. cit.*). This dichotomisation recalls the division discussed earlier (Section 3; p12) between technology and sociocultural dynamics, and for which the concept of sociotechnology is proposed.

Starting from the historical development of European capitalism in the 18th and 19th centuries, Slater & Tonkiss trace the theories that relate to ‘market society’, that is, the relationship of markets to society and in particular the idea that markets impose a particular kind of social order. They note that “If the emergence and extension of markets have been central to our understanding of

modernity, the logic of marketization is even more pronounced in the analysis of late modern social and economic forms” (*ibid.*: 5); and ‘marketisation’ is “the complex processes of commodification and monetarization<sup>20</sup> through which diverse aspects of modern social life became integrated into market arrangements” (*ibid.*: 3). Describing the process of commoditisation as central to marketisation, Slater & Tonkiss note that although things can move in and out of commodity status, and “people can creatively appropriate the products of capitalism” (*ibid.*: 25), the principle that any thing can become a commodity is the basis on which “market society has been widely understood as corroding other value systems” (*ibid.*: 25). This process requires calculation in terms of money – i.e. “monetarization,” and although its relation with “marketization is highly complex and historically variable” (*ibid.*: 25-6), it is “bound up with two critical developments that are equally definitive of a market society: depersonalization, and the increase of calculation and quantification” (*ibid.*: 26).

Starting with the classic economic theories of Adam Smith, they take in sociological theories – although the latter are often cast in opposition to the former, they argue that “economic theory is also social theory in the broadest sense” (*ibid.*: 200). Similarly, they also note how even the most fervent critiques of capitalism also promote an “absolute model of market society” (*ibid.*: 198), albeit as an antithesis. Another manifestation of these oppositions is explained with reference to commerce and culture – here the rise of mass consumerism is either seen as a threat to culture, or an opportunity to undermine elitist control of cultural expression – a “vastly expanded material culture that provides symbolic resources for meaningful social life” (*ibid.*: 150). There is a Bourdieuan analysis by Featherstone, recalling the discussion above (Section 3.2; p16) wherein

Modern cultural producers move between the twin poles of protecting their privileged cultural enclaves and embracing markets as means of disseminating and supporting their work, even though this threatens to de-monopolize and de-differentiate the autonomous aesthetic sphere they are also trying to carve out (*ibid.*: 155-6).

These analyses suffer from a continued division between ‘economy’ and ‘culture’, to which the postmodern response was to assert “Economics *as* culture” (*ibid.*: 191; original emphasis). This ‘cultural turn’ (*ibid.*: Chapter 7) took various forms but its main thrust emphasises “post-Fordism [...] the aestheticization of everyday life through advertising, marketing, design and lifestyle imagery [...] the increasing centrality of marketing and information [...] and the increasing ‘dematerialization’ of commodities” (*ibid.*: 175).

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<sup>20</sup> NB: ‘monetisation’ and ‘monetarization’ are essentially synonyms

Overall, “the trope of ‘market society’” (*ibid.*: 200) is understood as a key aspect of modernity, influencing social and political debates, policies, and global geo-politics – “however, in trying to understand and evaluate markets in modern social life, this term ultimately proves insufficient” (*ibid.*: 200). The cultural turn has provided the most trenchant opposition to the modern conception of the market society, but risks replacing it with another absolute system, when taken to its extremes by Baudrillard. Nonetheless, they argue, “the cultural turn on the whole pushes us into disaggregating markets” (*ibid.*: 202), which is where they see the most opportunity. Their argument is that markets need not only to be considered as embedded, or localised, but also seen specifically as instituted by particular processes – local or global – that are identifiable (*ibid.*: 201). This means that markets do not impose a certain type of social order, but they are important parts of the social order.

Therefore, with regards to the monetisation of blogs, to assume that this results in the clients and commercial interests owning and appropriating blogs is over-simplifying the picture, and would be in danger of reproducing the “marketisation thesis” – that monetised and profit-motivated exchanges are taking over increasing amounts of social life – which Colin Williams has demonstrated to be lacking in empirical backing, although not devoid of relevance. He concludes that there are a “plurality of economic practices” and modes of exchange that exist alongside each other (2004: 445). However, Williams’s argument still retains the economist’s focus on economic exchange, be it market or otherwise. To fully develop the analysis we can follow Slater & Tonkiss and turn to the debate sparked by Michel Callon’s introduction to *The Laws of the Markets* (1998), and the responses by Don Slater, Daniel Miller, and others. Callon takes actor-network theory and expands it to studies of the role of economic theory and ‘calculative agencies’ in creating markets, stating that “it [is] impossible to avoid considering markets as constructed, and necessary to emphasize the importance of technologies, including economics, in this very process of construction” (quoted in Barry & Slater 2002: 286). Developing an argument from the standpoint that questions the nature of materiality, Slater and Miller both agree with the thrust of his argument, rejecting naturalistic claims of economic activity as culturally neutral.

A key concept that they all use is that of ‘entanglement’, which recalls the ‘conversations’ espoused by Searles & Weinberger. Callon argues that ‘disentanglement’ is the goal of economic agents, but paradoxically: “To disentangle you have first to entangle better” (quoted in *ibid.*: 293). Miller rejects this stance, and Slater reworks this approach, in ways that shall be discussed further in chapter VII with regards to specific examples from my fieldwork.

Searles & Weinberger's arguments resemble those of Rishab Ghosh (1998), Eric Raymond (1998a) and Richard Barbrook (1998), who also cast the internet as a space for a radically new form of economic exchange. Altogether, these arguments take their basic tenets from a technodeterminist view of the internet, and a dichotomisation of market and non-market activities. Tiziana Terranova has convincingly argued that the internet is not a break with capital, but rather "It is rather a mutation that is totally immanent to late capitalism, not so much a break as an intensification, and therefore a mutation, of a widespread cultural and economic logic" (2000: 54). Slater makes a similar argument based on challenging theories of "dematerialisation" that do not take into account the "social processes and conditions through which things are stabilised as social materialities, or destabilised, reconfigured, problematised" (2002c: 96). This thesis will follow the lead by these two writers in asserting that the fundamental economic forces at play online are no different from those offline, and there is no need to posit new economic theories to account for how to make money online.

## **7.1 *Blogging markets***

Before discussing the theoretical approach further, this section will briefly overview scholarly literature on commercial uses of blogs. In the first instance, it is clear that monetisation has gone from a marginal activity to a widespread one. In 2005, a survey by Viegas mentions that 93% had blogged about companies or products, 84% never asked permission, and 71% always revealed the name of the company or product. In Brake's study of personal bloggers (conducted in 2005), only one blogger had put advertisements onto her blog, and was also alone in considering the possibility of monetising her blog (2009: 130). Pedersen & Macafee (2007) found less than 20% of a sample for whom their blog was a source of income; this was mostly women and some were "shop windows for small home-based businesses." A Swedish survey of bloggers in 2006 found that 10.6% of blogs had advertisements— the great majority of which were Google AdSense; another finding was that 61% were agreeable to being contacted by a company regarding their blogging. Overall, "The majority of bloggers still hardly make pocket money from blog ads" (Kullin 2006: 18–20).

By 2008, Technorati's 'State of the Blogosphere' survey (Sifry 2008) found a majority of bloggers with advertising on their blogs, 80% posting "brand or product reviews," and 37% "frequently." For Asians, it reported a maximum annual estimated blog revenue (in USD) of \$250,000, and a mean of \$7440. However, a much lower median of \$120 shows the disparities in income, with most earning relatively insignificant amounts. They also note that "one-third of bloggers have been approached [by companies] to be brand advocates." This reference to brands provides a clue to the importance of blogs for advertising and marketing, the main source of revenue for blogs. With blogs, non-

industry individuals can reach audiences previously only available via restricted mainstream media outlets, themselves heavily dependent on advertising revenue. Thus, there is a smoothening of the plane of media, wherein blogs can impinge upon companies' control of their brand image, a central component of their market strategy, sometime evaluated in terms of a capital asset.

### 7.1.1 *Blogging & public relations*

Blogging can be an answer, even perhaps *the* answer to the crises facing PR

(Cook 2006: 53; original emphasis)

There is considerable interest in blogs from the public relations industry, as evidenced by a significant number of papers in peer-reviewed journals and the above quote by Trevor Cook, who argues that the need to depend on the mainstream media, which prefers sensationalist and simplified messages, is an impediment to effective public relations. Peter Smudde (2005) and Srividya Raghavan (2006) focus on companies creating their own blogs as a public relations exercise, and discuss some of the related ethical and variety of practical applications. At this earlier point, it seems that the trend was to avoid risky engagements with external bloggers, and instead to 'join the conversation' by creating their own blogs.

A relatively early response published by Jeremy Wright (2005)<sup>21</sup> promotes blogs both as repositories of unmediated market information – e.g. customer experiences and opinions – and also as a means for a company to communicate directly with their market/customers. Companies are told that they can use blogs internally and externally. Externally, they can create their own blogs and/or engage with bloggers 'out there', and comments on blogs are seen as authentic voices of customers. This is echoed by Trevor Cook who emphasises the role of software that enables "[c]omments, trackbacks, links and tags" that "pushes us in the direction of participating in communities that are continually forming and reforming and swirling around particular topics and interests" (2006: 48).

Larry Weber, a prominent public relations and marketing figure, expresses a changing conception of the brand that parallels the shift away from representation and essence that underlies ANT and the assemblage perspective:

brand equity is shifting away from brand *essence* and brand recall. [...] In the new marketing reality, the brand is based on the *dialogue* you have with your customers and prospects – the stronger the dialogue, the stronger the brand (2007: 32; emphasis added).

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<sup>21</sup> He is a "blogging consultant" and therefore has a vested interest in promoting blogging.



He cites an example of a blogger publishing an open letter complaining about the computer manufacturer Dell, and the blog's readers increased from about five thousand a day to one hundred thousand. The solution for companies, he argues, is to engage as much as possible with these vocal consumers. Some evidence for this is provided by Tom Kelleher, who contacted commenters on an "organizational blog" (2009: 180) – i.e. one produced by a company, in this case Microsoft – and found that the blog increased the commenters' perception of Microsoft having a "conversational voice," and this correlated with various positive relational indices (*ibid.*). He also found that the commenters were more likely to read the blog regularly, sometimes daily (*ibid.*: 181). This supports the assumption that commenters are most likely to be regular readers, and thus more likely to be a part of a dialogic relationship.

In addition to underlying the increasing postmodern relevance of cultural and relational skills for economic actors, these approaches all tend to emphasise the shifting and relational aspects of online interaction and public consumption, something that the assemblage approach is well suited to develop. This will be discussed in the next section.

## **7.2 Assemblage & markets**

Deleuze & Guattari's account of capitalism has a strong Marxist influence, in that it proposes capitalism as a historically unique phenomenon – stating that "capitalism is indeed the limit of all societies" (1983: 267) – and they ascribe to economic forces an objectivity that separate them from other 'codes', i.e. forms of inscription that regularise and stabilise flows:

capital differentiates itself from any other socius or full body, inasmuch as capital itself figures as a directly economic instance, and falls back on production without interposing extraeconomic factors that would be inscribed in the form of a code (*ibid.*: 271).

They also argue that people become important only in terms of their concrete "capital or labour capacity," and there is always place for them, "even if an axiom has to be created just for you" (*ibid.*: 272). In capitalism, it is "axiomatization that comes to replace the vanished codes" (*ibid.*: 267), and "this axiomatic is not the invention of capitalism, since it is identical with capital itself. On the contrary, capitalism is its offspring, its result" (*ibid.*: 274). Thus the axiomatic refers to the abstract diagram, or the 'body without organs' that is the immanent virtual machine of capitalism. Claire Colebrook explains the body without organs as being "the undifferentiated that we imagine underlies the differentiated or organised bodies of life," and in capitalism this is "some basic flow of

capital which we then exchange and manage in order to produce ourselves as social and political individuals” (2003: xxi).

Deleuze & Guattari’s work can be read on many levels, but the broader historical argument will not be engaged with here for lack of space. For example, Escobar & Osterweil point to some inconsistencies in their arguments, saying that sometimes they see capitalism as “capable of integrating any non-capitalist form” (in *Thousand Plateaus*); but in other situations (*What is Philosophy*), “they seem to bracket this possibility, as in certain views of deterritorialization, retroactive smoothing by nomad-like agents or philosophy’s ability to turn capitalism against itself” (2009: 202).

As detailed earlier, the concept of the assemblage is deployed in this thesis, and from their more detailed discussion of capitalism, the idea of the axiomatic, coding and decoding, is also used in order to discuss the flows of territorialisation and deterritorialisation that operate around and through the monetisation of personal blogging.

William Bogard argues that the axiomatic that is the basis of capitalism “produces fluid codes that adapt to its changing technical means of control” (2009: 19). The versatility of capitalism, actualised mostly in the assemblage that is ‘the market’, lies in the ability to reterritorialise the lines of flight through decoding and reassembling the flows of desire. Or, as Jensen & Rödje put it, “Capitalism decodes desire and its products in order to recode them into abstract quantities in the form of money and commodities” (2009b: 17). An example of this can be seen in the work of Terranova, who describes the integration of counter-cultural fashion and music into capitalism (2000: 38); another apposite example is the recoding of Che Guevara, who died fighting against capitalism, but whose ubiquitous iconic image adorns consumer products worldwide.

Discussing another example of this process, Jensen & Rödje note how “[c]ommercial logics may certainly imply a reterritorializing of scientific activities and outcomes [where...] invention would only be encouraged to the extent that it can be reterritorialized directly into profit,” they also note that “capitalism is itself no all-encompassing entity” (2009b: 12). To make this last point, referring to Callon, and DeLanda, they note how breakthroughs and unexpected developments can occur. In effect, Callon provides a careful argument regarding the construction of markets under the influence of experts (such as economists) who influence government policy (Callon *et al.* 2002); and DeLanda

details the historical development of local and regional markets as specific assemblages (DeLanda 2006: 17–8).

Similarly, Collier & Ong argue that although “market calculation is an ideal-typic global form [that...] is freed of any social or cultural considerations,” when it is viewed as an assemblage, it has to be examined in “interaction with specific substantive or value orders” (2005: 14). Thus in any particular situation, one has to examine the complex of local and specific components that are brought “into new alignments” (*ibid.*: 16) by any number of influences. These arguments recall Slater & Tonkiss’s arguments regarding how markets are instituted (*op. cit.*: Section 7; p53) and, in effect, once markets are understood to be particular and contingent, it is difficult to argue for a universally prevalent, consistent, and dominant inexorable market logic, and instead culture and economy are more advantageously considered as components interacting on a ‘flat’ plane.

The axiomatic of capitalism is phrased in other terms by John Quiggin who, in a short discussion of the economic context of blogging, notes that blogging as an activity fits into both market and non-market sectors. For the latter, a blog post is a “public good” – meaning that it can be accessed by anyone without detracting from another person’s access, and nobody can be prevented from accessing it. This character of blogs means that that “non-monetary motives generally dominate” – motives such as self-expression, or an “economy of esteem” that uses hyperlinks (2006: 76). However, “market rationality tends to crowd out non-monetary motives” (*ibid.*), thus bloggers may simulate interest, and/or self-censor in order to accommodate advertisers. He concludes that market rationality “can be managed only by demarcating spheres in which the rules of market rationality do or do not apply” (*ibid.*). As will be discussed later, my fieldwork did show examples of these practices, but what is more difficult to accommodate is the demarcation of market and non-market (Chapter VII, Section 4.2; p218).

With regards to the internet, Agnieszka Wenninger (2007) points to an important tension wherein the free content and software that is the basis of so much of the rhizomatic potential of the internet – the open, smooth space – is underwritten by the sale of advertisements, which are a potent part of the recoding and territorialising dynamics of the exchange market. Similarly, Ien Ang has argued that the “television business [...] is basically a ‘consumer delivery enterprise’ for advertisers” (2000: 186), and the concept of path dependency – that the adaptation of sociotechnical innovations often depends on their congruence with pre-existing socioeconomic patterns – suggests that there are strong possibilities that blogs become integrated into this industrial model. Jeremy Wright, an early

successful professional blogger, wrote in 2005 about the increased monetisation of blogs and describes a progression from advertisements on blogs, to paid blogging, to companies sponsoring entire blogs which became accepted, “as long as bloggers and companies *disclosed* that this is what they were doing” (2005: 272; original emphasis). Although, he says, there will inevitably be inauthentic behaviour, and newer bloggers will be less concerned with the blogosphere as a whole, overall, “unless the writer behind them is authentic” (*ibid.*), such activity will not prosper. Noting that advertisements on blogs have become commonplace since 2004, he says “By giving the blogger final say-so over which ads are posted [...]. The ads become as authentic as the blog content” (*ibid.*: 286). Thus he challenges a fundamental assumption made by Quiggin, as well as many economists and cultural theorists, that any paid activity is *de facto* inauthentic. This dichotomy is one that is better addressed from an assemblage perspective which avoids polarisations of market and non-market.

These discussions do not broach the issue of paid posts in detail, perhaps because they became more common later on. There have been a number of debates amongst bloggers and social media consultants about the ethics and efficacy of paid blogging. One event was a controversy over a “flog” (i.e. ‘fake blog’), when the US retailer Walmart paid a journalist who toured the USA, parking and sleeping each evening in a Walmart car park, and blogging about it – this relationship was not disclosed, and it led to negative publicity (WalMartWatch 2006). In 2006, Microsoft provided laptops to some bloggers, but their status as review items (to be returned) or gifts, was not clear – this was perceived by some as attempting to buy favourable reviews (Solis 2006). The debate continues, and a report by a consultancy in 2009 argues that marketers should adopt the “sponsored conversation as an entrée into the online conversation,” and that “[w]ith appropriate protections for disclosure and authenticity, this practice will take its place alongside public relations and advertising activities in the blogosphere” (Corcoran 2009), but others argue strongly against this (Ray 2009). The best indication that this is a significant issue is that the Federal Trade Commission in the USA issued a directive in 2009 requiring bloggers to disclose payments both in kind and in cash (Federal Trade Commission 2009; Solis 2009).

These issues all find echoes amongst Malaysian bloggers, and Chapter VII returns to these themes with specific regard to the development of a market for blog advertising in Malaysia is discussed.

## 8 Conclusions

This chapter has firstly argued that blogs need to be conceptualised as a medium. This is needed in order to differentiate the specific mediated experience of blogging from other forms of online activity, and therefore the internet as a whole is proposed as a meta-medium, through which other media operate. Blogging involves the extensive use of a range of technologies, and understanding the blog as medium therefore requires theorising technologies, and the approach taken is to understand blogs as a sociotechnical medium. From this, a discussion of how technologies and social forms are interrelated took in ANT, field and assemblage theory: ANT provides an effective methodological basis, and a means to integrate human and non-human agency; field theory provides useful concepts for describing micro-practices, but the logic of field dynamics is difficult to sustain with regards to blogging as a collective practice; these approaches are complemented by an assemblage perspective, derived from Deleuze & Guattari, that offers a means to analyse the shifting relations of the multiplicity of actors and actants – the blogs, bloggers and readers in Malaysia whom I encountered in my fieldwork.

Of particular importance in analysing blogs is an understanding of the opportunities and limitations for interaction that they allow within the assemblages. The concept of affordances is useful in this regard, but its use in scholarly studies of blogging is patchy and undertheorised – therefore I have proposed a series of affordances that can be used within an assemblage perspective, and to provide a basis for the understanding of the causal relations of blogs and other interactants. This thesis focuses on personal blogging, and a discussion of genre highlights the relation of affordances to modes of expression, and the relevance of the latter for the stabilisation of particular forms of social actions. These are explained in terms of assemblage, and the final section discussed how assemblage can be used to develop an understanding of the monetisation of the personal blog.

# III. Research design

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This chapter will discuss the methodology that underlies the research design, and the methods used to address emerging questions. Although particular questions about the effects of monetisation on blogging were the impetus for the research, an inductive methodology meant that there was a process of adaptation of the initial research questions as fieldwork progressed, and an understanding of the limitations and opportunities of the available research tools developed. ANT provided the basic guiding principles in terms of avoiding the presumption of social forms. Also important to outline are the methodological issues that are specific to the internet: social connections operate both with and through the internet; and there are particular questions of the public nature of online interaction and related ethical concerns.

The guiding research question that was initially posed was:

- What are the effects of monetisation on the Malaysia blogosphere?

Subsidiary research questions were:

- How do theories of economies explain the monetisation of blogs?
- How do media theories account for blogs and the mediation of interpersonal relations?
- Are there any particular aspects of the Malaysia blogosphere that reflect aspects of Malaysian sociocultural patterns, rather than being specific to the blogging in general?

The initial working hypothesis was that there would be a negative reaction to increased monetisation that revolved around the upholding of the authenticity of the blog.

However, as Hine argues, “Ethnographers begin with a set of foreshadowed problems that give them a sense of what will be interesting to study, but these preliminary thoughts are to be constantly re-evaluated in the face of field experiences” (2008: 7). As the fieldwork progressed, I made a number of adjustments that affected the type of data collected, and the ability to answer the initial research questions. The most important adjustment was the realisation that, because of the numbers of bloggers and variety of blog genres, I would not be able to investigate the ‘Malaysian blogosphere.’ It also became clear that concepts of the ‘blogosphere’, or ‘blogging community,’ were unreliable. Therefore, I decided to focus on personal bloggers engaging in monetisation practices. However, this meant that I was much less likely to come across bloggers reacting negatively to monetisation – thus potentially producing a biased sample; to mitigate this to some respect, I did engage with two other groups of bloggers, in particular the SoPo bloggers who have different motivations for blogging.

BlogAdNet were the most prominent example of monetisation, the best source of relevant data, and the easiest to engage with. The emphasis thus shifted towards a particular group of bloggers registered with BlogAdNet. They are analysed here as a particular phenomenon, and not as a case study. There is not enough comparative material to know whether their case is generalisable, indeed the Malaysian case may be specific, but further research may benefit from the data presented here.

With regards to answering the question about the ‘Malaysianness’ of blogging in Malaysia, and although a guiding principle of this research is that the online and the offline are inextricably related, it also became clear that to answer this question necessitated further offline primary data collection (for example data on Malaysians’ attitudes towards blogging) which went beyond the resources available. This development of research goals is a consequence of the length of time spent in an unpredictable fieldwork context, where long-term participant observation affects the understanding of what is possible, and what is important.

With these developments, the initial research questions changed, and may be summarised as follows:

- How do monetisation practices interact with personal blogging practices in Malaysia?
- How do the specific affordances of blogs affect interpersonal interaction, and how do monetisation practices leverage those affordances?

## **1 Internet methodology**

This section outlines the methodological rationale underlying this research. As argued in Chapter II, ANT offers a suitable methodological approach for research involving the internet, because it enables an amalgamation of the digital technologies alongside the human actors whose interactions are mediated via – in this instance – the medium of the blog.

ANT adopts an empirical, but not a positivist stance. Anthropology has always been rooted in empirical data – that which is observable to the researcher and in principle to other parties. However, the positivist stance translates the possibility of empirical observation into the predicating of a reality beyond human control (although possibly subject to controlled manipulation) and interpretation; this is not possible in social research which has as its subject human behaviour that is empirically observable, but inherently subjective and defined by interpretation. Thus both subjectively-oriented and objectively-oriented methods can be used complementarily, and seen as poles on a continuum.

The nature of participant observation, the primary method in this research, requires the researcher to embed herself in a social context, and to engage in as many activities as possible, thus precluding a positivist quantitative approach and requiring the use of qualitative methods and analysis. The subjective understanding of the researcher needs however to be balanced by including the voices of others, and an analytically open approach to multiple interpretation of events. Methods that are oriented towards an objectivist methodology can thus be used as a balancing tool, and a check on the imagination of the researcher.

The complicating factors of ethnographies that trace on- and offline practices are discussed below (Section 1.3; p68), but the principle on which this research – an ethnography of Malaysian personal blogging – is based is that they are inextricably interconnected. In this I follow Daniel Miller & Don Slater's (2000) now classic ethnography of internet use in Trinidad, and their persuasive challenge to the frequent disembedding of the internet from the offline context. Similarly, as Christine Hine argues, using an ANT approach, one can follow "online traces," but an ethnography of the internet is also "about mobility between contexts of production and use, and between online and offline" (2008: 11).

## **1.1 Ethnography**

An 'ethnography' is the 'writing' of a culture and, drawing from Cooper & Woolgar, Christine Hine notes that in "claiming the method as ethnographic an author is making a performance of community" (2005: 8). She maps out two phases of internet studies: the first was a psychological experimental approach that concluded that the medium was contextually impoverished and likely to be disinhibiting (e.g. Reinig & Mejias 2004); and the second was an ethnographic, naturalistic, approach that produced accounts of community. She suggests that "the claiming of the online context as an ethnographic field site, was crucial in establishing the status of Internet communications as culture" (*ibid.*: 8); this positing of a separate online 'culture' then suggests a dichotomy between the on- and offline, another feature of internet research. Thus, much internet literature (e.g. Baym 1995; Boellstorff 2010; Herring *et al.* 2005) concentrates on online interactions, and the duality implied in 'virtual worlds' recalls the search and romanticisation of the 'other' that characterised a lot of earlier ethnographic accounts (Denzin & Lincoln 2007: 20–21).

However, an 'ethnography' also implies a community – an '*ethnos*' – and it is important to hold the assumption of 'community' in critical abeyance, and not slip into what can become a self-fulfilling presupposition. Thus Latour's advice to concentrate on the traces of associations and contingently formed collective activities (2005: 28–41), remembering that 'the social' is an analytic construct of



the analyst, guides the methodology of this research. However, it is also important to not reduce interactions to an atomistic and purely dyadic level, to recall the “multi-sited research” proposed by George Marcus, that is

designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited *logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography* (1995: 105; emphasis added).

The ‘logic of association’ used in this research is based on the possibility of causal relations being mediated via the blog affordances that offer opportunities and impose limitations upon dyadic and collective action. The collection of these causal relations may result in contingent assemblages, with emergent properties that are not reducible to individual actors and actants – both human and non-human – that have agency and thus are generative articulatory nodes in the rhizomatic assemblages. The method therefore needs to encompass both on- and offline contexts, apprehending both the human actors and non-human actants as integrated nodes.

Claims of community, as argued below (Chapter VI, Section 2.1; p143), can usually be tied to particular motivations of individuals or groups. Similarly, the ethnographer is subject to a range of interpretative biases and subjective experiences that shape his analysis – thus, a degree of reflexivity is required, that is, the incorporation of the researcher’s own self-awareness of his presence in the field with its attendant potential to influence others, and shape his analysis. The recognition of varying degrees of autoethnography is thus necessary, and the next section considers this aspect.

## **1.2 Participant observation & autoethnography**

“participant observation [...is a technique] of getting data [...] by subjecting yourself, your own body and your own personality, and your own social situation, to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals, so that you can physically and ecologically penetrate their circle of response to their social situation, or their work situation, or their ethnic situation, or whatever.”

(Goffman 1989: 125)

The above quote highlights the embodied and personal experience that participant observation, the principal method of ethnography, involves. It is possible to study blogs by textual analysis alone, but participant observation allows an appreciation of the ways in which a personal blog is inherently both a product – the online text – and a process (boyd 2006). By blogging myself, I was able to not

only engage with this aspect, but also to attend blogmeets, practice monetising my blog, and it facilitated access to respondents.

Participant observation requires direct personal engagement with people in the field, but in a manner that involves a constant shifting between performing as an 'insider', and observing and making notes as an 'outsider'. Thus, the practice of participant observation requires a reflexive self awareness. Autoethnography, which involves "[i]ncorporating self-narrative or personal anecdotes into anthropological writing" (Voloder 2008: 33), would seem to be the only way to make this reflexivity more transparent, improving the ethnography by opening up the processes of analysis to the scrutiny of the reader. It corresponds to the ANT approach, by flattening the field and placing the ethnographer alongside the nodes and relations that form the assemblage being studied.

There is an added dimension with internet-related ethnographies, where frequently "the first step toward existence is the production of discourse" (Markham 2005: 794); that is, in order to be present online, one has to write oneself into existence. This is particularly the case with personal blogging which is often an explicitly reflexive practice that foregrounds the subjective self. The question is therefore not so much whether or not to engage in autoethnography, but how much weight is to be given to personal experience as opposed to data based on others' activities and statements.

Lejla Voloder, who supplied the above broad definition of autoethnography, notes however that the "dominant conceptualisation of autoethnography" is one that resembles autobiography, and that "there is a marked reluctance to represent others in texts, to abstract and theorise beyond the individual experience" (2008: 34). An example of this is by Stacy Jones (2005) whose account, although it has relevance in terms of situating the ethnographer as a person in the field, lacks external reference, and thus risks turning the ethnography into a memoir.

There is an alternative to this. Leon Anderson's concept of "analytic autoethnography" has "five key features [...] that [...] include (1) complete member researcher (CMR) status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self, (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis" (2006: 378). As a blogger I found myself a member of a loose group of bloggers centred on Malaysia, involved in daily blogging practices; I posted reflexive posts about my fieldwork; I sought dialogue through the medium of the blog and in other settings; and explicitly formulated tentative analyses that were shared online in an attempt to engage in dialogue

– reflecting how the “autoethnographer’s understandings, both as a member and as a researcher, emerge not from detached discovery but from engaged dialogue” (*ibid.*: 382).

Anderson’s central concern is to allow for an ethnographer to include himself in the context of the fieldwork. Similarly, Voloder argues for the use of autoethnography “not to document [her] personal experiences,” but to “utilise self-experience as a heuristic device to engage beyond one’s individual experiences” (Voloder 2008: 35). This ethnography is guided by these approaches. In this thesis, I occasionally refer to personal experience, or use portions of my blog, because I feel that by purposely imitating typical blogger practices (such as ‘camwhoring’ – see Chapter VI, Section 6.1; p168), I could gain insight into the techniques used and embodied experiences. On other occasions, just by blogging regularly, I could imagine the parameters that might be motivating or guiding other bloggers’ actions. These personal experiences, drawn from a background of seven years of blogging in Malaysia, are presented alongside the voices of other bloggers, and not in order to overshadow them.

Other aspects of my fieldwork also resonate with Voloder’s account – for example, most of my online activities were done from home, and I would go out to blogmeets (the ‘field’) and come home. This enabled me to share the experience of most bloggers, but also highlights the “incongruity of the conventional anthropological premise that home and field are fundamentally separate” (Voloder 2008: 33). Nonetheless, I was often also acutely aware of my status as outsider, such as when I was at blogmeets – where my age (40+) and ethnicity (European) both marked me out as such; online, this was not so obvious, but the need to declare my status as a researcher also mitigated against seamless integration. As I have argued previously (Hopkins 2009), these difficulties are common to most ethnographers, and require what Marcus describes as constant recalibration and positioning “in terms of the ethnographer’s shifting affinities for, affiliations with, as well as alienations from, those with whom he or she interacts at different sites” (1995: 113). The next section turns to the most salient contrast in sites for this fieldwork – the on- and offline sites.

### ***1.3 Methodology on- and offline***

A significant aspect of internet research is the possibility of extended and meaningful interactions with respondents and within contexts where there is no face-to-face contact, resulting in the “lack of physical presence and the resulting anonymity provided by the medium” (Garcia *et al.* 2009: 53), often pointed to as a factor that inhibits reliable research. There are broadly two possible responses to this. One is that when researching an online context within itself, the offline correspondences do

not matter, but only what is happening in the context of – for example – an online MMORPG<sup>22</sup> or other virtual worlds (Boellstorff 2010; Garcia *et al.* 2009).

The other response, which is taken here, is to seek to engage with the respondents offline as well, thus verifying certain details such as gender and age, and benefiting from the non-verbal cues available in face-to-face interactions. By taking the latter approach I am not taking a position against the former – as Shani Orgad notes, arguing for the use of offline data does not imply that online data are less authentic (2008: 39) – but all of the personal bloggers with whom I interacted made no attempt to mask their offline identity, to which their personal blogs are by definition tied. Where the dichotomy does come into play is with regards to notions of authenticity, that bloggers should ‘be themselves’ online. With this in mind, it is useful to note Markham’s observation that in her exclusively online research, she found herself repeatedly trying to fit her interlocutors into categories in order to make sense of them, and she notes that an advantage with online research is that it “points out many of the biases inherent in our traditional ways of seeing and knowing” (2005: 796). What I became quickly aware of is that there was no more guarantee of a person’s authenticity either on or offline. Thus, methodologically, on- and offline are treated as continuums of the same reality; however, this should not overlook the way in which different affordances allow for qualitatively different modes of interaction.

One of the advantages of participant observation is that the researcher shares many aspects of life with those she seeks to understand – such as eating lunch with factory workers, working in a field, or sharing a village compound. Sharing these mundane activities can result in stronger relations forming, and particular insights. I am a blogger in the same sense as the other bloggers: I have another job, I blog more or less regularly, and I attend blogmeets. However, most online interaction takes place in the context of publicly oriented blogging, and the offline interactions are mostly extensions of the online blogging context, and therefore the situations that I participated in are contexts that were always framed by blogging and the heterogeneous motivations and practices of bloggers. While this means on the one hand that I was experiencing life as a blogger, it also means that the commonality with other bloggers remains blogging, and does not necessarily expand into other areas of life, a feature of the holistic model that underlies conventional ethnographies.<sup>23</sup> This recalls Vered Amit & Nigel Rapport’s argument regarding consociate relationships, that (in their example of sport-related activities) “emerge when individuals become capable of putting names to

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<sup>22</sup> Massively multiplayer online role-playing game

<sup>23</sup> Though, on a few occasions I exchanged IM conversations, gave bloggers lifts, was given a lift, met some in a party, in a shopping mall.

known faces and telling stories about mutually shared experiences on the world of track and field” (2002: 59).

Nonetheless, engaging with bloggers both on- and offline was the best way of understanding a full range of blogging-related activities. As Orgad argues, “the offline does not explain the online, nor does the online explain the offline [...] greater advantage is gained when examining the ways in which each configures the other” (2008: 48). Interpreting the online in terms of the offline can be just as misleading as the opposite, and it again reminds us of how claims to be able to develop holistic representations in ethnographies have always been suspect. For example, Mark Hobart’s (1996) reflections on how anthropologists are ‘disciplined’ by those they seek to understand underlines the weakness of arguments that purport to represent all aspects of a culture, reflect the need to ‘write in’ the anthropologist, and accept that her ability to interact and understand the many complex relations is always limited.

#### **1.4 Internet and authenticity**

In his paper *On Ethnographic Allegory* (1986a), Clifford makes two related arguments that highlight an interesting potential of internet-related ethnographies. Noting that “ethnographic writing [...] enacts a redemptive Western allegory” (*ibid.*: 99), whereby the ethnographer is salvaging an “imagined authenticity” that is, however, “presuppose[d], and produced by, a present circumstance of felt inauthenticity” (*ibid.*: 114). Other cultures are cast as authentic but inflexible, unable to withstand the onslaught of the western ethnographer’s own culture, itself seen as dynamic and containing the seed of destruction for the other – it is a fundamentally flawed analysis, both a masochistic self-flagellation and a naturalistic affirmation of ethnocentric power. These arguments are well rehearsed by now, but it is interesting to see how, when applied to internet research, they are often turned around. Two imagined worlds – the real and the virtual – are cast in opposition to each other, one or the other taking on the mantle of authenticity, depending on whether the online context is held to be an opportunity for a potential return to authenticity, divorced from the materialism and materiality of the offline, or instead a dangerous temptation to escape the social and personal responsibilities of the ‘real’ world.

Clifford also asks, in arguing for a reversal of the taxidermal ethnographic tradition, “What would it require [...] consistently to associate the [...] varied societies of Melanesia with the cultural *future* of the planet?” (*ibid.*: 115). This is a question that can be taken up in internet studies, much of which is oriented towards understanding the consequences of the rapid spread of new means of interaction. Specifically, with regards to ‘authenticity’ – the operation of which requires a stable self to be

represented – this thesis will discuss applications of the concept of the ‘relational self’, developed by Deleuze with regards to digital technologies, as well as by Marilyn Strathern and others with regards to Melanesian cultures (*cf.* Viveiros de Castro 2009: 220).

Overall this section has argued that the research of personal blogging poses a number of challenges to classic ethnographical methods, but these can be addressed by avoiding the projection of dichotomies of on- and offline contexts, by reflexively positioning the ethnography and using a limited form of autoethnography, thus placing the ethnographer, the blogs and the bloggers together as components of assemblages.

## **2 Ethics**

There are two fundamental principles in research ethics – the first can be summarised as ‘Do no harm’, and the second is ‘Is the research worth the potential disturbance to the subjects?’ Answering the second question is in part the role of this thesis, but on balance the amount of interference with those I observed was minimal, and the most important question to answer is how to avoid any negative consequences for my respondents and others who contributed to this research.

Avoiding any harm to the bloggers falls under three categories: I may represent them in a manner which they do not agree with; I may expose them to scrutiny from an unexpected public; and, I may affect their income generating activities. These are discussed below.

### **2.1 Public spaces**

For any internet-based research, there is a debate about the nature of web-published material – for example, are blogs public texts in the same sense as a newspaper, or a published autobiography? The Association of Internet Research working committee argues that there should be “One broad consideration: the greater the acknowledged publicity of the venue, the less obligation there may be to protect individual privacy, confidentiality, right to informed consent, etc.” (2002: 5).

For example, based on the above parameters, it can be noted that all blogs offer options to limit access, and therefore what remains accessible to any Web user can be considered to be in the public domain. In addition, monetising a blog necessarily implies seeking a large audience. Therefore, I believe that archiving blog posts and comments without specifically asking permission is acceptable. However, some research has shown that sometimes an expectation of semi-privacy is present

(McKee & Porter 2007), particularly amongst younger people who do not expect people other than friends and/or family to read their online postings (boyd 2007). The latter point was supported to some degree by the responses I got to a question I posted on my blog, asking (amongst other things) whether I should ask for permission to track and record all the posts and comments from a blog. Most responses to this question did agree that a blog is public, but also noted that tracking a blog closely in the way I proposed was a bit like 'stalking', and to ask the blogger was an appropriate courtesy.

The internet also offers the possibility of 'lurking' – i.e. observing without participating or being seen. However, in order to satisfy the requirement for researcher disclosure, on my blog I kept a 'sticky post' – i.e. one that does not move down as others are posted – which attracted attention by saying "If you're a Malaysian blogger, or a blogger living in Malaysia, my research is about YOU!" If the reader clicked to expand the post, they could find out that I was researching Malaysian blogs, and archiving and analysing blogs. In addition, whenever I left comments, I left a link to my blog too.

Regarding the comments in particular, an analogy may also be drawn with overhearing a conversation in a public space – but given the enduring quality of blog posts and comments, and their accessibility via a search engine, they are also qualitatively different. Generally, therefore, it is best to treat blogs as publicly accessible, but not necessarily public documents that can be used without some form of protection for the bloggers and commenters.

## **2.2 *Anonymising***

The simplest way to address the issue of unfavourable representation is to anonymise all the bloggers, which is what has been done – all bloggers and commenters are given pseudonyms.<sup>24</sup> For the blogs posts, I cannot cite the URL, otherwise the anonymity is broken. The solution I have developed is to enter all the posts in a database, and to cite the unique identifier; thus blog posts in this thesis are cited as follows – Blog post, [Blogger pseudonym], 1 January 2009: p00111. The 'p00111' number is the number in the database, and is available on request.<sup>25</sup> For commenters, I simply give them letters starting with A, with the originals also in the same database. Where I cite a blog, as opposed to a blog post, I use the following – [Blog pseudonym], accessed 1 January 2009: b00111.

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<sup>24</sup> Replacing pseudonyms is difficult, as sometimes they are carefully chosen idiosyncratic representations of the person's identity – for example if the pseudonym is 'happygurl', or 'geekguy', there are immediate connotations. I have tried to retain this to some degree.

<sup>25</sup> For examiners or other relevant persons, subject to ethical considerations.

A particular problem relevant to the internet is that specific quotes from web pages are easily searched, thus making the blogs I quote from easily identifiable for an interested person. I therefore asked interviewees for specific permission to quote verbatim from their blog. Where that permission was not given, I paraphrase or describe the content. By definition, the popular bloggers are not publicity-shy and – like Rutter & Smith (although they do not refer to bloggers) – most of those I interviewed “expressed disappointment that they [will] not be personally identified” (2005: 90) in my blog or eventual publications. The thesis may be published online – however, since pseudonyms are used, a search for the names of the bloggers and the blogs would not find the thesis online. Given the very public nature of the blogs, and BlogAdNet, there is very little I can do to prevent their identities being worked out by anyone who puts their mind to it, particularly someone who knows the Malaysian context. However, the bloggers retain a degree of plausible deniability, if the need arises.

The public activities of the interviewees created further difficulties in retaining anonymity. For example, I have used material from newspaper articles that quote some of them – but if I cite the newspaper article correctly, the anonymity is broken. The solution used is the details of the newspaper articles are not given here, but the details remain available on request. Overall, this approach has often been inconvenient, and – similarly to Lori Kendall (2008: 24) – I found that sometimes I had to restrict what I was blogging about in order to avoid the potential exposure of interviewee. However, one advantage was that during interviews the guarantee of anonymity was more than once referred to as a reason for giving me specific, more sensitive, opinions. In writing up, however, it was not always possible to use these titbits of information given in confidentiality, because – due to the public nature of blogging and the internet – any motivated person would find it very easy to work out most of the main actors in my account. There are some exceptions to the anonymising (see Appendix G), but all other bloggers and organisations are given pseudonyms, and if asked, I will neither confirm nor deny any speculations as to their true identity.

### ***2.3 Income generation***

By blogging about monetisation of blogs, it was possible that I could impact on the income of specific bloggers, or influence attitudes towards BlogAdNet. Although my initial stance was to see the monetisation of blogs as an unfortunate, if inevitable, encroaching of advertising on a previously more autonomous medium, I had to take care not let this opinion affect my judgement too much. Erkan Saka, who used his blog as part of his research into journalism and attitudes towards the European Union in Turkey, also notes that he “was neutral because [he] did not know what to



believe” (Saka n.d.: 132). In addition, if I was to take a public stance in that regard I could not only prejudice my chances of having honest and open interviews, but also might prejudge the context I was researching. Therefore, I was generally non-committal and also avoided responding to comments in blogs where there were criticisms of advertorials or advertising.

Another potential ethical issue was raised by the opportunity for myself to gain an income from blogging, and how this might create a conflict of interest. Monetising my blog was, however, a necessary part of the participant observation. The income generated did briefly become relatively significant – reaching a maximum of 100USD per month, and this helped to understand the experiences of other bloggers. More important was the experience of winning free cinema tickets, being invited to events, and so on.

### **3 Method**

The primary method used was participant observation. Participant observation enables a fine-grained understanding of the practice of being in a particular context, the embodied experience that enables deeper understanding – for example how, as Reed has also described (2008), the process of creating a blog post begins as you encounter situations in everyday life. In practice, the participant observation necessitated regular blog posting, reading other blogs and leaving comments, answering comments on my blogs, joining blog aggregators, trying out different SEO and monetisation techniques, and attending blogmeets. In addition to recording notes and ideas in the blog, I also kept a field diary where I could record observations and thoughts.

I also carried out an online survey – this was in order to gather more generalised opinions about the monetisation of blogs; it also served as a means to make myself known, capitalising on the fact that people often can more easily identify a survey as being ‘proper’ research. This probably contributed to my being interviewed by a national daily newspaper, and a number of bloggers mentioned the survey in their blogs (Section 3.3; p76). To complement the participant observation and the survey, I also did semi-structured interviews with chosen bloggers in order to have an opportunity to delve further into the issues raised. A disadvantage of participant observation is that it focuses on smaller group; I attempted to mitigate this to some extent by participating in some SoPo blogmeets and interviewing some bloggers not from the closer circle regular attendees of BlogAdNet events. Using these different methods provided a certain degree of external validity, and a means to triangulate data.

Focus groups were a possibility that I did not take up due to resource and logistical limitations, and I was not able to observe blogs in languages other than English. I also applied for an internship with BlogAdNet, but was unsuccessful.

In the earlier stages of the research, I investigated the possibility of using social network analysis (SNA) to identify central bloggers (to be targeted for interviews) and understand patterns of online interaction via hyperlinking. I did two pilot studies using the UCInet software and following Hanneman & Riddle's *Introduction to Social Network Methods* (2005); however, I realised that I did not have the necessary expertise, and I also lacked a suitable web crawler to gather data. However, there remains a lot of potential in this approach as a means of sampling blogospheres.

The stages of the research are outlined in Table 3, and what follows in this section is an explanation of how the methods chosen were implemented.

Stages of the research																					
	2007					2008					2009										
	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	
Blogging on <i>anthroblogia</i>																					
Participant observation (blogmeets in stripes, number indicates more than one)	2								2				2	2	3			2	2	3	
Collating database, noting patterns and trends.																					
myBlogS survey																					
Blogging on <i>Tropical Gardening</i>																					
Interviews																					

**Table 3: Stages of the research**

### 3.1 Defining the field

Determining the Malaysian blogosphere is difficult in the absence of firm data, but to talk of a national blogging space is viable. An early study mapping interlinked websites found that online groupings tended to reflect offline national borders (Halavais 2000). Similarly, most bloggers tend to link to and read blogs from the same country and/or language, and the relevance of the nation state in terms of relatively discrete blogospheres is demonstrated by studies on Persian/Iranian blogs (Doostdar 2004; Kelly & Etling 2008); Etling *et al.* (2009) find that “the Arabic blogosphere is organized primarily around countries;” other studies that highlight national and/or linguistic groupings have been on German language blogs (Schmidt 2007b), Sweden (Kullin 2006), and Poland (Trammell *et al.* 2006).

The operational definition for the Malaysian blogosphere used in the myBlogS survey was any blogger or blog reader who was either Malaysian, living in Malaysia or blogging mostly about Malaysia. In the myBlogS survey 11% of the respondents were Malaysians living overseas. From this perspective the Malaysian blogosphere may seem to be global, but on the other hand 66% of the respondents lived in either Kuala Lumpur or Selangor – the state that encompasses the federal territory of Kuala Lumpur – in effect, most of the respondents probably live in the same conurbation which also holds approximately one-quarter of Malaysia's 25 million inhabitants. As Lomborg suggests (Chapter II, Section 6.3; p48), anyone with a blog can be a part of the 'Malaysian blogosphere', but there are many different levels of engagement. The most popular bloggers are highly visible, and integrated to a high degree; on the other end of the scale, there are blogs that are updated infrequently, and perhaps only read by a few offline friends of the blogger.

It is impossible to say with any precision how many blogs there are in total, or the linguistic breakdown, but some basis for estimates are available. A recent study (but based on 2007 data) published by Ulicny *et al.* notes that the Blogger platform (also often referred to as 'blogspot') "has more than 152,000 Malaysian profiles — many more than on Wordpress.com or similar services" (2010: 35) – this broadly suggests a total number Malaysian blogs of more than 152,000, and less than 250,000. Another source of information is statistics from BlogAdNet who reported 141,188 registered blogs in Malaysia.<sup>26</sup> Based on the ratios present in the myBlogS survey – that 36% of bloggers were registered with BlogAdNet then that would mean about 423,000 blogs in Malaysia. But bloggers can easily have more than one blog – in the myBlogS survey, 20.5% had two blogs, 6.5% had three, and 5.6% had more than three; also, there is a financial incentive to register multiple blogs with BlogAdNet as each one can potentially gain income. A rough calculation based on the ratios results in about 212,000 bloggers.

Regarding language, Ulicny *et al.* note that there was "a small amount of Chinese blog content in [their] data" (2010: 36),<sup>27</sup> and SoPo blogs (the target of their study) are four times more likely to be in English than BM (2010: 36). Similarly to Jun-E Tan & Zawawi (2008: 48), a majority of the myBlogS respondents indicated English as their most used language, followed by 56% for BM, and 29% for Chinese as their second-most used language. Tan & Zawawi had a lower proportion of English language, perhaps reflecting their use of surveys in English and BM, whereas myBlogS was only in English.

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<sup>26</sup> Blog post, BlogAdNet, 31 December 2009: p00834

<sup>27</sup> However, this may be because of limitations of their web crawling software.

There is another aspect to field research when researching the internet – in effect, one never leaves the ‘field’, and the entry into the field was – for me – an arbitrary date defined by announcing my presence as an anthropologist, although I had been blogging for three years previously. The finishing date was that of a large blogmeet organised by BlogAdNet, which also coincided with requirements related to academic timetables for completion of the thesis. There was a period when I was concentrating more on fieldwork, which then diminished, but I was never separated from ‘the field’ as such; however, I have mostly not referred to anything that happened after December 2009.

### **3.2 Participant observation**

I created two blogs: the main one was *anthroblogia*,<sup>28</sup> and the second was *Tropical Gardening*.<sup>29</sup> The former was my main blog, and the latter focused on organic tropical gardening in order to test some monetisation methods that revolve around the niche blog such as SEO techniques to pull in search engine traffic, and leveraging that audience by selling advertisements, links and getting commissions on sales for Amazon.com. I tried to blog as often as possible on *anthroblogia*, with a mixture of more personal posts, posts related to BlogAdNet campaigns, and posts about the research. Regular and frequent blogging was difficult, and I was not able to keep up a steady stream of posts as the most popular bloggers do.

As a means of grounding the subsequent categorisation of blogs, from December 2008 to March 2009 I systemised my observation by entering all the blogs I read into a database; I purposely expanded my usual range of blogs by following links in comments, and reading the blog posts that appeared in the ‘top ten’ posts (as decided by votes of readers) in the BlogAdNet blog aggregator. I recorded details such as the blog title, the name or pseudonym of the blogger, available demographic details, the genre, types of advertisements hosted, means of monetisation, and so on (see Plate 1). This exercise in content analysis was useful in building a more systematic understanding of patterns of blog usage and elements of the different genres. One insight gained was the difficulty of limiting blogs to a particular genre. As a working operationalisation, the ‘personal blog’ was distinguished mostly in opposition to other more straightforward genres – such as SoPo or Tech blogs – which are more limited in their content matter. Most blogs will contain some personal touches, but personal blogs are distinguished by the diaristic emphasis on personal daily experiences that may or may not touch upon political issues, gadgets, pets, parenting, religion, or any of the many topics that form the main topic of other blog genres.

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<sup>28</sup> <http://julianhopkins.net>

<sup>29</sup> <http://tropical-gardening.blogspot.com/>

The information gathered from about 500 records helped me to add commonly used components to my own blogs, learn about techniques for self-publicising, and monetising opportunities. For example, I submitted my blog to a number of blog aggregators, and tried a scheme that increases traffic amongst subscribed bloggers. In addition, it helped to develop questions for the survey and the interviews, and to collect emails for the survey.

# anthroblogia

UniquelD	b0136		Record Created	24/6/2008	
Blog Name	anthroblogia		Date modified	22/02/2011	
Subheading	digital anthropology				
Blog url	http://www.julianhopkins.net/				
Email	j@julianhopkins.net	Contact Form	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No		
Blogger Name	Julian Hopkins				
Blogger Nick	julian				
Gender	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Male <input type="radio"/> Female <input type="radio"/> DK <input type="radio"/> Male Guess <input type="radio"/> Female Guess				
Age	36-40	Year of Birth	1969		
Ethnicity	<input type="radio"/> Chinese <input type="radio"/> Indian <input type="radio"/> Malay <input type="radio"/> DK <input type="radio"/> Chinese Guess <input type="radio"/> Indian Guess <input type="radio"/> Malay Guess <input checked="" type="radio"/> Other...				
Occupation	Student				
Location	Petaling Jaya				
Notes	Doing research into blogs				
Other Blog 1	http://tropical-gardening.blogspot.com/				
Other blog 1 Notes	Niche blog				
Other Blog 2					
Other blog 2 Notes					
Other Blog 3					
Other blog 3 Notes					

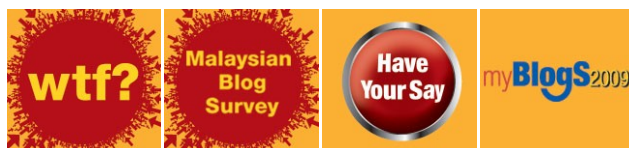
Blog Type	<input type="checkbox"/> A-list <input type="checkbox"/> Food <input type="checkbox"/> Niche <input type="checkbox"/> Religion <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Blogosphere <input type="checkbox"/> Group <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Personal <input type="checkbox"/> SoPo <input type="checkbox"/> Comic <input type="checkbox"/> Hobby <input type="checkbox"/> Politician <input type="checkbox"/> Tech <input type="checkbox"/> Commercial <input type="checkbox"/> Mother <input type="checkbox"/> Problog <input type="checkbox"/> Other...
Language	<input checked="" type="radio"/> English <input type="radio"/> BM/English <input type="radio"/> Chinese/English <input type="radio"/> BM <input type="radio"/> Chinese <input type="radio"/> Other...
First Post	1/5/2007
Most recent post	23/6/2008
Advertisements	<input type="checkbox"/> Adbrite <input type="checkbox"/> Bidvertiser <input type="checkbox"/> LinkXL <input type="checkbox"/> Shopzilla <input type="checkbox"/> Other... <input type="checkbox"/> Adclick <input type="checkbox"/> Blogads <input type="checkbox"/> PopUp <input type="checkbox"/> Standalone <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Adsense <input type="checkbox"/> ContentLink <input type="checkbox"/> Pubmatic <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Text Link Ads <input type="checkbox"/> Advertlets <input type="checkbox"/> LinkWorth <input type="checkbox"/> Reviews <input type="checkbox"/> TradePub <input type="checkbox"/> Amazon <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Nuffnang <input type="checkbox"/> Shopping Ads <input type="checkbox"/> None
Problogging	<input type="checkbox"/> Advertorial - Open <input type="checkbox"/> Donation/Tip <input type="checkbox"/> PayPerPost <input type="checkbox"/> Advertorial - Hidden <input type="checkbox"/> Event Review <input type="checkbox"/> Web hosting <input type="checkbox"/> Affiliate <input type="checkbox"/> Invite Advertise <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> None <input type="checkbox"/> Disclosure statement <input type="checkbox"/> Invite Advertorial <input type="checkbox"/> Other...
Affiliation	<input type="checkbox"/> All-Blogs <input type="checkbox"/> Penang Bloggers <input type="checkbox"/> Youth Says! <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> AMBP <input type="checkbox"/> Sabahan Bloggers <input type="checkbox"/> None <input type="checkbox"/> CFOMB <input type="checkbox"/> SPI <input type="checkbox"/> Other... <input type="checkbox"/> Kuching Bloggers <input type="checkbox"/> United Indian Bloggers
Aggregator	<input type="checkbox"/> BF Directory <input type="checkbox"/> Book Blogs <input type="checkbox"/> Sara Who? <input type="checkbox"/> Blogarama <input type="checkbox"/> Fuel My Blog <input type="checkbox"/> SGBlogs <input type="checkbox"/> Blog Catalog <input type="checkbox"/> Global Voices <input type="checkbox"/> SGBlog.com <input type="checkbox"/> BlogFlap <input type="checkbox"/> Malaysian Blogs & News <input type="checkbox"/> SG Blog Hub <input type="checkbox"/> Bloggernity <input type="checkbox"/> Malaysian Blogosphere Search <input type="checkbox"/> sgfriends <input type="checkbox"/> Bloglines <input type="checkbox"/> Million Blog List <input type="checkbox"/> Shout out <input type="checkbox"/> Blog Malaysia <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MyBlogLog <input type="checkbox"/> Tomorrow.sg <input type="checkbox"/> Blog Rankings <input type="checkbox"/> Newsgator <input type="checkbox"/> TopBlogging <input type="checkbox"/> BloggersSG <input type="checkbox"/> Ping sg <input type="checkbox"/> Wiki Blog Directory <input type="checkbox"/> Blogz Search <input type="checkbox"/> PPS <input type="checkbox"/> None <input type="checkbox"/> Blogtoplist <input type="checkbox"/> Rice Bowl Journals <input type="checkbox"/> Other...
Traffic generator	<input type="checkbox"/> 23 Blogs <input type="checkbox"/> Blog Rush <input type="checkbox"/> Entrecard <input type="checkbox"/> Spott <input type="checkbox"/> Other... <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Blog Explosion <input type="checkbox"/> Blog Showoff <input type="checkbox"/> Link Referral <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> None
Awards	<input type="checkbox"/> BBA Asia Blog <input type="checkbox"/> Manya Awards <input type="checkbox"/> None <input type="checkbox"/> Blogger's Choice Awards <input type="checkbox"/> S'pore Blog Awards <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Other... <input type="checkbox"/> Blog God Says <input type="checkbox"/> Thinking Blogger
Campaigns	<input type="checkbox"/> Against Book Banning <input type="checkbox"/> Free Nat <input type="checkbox"/> Trams in Penang <input type="checkbox"/> Anak Bangsa Malaysia <input type="checkbox"/> Malaysian Artistes... <input type="checkbox"/> Unity in Diversity <input type="checkbox"/> Anti-ISA <input type="checkbox"/> Media Freedom <input type="checkbox"/> Youth Says <input type="checkbox"/> Benar <input type="checkbox"/> Missing Child <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> None <input type="checkbox"/> Bersih <input type="checkbox"/> Paper-Free Tuesday <input type="checkbox"/> Other... <input type="checkbox"/> Bloggers United <input type="checkbox"/> Save our Sumatran Rhinos <input type="checkbox"/> Bloggers Unite <input type="checkbox"/> Support Malaysia Today

Plate 1: Example of database record of blogs surveyed in the first phase of the fieldwork

### 3.2.1 Blogmeets

During the fieldwork period, I attended 29 blogmeets, and four blog-related events. Most of them were organised by BlogAdNet; SoPo ones were the next most common, and I also attended a few others – by the Malaysian Bloggers' Club (MBC – organised under the umbrella of a national newspaper), AppAds (the main competitor of BlogAdNet), and a book readers' club. Blogmeets were an essential part of the fieldwork – they were the main means of meeting informants, and I would try to chat casually and ask questions, taking photos and observing. It also contributed an important understanding of the offline context – for example, I was able to compare the offline experience with the ways in which it was represented online afterwards. I learnt to use a voice recorder to take quick notes before, during and after events that I attended.

## 3.3 Survey



**Plate 2: Four images that formed an animated gif banner used to publicise the myBlogS 2009 survey**

From March to April 2009 I conducted an online survey called the 'Malaysian Blog Survey 2009' - ('myBlogS 2009').<sup>30</sup> I was assisted in designing a logo,<sup>31</sup> and I planned various means to increase the response rate – for example, as seen in Plate 3, when attending some blogmeets I wore a headpiece that attracted attention, giving the bloggers something to take photos of (an important practice – see Chapter VI, Section 6.1; p168), and an opportunity for me tell them more about the survey. Advertising was done by sending 218 direct emails collected from blogs and bloggers, being mentioned in the Sunday education supplement of a national newspaper, and in a popular online newspaper (*Malaysiakini*), distributing flyers in two campuses and at blogmeets, sending emails to friends and acquaintances, as well as using Facebook. In the emails I encouraged bloggers to advertise it on their blog, and I supplied banners with code to embed it on their blogs.

I also sent personalised emails to the targeted bloggers, requesting their help in publicising it. In all fifteen bloggers blogged about the survey and four tweeted, but the A-list bloggers whom I had targeted had a disappointing response, only one tweeted about it and none blogged about it – thus I did not get much support from them, for reasons that I can only speculate on. Apart from issues of

<sup>30</sup> The prefix 'my' is the one that indicates Malaysia in the URL (e.g. [www.monash.edu.my](http://www.monash.edu.my)) and is also used in many public contexts for nationally oriented programmes.

<sup>31</sup> For which I would like to thank Mosaicstreet SdnBhd - <http://www.mosaicstreet.com/>

time and interest, it is possible that the topic was contentious, and to blog about it was to offer the opportunity for a debate on monetisation on their blogs. The most popular blogger at the time (Tommy) did generously put a banner for the survey on his blog sidebar for a week, but there was not much response, reflecting the low click-through rate of all banner advertisements.

I did not have a way of tracking where the respondents had heard about the survey but overall, based on the timing of the responses, the best response rate seemed to come from the direct emails I sent out, and from the mention in *Malaysiakini*.



**Plate 3: Publicising the myBlogS survey at a BlogAdNet cinema screening by wearing a headpiece. This not only raised curiosity, but also gave a photo opportunity for bloggers there.**

Overall, 686 respondents started the survey. 14 non-qualified entries were deleted, and 119 did not complete the questionnaire, resulting in 553 valid records, a completion rate of 82.3%. Of these, 197 were 'Blog readers' (i.e. non-bloggers who read blogs); the remaining 356 were active bloggers (having updated at least once in the previous three months), divided into 183 (51.4%) who were 'Monetisers' (who had stated that they were either making money from their blog or wished to), and 173 (48.6%) 'Non-Monetisers' who stated that they had no intention of making money with their blog.

A limitation of this survey, which is common to most internet surveys and research, is that the overall population of the Malaysian blogosphere is not known, precluding the use of a stratified or random sample. Thus the method used was a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling. An example of the shortcomings of this is seen in the age of the blog readers of whom 49.2% were aged 31 and above, compared to 20.5% of the bloggers. This is probably explained by



the surge of responses after the survey was publicised in *Malaysiakini*, which has a high proportion of readers interested in SoPo blogs, and the latter are usually predominantly maintained and read by middle aged males as previous research has demonstrated – both in Malaysia (Jun-E Tan & Zawawi 2008), and in America (Herring, Scheidt, *et al.* 2004). This explanation is supported by a greater prevalence of males amongst the readers too – whereas overall 47.6% of the respondents were male, 53.3% of the readers were male.

Because of the nature of the sample, it was not suitable for the data from the survey to be subjected to statistical tests of significance. The data is therefore used descriptively, and as a means of gaining some overall insights, rather than to draw statistical inferences. This is done by focusing on the wider gaps in terms of attitudes, and gaps of less than 10% are not considered salient; also in the Likert scale responses, only aggregates of 50% or more were taken into consideration. I decided not to compare readers and bloggers because of the effect mentioned above, but the comparisons between Monetisers and Non-Monetisers did reveal some useful trends. I also used the survey to help prepare questions for the interviews.

### **3.4 Interviews**

Initially, I wanted to target the ten most popular bloggers for regular tracking, and then interviewing. However, not all bloggers display their reader statistics; through an anonymous source,<sup>32</sup> I obtained a list of what were probably the seven most visited blogs registered with BlogAdNet at the time. I excluded one from that list (Dr Mahathir, the ex-Prime Minister), and also added some other blogs such as those by two BlogAdNet employees – and some others who had other attributes such as also writing in the newspaper, or being more focused on problogging. Over time I was not able to keep to this plan – not all returned my email asking for permission to track their blog, or agreed to an interview. I also decided to interview other bloggers – three Malay bloggers, some SoPo bloggers, and some other bloggers with less traffic in order to get some added perspective (see Table 4 for an overview).

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<sup>32</sup> Via a blogger who had been privy to some relevant information.

Selecting bloggers for tracking and interviewing	
First stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Selected ten bloggers with eleven blogs (one blogger had two blogs I wanted to track).</li> <li>Three did not respond to requests for permission to track them</li> </ul>
Second stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>After developing informal contacts and meeting with bloggers at blogmeets I decided to try to interview some Malay bloggers, and also to interview some less-high traffic bloggers. These latter had not been tracked to the same degree as those initially chosen.</li> </ul>
Third stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Most interviews were conducted between August and October 2009.</li> <li>The SoPo interviews were mostly done at one blogmeet, and one was by email.</li> </ul>
Fourth stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In total there were seventeen semi-structured interviews of one hour or more, three briefer interviews of about fifteen minutes each, and two email interviews.</li> <li>Each interview was transcribed in note form, and themes were noted. When quoting from the interviews, the recordings were checked back for accuracy.</li> </ul>

**Table 4: Interviewee selection process**

The interviews were generally carried out in a public space such as a coffee shop, one interview suffered a lot from background noise and I found that I needed to invest in a good lapel microphone. There was a list of questions which I used (see Appendix B), but in order not to disturb the flow of the conversation I tried to refer to it only casually and concentrated more on encouraging the interviewee to express their thoughts freely. This meant that not all the questions were asked all the time, and the interviews are thus not directly comparable in a strict sense. The main themes that were kept to were: defining a blog, making and responding to comments, authenticity ('Can your readers know the real you?'), blogger community, choosing what to blog about, the significance of the blogging income, and changes since blogs started to be monetised.

Table 5 lists the interviewees along with a number of descriptors. There are many ways to group bloggers together: based on their geographical location, genre, age, language, ethnicity, frequency of posting, and so on. All of these ways can be relevant, depending on what the researcher is interested in; the bloggers I encountered in the blogmeets were generally clustered around their relative status as bloggers, and/or smaller clusters of friends; for SoPo bloggers, political affiliation was important. For this research, I was only able to read English language blogs, resulting in a partial view of Malaysian blogs, although this is mitigated to some extent by the apparent predominance of English language blogs. With regards to advertising, the preference for English language media – based on the assumption that English speakers are more affluent – is reflected in the higher cost of

advertising in English language media,<sup>33</sup> suggesting that monetisation may have more impact on English language blogging.

Most of the interviewees are relatively young (20-30 years old), ethnically Chinese, and living in the Klang Valley area. The most relevant categories for this thesis are the genre, the length of time they have been blogging, and the amount of traffic they get: the longer they have been blogging, the more understanding they will have of the changes that have accompanied monetisation, and the higher their traffic the more they will have had the chance to reflect on the impact of their blog. There is a fuzzy but recognisable line between the 'top bloggers', or the A-list, and 'the rest'. Trammell & Keshelashvili operationalised an A-list blog as one with more than one hundred incoming links from other blogs (2005: 973), and Herring *et al.* also used the number of incoming blog links to determine A-list blogs (2005: 4); I did not count the incoming blog links, but those that I have classified as 'A-list' are those that were the most likely to get advertorials, to get mentioned in the press, and with higher audiences – these are also sometimes called 'blogebrities' (i.e. celebrity bloggers). The A-list are expected to have daily audiences in the thousands, the lowest will have audiences in double digits. 57% of the blogger survey respondents had traffic of below 100 per day and 23% did not know, which implies it is also low (see Appendix A – Q22). Most of my interviewees have more than 200, and many have more than a thousand;<sup>34</sup> therefore my interviewees do not represent the average personal blogger, and in that respect reflects the limitations of much blog research that was already noted by Herring *et al.* (*ibid.*). However, they were selected in order to get more information about the effects and processes of monetisation, something that the bloggers with more traffic have most experience of.

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<sup>33</sup> Personal communication from advertising professionals

<sup>34</sup> After doing the interviews I realised that I had not consistently asked each interviewee for their audience figures, so the figure is sometimes based on an estimation based on the long period of interaction and reading their blog.

Pseudonym *	Blog started in	A-list or not	Sex	Ethnicity §	Age range	Blog genre	Approx. daily audience	Interview date	Interview format
Rachel	Sep. 2004	Low traffic	M	Caucasian	50+	Hobby	<500	16/8/2009	Face-to-face, extended
Ibrahim	2002	A-list	F	Chinese	20-30	Personal/ Lifestyle	1-5,000	12/10/2009	Face-to-face, extended
Andrew	Jan. 2002	Low traffic	M	Chinese	20-30	Personal/ Lifestyle	DK	15/8/2009	Face-to-face, extended
Chee Keong	Apr. 2002	A-list	M	Chinese	20-30	Personal/ Lifestyle	5-10,000	28/7/2008	Face-to-face, extended
Jaymee	Oct. 2003	A-list	F	Chinese	20-30	Personal/ Lifestyle	500-1,000	13/10/2009	Face-to-face, extended
Nicky	Feb. 2004	A-list	F	Chinese	20-30	Personal/ Lifestyle	1-5,000	26/10/2009	Face-to-face, extended
Magdalene	Apr. 2004	A-list	F	Chinese	20-30	Personal/ Lifestyle	1-5,000	22/10/2009	Face-to-face, extended
Sebastian	July 2004	Low traffic	M	Chinese	30-40	Personal/ Lifestyle	DK	25/9/2009	Face-to-face, extended
Adeline	Sep. 2004	A-list	F	Chinese	20-30	Personal/ Lifestyle	1-5,000	7/5/2009	Face-to-face, extended
Tommy	Jan. 2005	A-list	M	Chinese	20-30	Personal/ Lifestyle	15-20,000	5/8/2008	Face-to-face, extended
Haliza	Sep. 2005	A-list	F	Malay	30-40	Personal/ Lifestyle	1-5,000	16/10/2009	Face-to-face, extended
Andy	Oct. 2005 ‡	Uncertain †	M	Chinese	20-30	Personal/ Lifestyle	DK	10/8/2009	Face-to-face, extended
Thomas	July 2006 ‡	Low traffic	M	Chinese	20-30	Personal/ Lifestyle	DK	13/8/2009	Face-to-face, extended
James	July 2006	Uncertain †	M	Chinese	20-30	Personal/ Lifestyle	DK	11/2/2009	Face-to-face, extended
Stephanie	Oct. 2006	A-list	F	Chinese	20-30	Personal/ Lifestyle	1-5,000	6/9/2009	Face-to-face, extended
Alvin	Apr. 2008 ‡	A-list	M	Chinese	20-30	Personal/ Lifestyle	1-5,000	1/10/2009	Face-to-face, extended
Faizal	June 2008	Low traffic	M	Malay	30-40	Personal/ Lifestyle	DK	2/10/2009	Face-to-face, extended
Xi Ving	Sep. 2008	Low traffic	M	Chinese	20-30	Personal/ Lifestyle	DK	1/9/2009	Email
Jia Hao	Nov. 2003	Low traffic	M	Chinese	50+	SoPo	DK	16/5/2009	Face-to-face, short
Heng Yik	Apr. 2005	Low traffic	M	Chinese	30-40	SoPo	DK	16/5/2009	Face-to-face, short
Zul	May 2006	A-list	M	Malay	50+	SoPo	5-10,000	16/5/2009	Face-to-face, short
Bashir	July 2007	Low traffic	M	Malay	20-30	SoPo	DK	2/9/2009	Email
<p>* Assigned in order to protect anonymity.  § Based on my labelling, I did not ask them.  † These are BlogAdNet employee who benefit from high visibility due to their job, but this may not reflect their status as bloggers <i>per se</i>.  ‡ Had another blog before</p>									

**Table 5: Interviewees**

## 4 Analysis and presentation of findings

The last stage of the research is the writing of the thesis itself, and the following chapters present the analyses and questions that arose throughout, and subsequent to, the fieldwork. What is worth

mentioning in this chapter regarding research design is that the inductive approach taken means that the process of writing up is also a continuation of the research. Through being required to filter the data, and present it in a manner suitable to be examined as a PhD thesis, there is a non-linear process of selection and representation as I find ways to express parts of what I had experienced and observed. This is in itself generative of results, and in this respect Denzin & Lincoln argue that, “[t]here is, in the final analysis, no difference between writing and fieldwork” (2007: 26).

One consequence of this was that the initial research questions changed, and may be summarised as follows:

- How do monetisation practices interact with personal blogging practices in Malaysia?
- How do the specific affordances of blogs affect interpersonal interaction, and how do monetisation practices leverage those affordances?

An example of the process of thinking while writing was in the shift I made from using a Bourdieuan model, based on the premise of a field of blogging with authenticity and disinterestedness as a ‘fundamental law’, towards the assemblage model derived from Deleuze & Guattari. This was because I came to a point where I realised that I could not fit what I had observed into the Bourdieuan model (as explained in Chapter II, Section 3.2; p15); most bloggers I came across embraced the chance to make money, and while there were some unhappy voices, these were mostly from blogs of another genre such as SoPo or the tech/geek blogs. Using this model enabled the writing and analysis to progress in more satisfactory manner, one that I felt represented the personal blogging experience better. If, however, I had focused on SoPo blogs, I believe that I would have found a much stronger aversion to the monetisation of blogs, and a related upholding of the authenticity of the voice of the blogger; but this would have also encompassed a version of journalistic ethics that required another analysis that spanned mainstream media and blogs. This is not to diminish the potential contribution of this, or any, ethnographic text, but only to underline its contingent and engaged properties that make it, as Clifford argues, “inherently *partial* – committed and incomplete” (1986b: 7; original emphasis).

This ethnography focuses particularly on change, from the non-monetised to the monetised blogging practices. There is necessarily a historically chronological progression of a discrete set of events, as outlined in chapter IV, but to overlay upon this a chronological causal logic may impose a linearity that is not justified. An alternative to a linear logic can be drawn from Deleuze & Guattari’s rhizomatic model, wherein causal effects may be traced in a simple linear manner, but can also

happen recursively, through systemic shifts in intensities, with changing resonance between nodes resulting in simultaneous and unpredictable movements (see also DeLanda 2006: 19–21).

When applying this perspective to analysing changing social situations, the first point to recall is that social formations are always in a condition of change. While a collectivity of causal relations can be apprehended synchronically as an assemblage with emergent properties, which have identifiable traces and effects, this model is always partial, and historical. It is partial because it is derived (in this case) from the observations and work of a single researcher, and it is historical because any anthropological analysis is always based on the past. This is not to deny the potential usefulness of such an analysis, but the analytically actualised assemblage should not be recast as embodying the dynamic situation, but instead used as a means to guide further investigations. In cases where such analyses are recast as discovered models to be applied, there is the possibility of them recreating the initial situation, and thus being functionally practical, but this depends more on the ability to reform and control the actors and actants, rather than the ability of the analysis to uncover putative objective structures. Thus, the assumption of a homogenous or linear impact of monetisation on blogging would require the concurrent projection of a relatively unified community, or field, of blogging – one which is then capable of reacting in a directly proportional manner to the new stimulus of monetisation.

The emergent properties do result from the assemblage, and are not reducible to the individual actors and actants, but the change is always experienced by those individual components, for the assemblage is always in motion, able to be captured and crystallised for the purpose of analysis, but never in fact an entity beyond the contingent dynamic process that creates it. The traces of change are expressed in practices and experienced by actors and actants, and their causal interconnections may or may not lead to assemblages with novel emergent properties.

Much as the inductive process of research outlined here has avoided a linear hypothetico-deductive mode, the process of outlining the effects of monetisation will not follow a linear process either. Thus, the three following chapters each present the important practices, actors and actants of personal blogging from three different perspectives, or scales. The first is the blogger as an individual and how she relates to the blog as actant; the second is the bloggers and blogs as a collective; and the third looks at monetisation and how it relates to the previous two representations of assemblages.

Within each chapter, particular events are used as examples. Events are the building blocks of practice, most pass unremarked but contribute to the causal interactions in different manners; some become important, either because of how they represent a challenge to habitual practice (e.g. a blogger copies another blogger's post), or because they represent a exemplary reaffirmation of practices (e.g. a blogger announces he has cashed a ad-revenue cheque); other events may take on much wider importance, and have ramifications beyond the blogosphere – such as when a number of SoPo bloggers were elected to Parliament in the 2008 general election in Malaysia. The response to an event by actors may lead to the emergence of an actant of more-or-less determinate properties, the translation of the event and its relative situating may be largely determined by an actor or actant. In other contexts, the determination will be a lot more fluid. For example, a blog post may be stated as objectionable by a leading blogger, different opinions will circulate around posts and comments, and many interpretations arise. There is a definite centrifugal effect deriving from the affordances of the blog, and a decentring of discourse based on the potential for unexpected links and influences between different nodes may occur. In practice, however, there tends to be a clustering around particular actants and/or actors.

Each chapter outlines relatively autonomous assemblages apprehended during the fieldwork, and they can be seen as rhizomatic nodes that can be combined to allow a wider picture of the interaction of all three dynamic processes – the self, the blogosphere, and monetisation.

# IV. Personal blogging and monetisation in Malaysia

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## 1 Introduction

In order to provide context for the following chapters, this chapter will outline a history of blogging in general, and review some literature on blogging outside of the USA. Moving to a focus on Malaysian blogging, it will discuss key stages and also discuss monetisation practices. Although political issues are rarely discussed on personal blogs, reflecting the offline context where such matters are usually avoided in public or semi-public settings, I include a discussion of SoPo blogs. In one respect, personal blogs define themselves in opposition to SoPo blogs, and in addition public consciousness of blogs is often shaped by SoPo blogs. The material used is drawn from academic literature, newspaper and website sources, blogs, and interviews with bloggers.

Broadly, there are four phases that can be identified. The years 1990 to 1999 saw the introduction and growth of the internet, and the impact of personal websites and proto-blogs in the 1998 *Reformasi* period,<sup>35</sup> and the general elections in 1999 saw a distinct challenge to the government control of the media. Following this there was a phase of maturation, with the gradual growth of blogs as a subcultural phenomenon which lasted until 2005/2006 when blogs entered public consciousness and some took on an agenda-setting role. From then onwards there were various moves to integrate blogs into the mainstream media and – with the onset of BlogAdNet in 2007 – into advertising too. The General Election of 2008 resulted in an integration of blogs into mainstream politics, and overall there was a mainstreaming of blogs. By 2010, the use of Facebook and Twitter has taken the lead in terms of popularity of online media, but blogs still retain a significant role.

## 2 Blog history

Estimating the number of blogs is difficult (Kolari *et al.* 2006; see also Li & Walejko 2008), but there is no doubt that the number of blogs has increased exponentially over the years. In 2002, figures ranged from 375,000 for Blogger.com (Jenkins 2002: 91), and 800,000 overall (McNeill 2003: 25). In 2004 there were an estimated 4.12 million blogs (Henning 2004); in 2006 the PEW Internet Survey

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<sup>35</sup> A period of political upheaval following the dismissal of the Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim.



estimated 12 million American blogs (mostly “personal journals”), and 57 million blog readers (cited in Lenhart & Fox 2006: ii). In 2008 Technorati, the largest blog search engine, reported having indexed 133 million blogs since 2002, and recorded 900,000 posts every 24 hours (Sifry 2008).<sup>36</sup>

The earliest historical narrative of blogging is in a volume edited by Rebecca Blood & John Rodzvilla (Blood & Rodzvilla 2002). These accounts emphasise the early ‘filter’ function of ‘web logs’ (eventually to become ‘blogs’) where the bloggers “pre-surfed” (Blood 2002a: 9) the web for readers who came to trust the blogger’s judgement regarding the quality and relevance of those links. The “free-form interface”, the “empty box into which the blogger can type [...] anything” (*ibid.*: 11) encouraged a variety of expressions, and connected collectives of bloggers began developing common practices and sustained connections both on- and offline. One expression of this was the exposing and hostile reaction in 2001 to a woman who had garnered a large audience while pretending to be a teenage girl with a fatal leukaemia (Geitgey 2002). A more recent paper by Rudolf Ammann (2010) uses archived web pages to show how blogging developed from “news page maintainers” (*ibid.*: 281), and traces the influence of key figures such as Dave Winer and Jorn Barger. It shows changing practices, and details a failed attempt by Barger to impose a definite form of blogging – i.e. that “a true weblog is a log of all the URLs you want to save or share” (Barger quoted in Ammann 2010: 284).

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, there was a sustained increase in “do it yourself journalism” and an explosion in the number of blogs (Halavais 2002; see also Krishnamurthy 2002; Gallagher 2002). Another milestone in American blogging was the 2004 ‘Rathergate’ incident which saw blogs breaking a story on faked documents used on the CBS Evening News (Adamic & Glance 2005: 36; Teachout 2005: 43). The ability of blogs to promote cross-partisan dialogue has been contrasted with the apparent ‘balkanisation’ of blogs, (e.g. Thomas J Johnson & Kaye 2004; Teachout 2005), and Linda Jean Kenix (2009) also notes that the comments in popular blogs tend to reflect a relatively homogenous political outlook that parallels that of the blogger.

The growth in blogging has peaked, with Facebook and Twitter providing alternatives for internet users (Holahan 2007). Blogging requires more effort than these other services, and therefore bloggers are now more likely to be committed to their blog for creative, cathartic, or professional purposes. Nonetheless, there are still many millions of blogs, and they remain one of the most enduring forms of the new digital media, ranging from a personal blog with an audience in single

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<sup>36</sup> These studies tend to be centred on American blogs, though recently there has been more inclusion of non-American data (e.g. Technorati 2009).

digits, to large media outlets with many authors and resembling magazines more than the classic dairy genre.

## **2.1 Personal blogs overview**

Most histories of blogging in America point to Jorn Barger as being the first blogger in 1997 (Blood 2002b), but there is an earlier “founding father of personal bloggers” – Justin Hall – who started in 1994 (Rosen 2004).<sup>37</sup> He is also mentioned by Jill Rettberg (2008: 23), there have been other references to him (Harmanci 2005; Israel 2011; Sandy 2011), and he was featured in a 1998 documentary.<sup>38</sup> It is a curious feature of most accounts of blogging that personal blogging, although recognised as predominant, remains in the background – mentioned in passing, or as means to show the changes in what is seen as the central form – a public reflection on other material on the Web (i.e. an annotated hyperlink), or discussion of current affairs. Thus Blood remarks that most blogs are “journal-style” rather than “filter-style” weblogs (2002a: 11), but prefers to concentrate on the latter. Barger also obliquely refers to the increase in personal bloggers, saying that “you can certainly include links to your original thoughts, posted elsewhere [...] but if you have more original posts than links, you probably need to learn some humility” (Barger quoted in Ammann 2010: 284).

Whereas in the USA, the blogs that attracted the most mainstream media attention were focused on political commentary, in the UK initial interest was more likely to shaped by reports of a blog by a sex worker, and discussions of the motivations of personal bloggers (Brake 2009: 133). However, apart from blogs that focus on sexual confession, where “100% of the bloggers discussed are women” (Pedersen & Macafee 2007: n.p.) the tendency to foreground male bloggers is also found in the UK – a 2007 study by Sarah Pedersen and Caroline Macafee argue that this is because of “more personal content and orientation towards the social aspects of blogging, as opposed to a male emphasis on information; lesser technical sophistication; and a greater preference for anonymity” (*ibid.*: n.p.).

## **2.2 Blogs globally**

Most studies of blogs have been on those in the USA, but there are an increasing amount of studies on blogs around the world (for a non-exhaustive list, see Appendix C). There are a few that have taken a specifically international comparative approach (Loewenstein 2008; Su *et al.* 2005; Zuckerman 2007); Cenite *et al.* also compared blogger ethics worldwide, but 65% of the respondents were from the USA (2009). Ethan Zuckerman also notes the relevance of national blogospheres, as

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<sup>37</sup> Justin Hall no longer blogs, but his work can be seen on two websites: <http://interactive.usc.edu/members/jhall/> (inactive) , <http://www.links.net/vita/> (possibly active).

<sup>38</sup> *Home Page* – see <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0144969/>

well as commonalities and links between blogs internationally, using hyperlink analysis to show that a minority of blogs are connected with other websites and blogs beyond their offline context. These are “bridgebloggers,” who are able to transcend national and cultural boundaries – but the language used is a critical aspect of this phenomenon, and he notes that it “may be proportionally shrinking as the non-English blogosphere grows” (2007: 48). He also notes that comparative studies are “complicated by lack of believable data on the size of blogospheres in different languages and countries” (*ibid.*: 63). One comparative study is by Su *et al.* who use Hofstede’s dimensions of community as applied to blogging practices, and report that the similarities in bloggers’ “experiences with activism, reputation, social connectedness and identity [allow them to] posit that bloggers themselves represent a unique culture that permeates through regional boundaries” (2005: 187). There are a few other examples of international surveys done by private companies (e.g. Sysomos 2010; Text 100 2009), but their methodological opacity limits their usefulness.

The edited volume by Adrienne Russell and Nabil Echchaibi (2009) looks at blogging in France, China, Russia, Australia, Israel, Morocco, Italy and Singapore, as well as transnational Muslim voices. It has an overall concern with blogging and theories of media imperialism, and offers a contrasting approach to that by Zuckerman (*op. cit.*) who emphasises the role of blogs in spreading western-style liberal democracy. In it, Karina Alexanyan and Olessia Koltsova (2009) describe how patterns of use of LiveJournal differ amongst Russian speakers compared to American users. However, they also show how this apparent unity of practice does not reflect commonalities in other dimensions when a shift in control of the Russian language LiveJournal blogs to a Russian company brings to the fore offline issues of contesting national and ethnic-linguistic identification. With regards to Chinese blogs, Kim de Vries (2009) contrasts the “Western romantic view of writing in which each author’s first audience is him- or herself, and primary responsibility is to some interior truth, rather than to a larger community” (*ibid.*: 48) with the “collectivist orientation” of Chinese culture. But she also notes the popularity of blogs over forum newsletters (a collective form of online publishing) which suggests that the Chinese prefer individualistic modes of online publishing, and that the Chinese also participated in blogging from early on, for example with Chinese language software (*ibid.*: 50).

Russell thus argues against the “absurdity of theory elaboration based on isolated Western case studies” (2009: 1), and notes that “bloggers around the world [...] seem to be developing in ways that are distinct from the U.S. model” (*ibid.*: 6). This is also supported by Park & Kluver who note that because national “political contexts and assumptions” vary widely “meaningful cross-national

comparisons” in comparing the use of the internet in elections across countries are very difficult to make (2007a).

Overall, however, there are distinct commonalities to be derived from the surveys of blogs around the world. These are: personal blogs are in the majority; political/journalistic bloggers are more likely to be older men; reasons for blogging are typically expressed in terms of personal creativity; most bloggers are not anonymous, and those who use pseudonyms are likely to be recognisable; and, many blogs are rapidly abandoned. However, while there is a shared pool of practices and experiences of bloggers, these broad similarities are not enough to deny the multiplicity of practices that are embedded in the offline context of the bloggers. As Brake has argued, bloggers typically have an audience of people like themselves in mind (2007), and this can apply both to what are sometimes called ‘communities of interest’, which may effectively span the globe (tech blogs are one such example), as well as to locally based national, cultural or linguistic groups – and at the micro level, to small groups of personal friends and acquaintances.

### **3 Malaysia: state media control and the internet**

Malaysia has been ruled by roughly the same coalition since independence in 1957. Called ‘*Barisan Nasional*’ (BN)<sup>39</sup> since 1973, the coalition’s dominant partner is the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO), and the main partners are mostly ethnically-based parties such as the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). An important part of the context of the internet in Malaysia is the long-standing close control of the mainstream media by the BN. Building on a legacy of colonial laws that criminalise sedition and enable detention without trial under the Internal Security Act (ISA), there have been a series of legislative enactments designed to control media outlets and limit freedom of speech – for example, the Printing Presses and Publication Act (PPPA) requires newspapers to apply to the Home Ministry to renew their licence every year (Randhawa 2006). Occasionally this permit has been withdrawn, leading to financial losses and even permanent closure of a newspaper (Ming Kuok Lim 2007).

Widespread privatisation in the nineties did not effect significant change. As Cherian George has noted, Media Prima, in which “UMNO has a controlling stake” is the majority shareholder of the New Straits Times Press (NSTP) which runs one of the two major English language newspapers, and a major BM newspaper *Utusan Malaysia*, “is about 50-percent owned by UMNO and its nominees;” the press directed at the ethnic Chinese similarly reflects the interests of MCA and Chinese elites

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<sup>39</sup> It means ‘National Front’. Previously it was called the Alliance.

(2007: 897–8). This control of the print media also extends to television, thus “Media Prima [is] the sole owner of all commercial free to air television in Malaysia” (Lay Kim Wang 2010: 23). In another example, 38% of the only satellite television service (Astro) is owned by government organisations (Kaos Jr 2010).

The first Internet Service Provider (ISP) in Malaysia was founded in 1990. There was a large growth in 1995, and in 1998 more telecommunications companies were allowed to form ISPs. In 2000 there were seven ISPs serving 1.2 million subscribers and an estimated four million internet users (Tong 2004: 277–8). This represented 15% of the population; by 2005 the users were estimated at ten million (37.9% penetration), and in 2010 the respective figures were almost seventeen million and 64.6% (Malaysia Internet Usage and Telecommunications Reports 2010). The broadband penetration rate in 2009 was reported as 31.4%, with however a “huge disparity” in the urban/rural penetration with a ratio of 6:1 (NST Online 2009).

The state control of the media is generally effective for the ‘old media’ that require relatively large organisations and the central control of production and distribution. However the internet affordances mean that content production is decentralised, and potentially anonymous. Keeping in mind that the extent to which these affordances are actualised depends also upon socio-political decisions, it is important to note that a government decision in the 1990s to create a propitious environment for technological innovation and inward investment in the ‘Multimedia Super Corridor’ included a guarantee of non-censorship of the internet in the ‘Bill of Guarantees’ (Bunnell 2004: 95). Combined with the fact that the PPPA specifically refers to material produced on printing presses, this means that the internet has provided a space for bloggers and online media to operate relatively freely. However, the government has repeatedly proven itself capable of deploying the ISA and anti-sedition laws in order to discourage certain topics from being aired (e.g. Jun-E Tan & Zawawi 2008: 68–75).

Perhaps the earliest actor to use the internet to bypass the mainstream media was the late M.G.G. Pillai who, in 1997, set up an email list to distribute “political news and commentary” directly to interested subscribers (George 2006: 79). During the ‘Reformasi’ political crisis of 1998, the partisanship of the mainstream media aroused much dissatisfaction and websites and emails were used to distribute alternative voices, and to mobilise political dissent. Many of the websites were operated by organisations challenging the state or by individuals on their own behalf (George 2006; Tong 2004). One of the earlier websites of a blog nature (i.e. personalised and diaristic) was Sabri

Zain's 'Reformasi Diaries' which chronicled the events of the Reformasi period and afterwards.<sup>40</sup> The most lasting player to come out of that period was *Malaysiakini*;<sup>41</sup> founded in 1999 and modelled as an online newspaper, it has become a central figure in the alternative media (Tong 2004: 298–302). The onset of the internet, and related technologies such as email and also mobile telephony, have therefore enabled significant challenges to the government control of information, and as such form a frontline in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Malaysian public sphere.

#### **4 2000-2006: Maturation – early blogs and Project Petaling Street**

The bias in favour of filter blogs – known in Malaysia as SoPo (Social-Political) blogs – is also common in most accounts of blogging in Malaysia, and personal bloggers are also usually overlooked in terms of historical relevance in favour of bloggers more visible in the mainstream media such as Jeff Ooi (a SoPo blogger) and Oon Yeoh (a technology blogger). According to Ibrahim, one of my respondents, the earliest bloggers in Malaysia were present in 1998 when 'Gengjurnal' was formed – this was "a pure Malay bloggers' community [...] when during html they blog in Geocities."<sup>42</sup> Gengjurnal was sustained for about five years, with annual awards a testament to emergent practices, but it faded away "most probably because of most of the bloggers now are married, they have their own... [i.e. changing priorities]" (*ibid.*). For English language blogs, the earliest Malaysian personal blogger that I was able to trace was 'Absolutely Fuzzy',<sup>43</sup> who was blogging in 2000, and was mentioned by Chee Keong as an inspiration.<sup>44</sup> By 2003, there had developed enough momentum amongst the English language blogs for the formation of the Project Petaling Street (PPS) blog aggregator, or 'blogtal'.<sup>45</sup> This was initially started by ten bloggers as a way of announcing their posts<sup>46</sup> and, according to Chee Keong, also as a means to generating some advertising revenue. It quickly attracted attention and more bloggers requested to appear in the feed – at first entry was allowed by invitation only, and then later prospective members could register themselves and a preliminary screening was done to filter out undesirable blogs. The ten founding members had permanent visibility on the sidebar, but objections were raised about this and eventually the site was opened to anyone who wanted to register, and all were given equal visibility.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> <http://www.sabrizain.org/reformasi/diary/index.htm>

<sup>41</sup> <http://www.malaysiakini.com/>

<sup>42</sup> i.e. Using html they developed blog-like websites hosted by geocities.com, and used BM only. Interview with Ibrahim, 12 October 2009.

<sup>43</sup> <http://absolutely-fuzzy.com/>

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Chee Keong, 28 July 2008.

<sup>45</sup> <http://www.petalingstreet.org/>

<sup>46</sup> This was before Really Simple Syndication (RSS) was available.

<sup>47</sup> Fieldnotes dated 14 June 2008.

The first trace of an offline blogmeet (for English-language bloggers) was reported in the blog of the founder of PPS in July 2003,<sup>48</sup> and later the same month he posted some details from a directory of blogs which had collated close to a thousand blogs.<sup>49</sup> In the same month, the same blogger mentions an article in the technology section of a national newspaper that discussed blogs and also mentioned PPS.<sup>50</sup>

In October 2004, a comment deemed to be religiously offensive that was left on 'Screenshots' (Jeff Ooi's blog), led to him being questioned by the police. Jeff Ooi was able to supply or confirm information related to the IP address of the commenter, and the police was eventually able to track down a disgruntled apparently anti-UMNO Malay who had made the comments. Coincidentally or not, this episode had been preceded by a series of acrimonious public exchanges between Jeff Ooi and an important newspaper figure (ex Editor-in-Chief of a major daily) and columnist (Yeoh 2005).

In June 2005 a feature article in *The Star*, a national newspaper, profiled a few personal bloggers, and estimated the number of Malaysia blogs at ten thousand – based on the PPS co-founder's opinion (Cheang 2005). Interestingly, this article was written by a journalist who was also an anonymous blogger – presaging the overlapping of blogging and the mainstream media that has become widespread.<sup>51</sup> In the same month, the second anniversary of the founding of PPS saw a well-attended blogmeet with bloggers from around Malaysia, and included an awards ceremony. Two stories that attracted the attention of the media were the employment of a blogger (Ibrahim, one of my respondents) by a television station because his blog had attracted a large audience of fans of a popular television reality show,<sup>52</sup> and another personal blogger was reported to the police for blogging about recreational drug use (Chee Keong, one of my respondents).<sup>53</sup> These influences went both ways, and in one case a relatively popular blogger blogged about her father forbidding her from attending any more blogmeets – he had read about the dangers of meeting online acquaintances, and there had been attention stirred in Singapore by a blogger who had posed nude online.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Blog post, Amin, 6 July 2003: p00840

<sup>49</sup> Blog post, Amin, 25 July 2003: p00842

<sup>50</sup> Blog post, Amin, 7 July 2003: p00835

<sup>51</sup> He was to forego his anonymity later.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in newspaper article 02, January 2006. Details retained to maintain anonymity.

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in newspaper article 03, November 2005. Details retained to maintain anonymity.

<sup>54</sup> Blog post, Mary, 13 June 2005: p00843

## 5 2006-2008: Maturity and integration

As can be seen above, as blogging increased online, it was becoming increasingly impossible to ignore offline, both in a political sense, and in relation to the mainstream media which, at times, keenly felt the competition from those who did not need to abide by the same regulations and financial constraints as they did. This section looks at how these two components of the public sphere dealt with blogs over the period from 2006 until the General Election in March 2008. At the same time, opportunities for monetisation were developing, which are discussed later (see section 7; p103).

### 5.1 *Personal blogging and the mainstream media*

Although the mainstream media had many reservations about the professionalism and relevance of blogging, newspapers showed an interest in blogging both as a topic for news content and also in terms of recruiting talent from the blogosphere. In July 2006, a plan for what was intended to become an online magazine was developed in a loose association with *The New Straits Times* (NST). Called ‘moNSTerblog’, this was to consist of a number of bloggers who would regularly produce content around some broadly defined themes with the intention of building up a readership and eventually gathering money from hosting advertising on the site.<sup>55</sup> However, this foundered after about eighteen months due to the lack of income forthcoming to the bloggers, and the withdrawal of the support of the NST following some blog posts on two major demonstrations that took place in 2007 regarding election reform and ethnic Indian minority rights.<sup>56</sup>

In terms of using blogging as content, one of the first major pieces that affected personal bloggers was a spread in a English language tabloid *The Weekend Mail* about “Bootylicious” female bloggers who were “heating up cyberspace” (Weekend Mail 2006). Another example of the mainstream media interest was a regular feature in the *Saturday NST* called ‘Blog’ which featured a weekly blog, for example one that focused on baking (Fatboybakes 2007). Amongst bloggers, appearing in the MSM usually added to credibility, although it did not necessarily add to their readership – as one blogger noted after a number of appearances in the MSM.<sup>57</sup> This demonstrated that although journalists were increasingly turning to blogs for content, newspaper readers were still less likely to be reading blogs.

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<sup>55</sup> Blog post, Jaymee, March 19 2008: p00839

<sup>56</sup> Blog post, Jaymee, March 21 2008: p00837

<sup>57</sup> Blog post, GeekMonk, 30 April 2007: p00836



Much content of the Malaysian mainstream media is ostensibly non-political, with the bulk of newspaper content consisting of general interest stories, and the foreign content drawn from wire services. In May 2007, at the same time as SoPo blogs were banding together under All-blogs (see below, section 5.2), Star Publications, the owners of the leading English daily *The Star* were setting up the Malaysian Bloggers' Club (MBC). It proposed itself as a blog directory for all blogs in Malaysia, and was running a competition to encourage bloggers to sign up. It was perceived by some as an attempt to divert attention from the SoPo bloggers efforts to speak on behalf of the bloggers,<sup>58</sup> but it received a positive reception from some non-SoPo bloggers, one of whom interestingly also noted the commercial relevance of bloggers – arguing that “bloggers form a very powerful viral marketing voice.”<sup>59</sup>

## **5.2 SoPo blogging and the mainstream media**

In late October 2006, Jeff Ooi published a detailed accusation that a senior editor of the NST had plagiarised a column (Ooi 2006). This eventually led to him and another SoPo blogger who had repeated the allegations being served injunctions in January 2007 and being sued for defamation (Ooi 2007). This was perceived by many bloggers as an attempt to muzzle the online voices, and there was a rapid mobilisation of support online, and eventually the formation of All-Blogs, an association designed to represent and support bloggers (Jun-E Tan & Zawawi 2008: 24–9). In its wake, some objected to the manner of its formation, and proposed another similar organisation, and there was also the formation of a “Muslim Blogger’s Alliance” – neither of which had any particular impact. All-Blogs did succeed in becoming a point of reference for bloggers and the mainstream media, and in August the ‘Blog House’ was opened. It was ostensibly a physical locale for bloggers, however its accessibility always remained controlled by a few individuals, and the ownership of the house, in an expensive neighbourhood,<sup>60</sup> was never clarified.<sup>61</sup>

The perception of bloggers as irresponsible rumour-mongers was to set the tenor for much of the government response to blogging. In March 2007, the Tourism minister was reported as saying “All bloggers are liars, they cheat people using all kinds of methods. From my understanding, out of 10,000 unemployed bloggers, 8,000 are women” (JerryWho 2007). In May, the Information Minister suggested that there was a need to “classify web bloggers as professionals and non-professionals as a mechanism to prevent misuse of blog sites” (*Bernama* 2007a). Also in May, there was a blogmeet called Bloggers’ United Malaysia (BUM), which set itself the task of discussing the relation between

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<sup>58</sup> Blog post, Hamdi, 21 May 2007: p00844

<sup>59</sup> Blog post, GeekMonk, 25 May 2007: p00845

<sup>60</sup> Bukit Damansara, Kuala Lumpur

<sup>61</sup> Fieldnotes dated 26 August 2007, 6 July 2008

the fourth estate (journalists) and the ‘fifth estate’ (bloggers). The theme of ‘responsible blogging’, which encompassed the absence of anonymity, fact checking, and avoiding racially sensitive was an important part of the event material (Jun-E Tan & Zawawi 2008: 55–7).<sup>62</sup>



**Plate 4: Sidebar button displaying solidarity for arrested SoPo bloggers**

Although the principal reaction of the government was to dismiss or denigrate SoPo bloggers, such as when they were called “monkeys” by the UMNO Youth deputy chief (*Bernama* 2007b). However, the continuing preoccupation of the government with blogs was evidenced by the revelation that UMNO was recruiting its own team to fight a “cyber war” (*The Star Online* 2007a), and the remonstrance by a senior minister to the MSM that it should be careful in their reporting and using material from blogs, saying that “[f]or a mainstream media to quote a blog is irresponsible. It should be the other way around” (*The New Straits Times* 2007). The next month saw two incidents with bloggers: one was arrested for linking to a site that made accusations of corruption against a government minister (*The Star Online* 2007b), and Raja Petra Kamaruddin (aka RPK) was questioned regarding his blog postings. Each of these occasions raised public awareness of blogs, and provided opportunities for online mobilisation of bloggers, typically in the form of declarations of support and display of sidebar buttons (see Plate 4, and Appendix F). In addition to these public happenings, a blogger reported repeated hacking attempts, and another reported anonymous threats (Jun-E Tan & Zawawi 2008: 58).

<sup>62</sup> Fieldnotes dated 19 May 2007

In April 2008 a survey undertaken in February and March revealed that more than 60% of those aged 21 to 40 years old trusted information on “blogs and online media,” compared to less than 25% for television and newspapers (*The New Straits Times* 2008a). Thus, as the country headed towards the General Election in 2008, there were vociferous and confident SoPo bloggers, loosely organised in various collectives, with the government-friendly MSM often in a reactive, defensive mode.

## 6 After 2008: blogs mainstreaming

After the unprecedented poor results for the ruling coalition in the March 2008 elections, the importance of the internet was reassessed, and the Prime Minister said “In the last election, we certainly lost the Internet war, the cyberwar” (Dzulkifli Abdul Razak 2008). Although many aspects of the internet (YouTube, email, Malaysiakini), as well as mobile telephony, were important in undermining the government message, blogs in particular were seen as being central to the role of the internet. This was evidenced in a number of initiatives that focused on blogs and bloggers: in March the Information Minister announced that meeting bloggers “to better understand their sentiments and give them an avenue to express themselves” was “at the top of his agenda as requested by [the] Prime Minister” (*The New Straits Times* 2008b); in April the youth wing of UMNO required that all candidates for posts set up blogs (Phang & Pua 2008); in May the Information Minister (ironically underscoring the government control of television) announced the intention of “giving bloggers air time on TV once a week” (Shahanaaz 2008), an initiative that was carried through and kept up for a few months; this month also saw discussion of the need for a code of ethics for bloggers based on journalistic ethics (Kushairi 2008), and the proposition for a university course that would “enable bloggers to be more professional and ethical” (*The Star* 2008).

Amongst the SoPo bloggers the atmosphere changed significantly, with the second annual BUM meeting in May being held in a celebratory atmosphere, and the new Member of Parliament Jeff Ooi attended via teleconferencing facilities while on official state government business in Vietnam.<sup>63</sup> Likewise, the first anniversary of the formation of All-Blogs, held at the Blog House, saw the attendance of seven Members of Parliament as well as prominent NGO activists and public figures.<sup>64</sup>

This period of relative entente did not last, however. Political allegiances amongst bloggers, while tending towards the oppositional, also generally reflected the broader offline political situation. Even at the anniversary of All-Blogs, there were signs of a division between bloggers – some of

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<sup>63</sup> Fieldnotes dated May 2, 2008

<sup>64</sup> Fieldnotes dated 8 July, 2008

whom represented a faction of the ruling party who were unhappy with the Prime Minister, but still preferred the coalition to stay in power, while the others wanted a complete change. This divergence of interest finally surfaced in open disagreement in April 2009 (Leonard 2009). While this gradual shift was happening, the government attempts to assuage bloggers by opening up to them was only marginally successful, and many continued to attack the government. In particular, RPK continued to publish leaked documents, launch trenchant broadsides, and most controversially, repeated allegations that the Deputy Prime Minister and his wife were implicated in the murder of Altantuya Shaariibuu, a Mongolian translator previously employed as an official translator, and also the mistress of a close associate of the Deputy Prime Minister (Raja Petra Kamarudin 2008). In August his blog was blocked by the Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission, a move widely derided as pointless as a mirror site was available almost immediately (Wong 2008); and in September he was arrested and detained under the ISA law, with the Home Minister stating that it was due to blog posts “that ridiculed Islam which could arouse anger among Muslims.” (Chelvi 2008) – a reason that notably sidestepped his more controversial accusations.

In September, the Deputy Prime Minister (and soon to be Prime Minister) launched his own “personal website,” saying that it was “intended to be a forum for all Malaysians to exchange views important to them” (*The Sun* 2008), and in October – highlighting the public strategy regarding the developments in media distribution, the Information Minister stated that “The government no longer regards online news portals and weblogs as alternative media but as mainstream because they have become more popular than traditional news sources” (Ramendran 2008).

In the non-SoPo sphere, there was also a continuing move towards mainstreaming blogs, such as when a personal blogger was given a regular column in *The Star*<sup>65</sup>. In May 2009 a television channel (8TV) launched a serial called “Blogger Boy”, whose central character has a “secret identity on the internet by way of his male confessional comic blog” (Voize 2009); Plate 5 shows how the image of a blogger is used in an advertising campaign for a broadband service (Maxis 2009). In early 2010, a cross-platform programme featuring bloggers called ‘Project Alpha’ launched as an online television show with radio tie-ins, as well as television programming as part of the launch of a high-definition service (Yee 2010).

In December 2008 Oon Yeoh, argued that the cutting edge of social media had moved on from blogs to Facebook and Twitter blogs, citing Nicholas Carr as saying “that many popular blogs are today

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<sup>65</sup> Newspaper article 05, May 2008. Details retained to maintain anonymity.

commercial ventures, bloated and geared towards selling ads,” and noting that on Technorati, “[a]t least 94% of their listed blogs have gone dormant” (2008). This points towards a certain saturation of the blogosphere, but rather than seeing it as the demise of blogging, I would argue that it is the end of the initial growth phase of blogging, with those bloggers who are left being more committed to the regular maintenance of their blog, and the production of consistent content. Based on a consistent ability to attract audiences, commercial interest in blogs continued, and although the new FTC regulations in 2009 were noted in Malaysia too (*cf.* Chapter II, Section 7.2; p59), there have been no formal moves in that direction (Chhan 2009).



Plate 5: Newspaper advertisement, *The Sun*, 16 October 2009

## 7 Monetisation of blogs

Having now given a brief overview of the context of blogging in Malaysia, this section will focus on the particular process of monetisation, looking first at the more general content of the internet, and then in Malaysia in particular.

### 7.1 *The internet and commercialisation*

Fernando Bermejo details how the commercialisation of the internet was ongoing since 1974, with first infrastructure, then connection points becoming commercially controlled – developing a market for providing hardware and software to enable access. In 1993 the Mosaic browser made the visualisation and retrieval of online data online much easier, and the next step was to commercialise the content – for which advertising was to be crucial (2007: 88–94). By the “mid-1990s [there is] an Internet that has already been penetrated, at all levels, by commercial criteria and interests” (*ibid.*:

94). That there were tensions caused by this is evidenced by the future founders of Google – then academics, who argued that “the issue of advertising causes enough mixed incentives that it is crucial to have a competitive search engine that is transparent and in the academic realm” (Brin & Page 1998: n.p.).

Bermejo further argues that because the internet can combine a global audience with the ability to segment and target population groups, it has always had “the potential to become an ideal vehicle for advertising messages” (2007: 93). The first (unauthorised) use of the internet for advertising happened in 1978, when a mass email was sent out to announce a new product (*ibid.*: 91). In effect, the most consistent means for monetising the internet has been as an advertising platform, and that is how most bloggers in Malaysia are able to generate income.

Political dimensions also operate in Malaysia, as evidenced by the reported difficulty of an online newspaper, Malaysiakini, to get advertising revenue due to its oppositional stance (Tong 2004: 285–9); also, in another context, two of the SoPo bloggers I interviewed (Zul and Jia Hao) did not have advertisements to avoid the perception of bias.<sup>66</sup> BlogAdNet also reported a similar issue, with James explaining that RPK had registered with them, but they foresaw too many difficulties in proposing his blog to clients and declined to register him.<sup>67</sup>

Google AdSense, which became available to Malaysian bloggers in 2003, vastly increased their potential access to advertising revenue – any blogger could sign up and no direct contact with advertisers was required. Chee Keong gave an interesting insight into the process, explaining that when he first put AdSense on his blog in 2005 he had had to negotiate with Google regarding his open discussion of illegal recreational drug use. The “Google guy [said...] ‘I know you have a drug blog, if anyone complains, we have to take it down.’” He was able to make money rapidly, and proved it by posting a picture of the cheque he received – a common practice amongst bloggers. However, he believed that this made other bloggers jealous – another noted Malaysian blogger took the initiative of complaining and encouraging others to do so, and Google cancelled the authorisation after three months (*op. cit.*).

However, generally AdSense did not generate much revenue for Malaysian personal bloggers. Once the space is provided on a blog, AdSense works by delivering advertisements based on keywords in the text – this works well when the topic of the blog is focused (for example, on cars – e.g. “Paul

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<sup>66</sup> Interview with Zul, Jia Hao, 16 May 2009

<sup>67</sup> Interview with James, 11 February 2009

Tan's Automotive News”),<sup>68</sup> thus attracting relevant ‘organic’ traffic from search engines, but not for personal blogs which cover a variety of topics. So even if a blogger had a large audience, most of them would be unlikely to click on the ads, which in addition were mostly aimed at American audiences.<sup>69</sup> In Malaysia, some tech blogs were able to leverage AdSense effectively because of the global relevance of the focused topic matter.<sup>70</sup>

Tommy’s experience gives an insight into the development of the market for blog advertising. In August 2005 he was approached by a Singaporean company to display a banner advertisement for an online service, and later a reader – who was the Marketing Manager of the Malaysian branch of a multinational car company – contacted him to do an advertorial which appeared in May 2006. From then on, the contact he developed with that client’s media agency brought him a number of opportunities, but once BlogAdNet started, and he agreed to work with them, his offers increased considerably and – as agents – they took over many of the details such as invoicing, communicating with the clients, and so on.<sup>71</sup> This service from BlogAdNet was mentioned positively by other bloggers too.

Another example of a successful blog monetiser is ‘MaBlogger’; she had garnered a substantial audience with her no holds barred attitude, but also maintained at least four blogs, each with different foci. In 2006 she reported starting to use PayPerPost, an American company that pays bloggers to write posts, usually including two or three links and some specific keywords or phrases. This was popular amongst bloggers who were able to pass the minimum criteria of having blogs of a minimum age, with a particular number of posts containing original content. Although the posts sometimes paid as little as USD5 per post, there were many such opportunities available, and thus it could add up. Andy also reported using it, but said that it was very competitive and also negatively affected the credibility of his blog.<sup>72</sup> About a year later, Google responded to this type of practice by reducing to zero the Page Rank<sup>73</sup> of any website with paid posts from particular companies – this led to most bloggers taking PayPerPost off their blog, or – as Faizal did – moving paid posts to another blog dedicated to paid posts and advertisements.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> <http://paultan.org/>

<sup>69</sup> This was first explained to me by ‘John’ at a BlogAdNet blogmeet. Fieldnotes dated 16 March 2008

<sup>70</sup> e.g. <http://www.liewcf.com/>

<sup>71</sup> Interview with Tommy, 5 August 2008

<sup>72</sup> Interview with Andy, 10 August 2009

<sup>73</sup> A ranking that affects the chance of appearing higher in search results. Usually expressed as ‘PR’.

<sup>74</sup> Interview with Faizal, 2 October 2009

Coincidentally, and almost simultaneously with the effective demise of PayPerPost as a major presence, BlogAdNet and AppAds started. The opportunity for these companies lay in the disjuncture between the globally available internet, dominated by American and European interests, and the local Malaysian advertising market. They realised that the local advertisers wanted access to local audiences, and the global nature of the internet audience was a disadvantage in this respect. When launching BlogAdNet, they paid Tommy for an advertorial; he also argued that AdSense did not work for most Malaysian bloggers, and concluded: “Finally, you can actually enjoy the products or services being advertised on Malaysian blogs! [...] **Relevance**. That's the keyword.”<sup>75</sup> Thus BlogAdNet was promoted as a local company, with local interests at heart. BlogAdNet reported targeting 300 registered blogs in three months, but had 250 in two weeks,<sup>76</sup> and 1,500 in two months.<sup>77</sup>

Adeline said that the first public relations opportunities for bloggers that she was aware of were invitations to restaurants.<sup>78</sup> An early example of this was in May 2007 when a leading blogger's birthday was hosted by a restaurant, providing an opportunity for it to get visibility on the blogs of the approximately twenty bloggers who were invited.<sup>79</sup> This was one of the first such events, and soon became a common way for some restaurants to promote themselves. Later in the same month, a spread appeared in *The Star* entitled “Blogging and big bucks” with interviews of bloggers, discussing how bloggers perceived making income from their blogs; one blogger stated that niche blogs could earn up to RM10,000 a month (Christy S.W. Lee 2007).

Opportunities such as the above were initially restricted to the most popular bloggers, but at the end of December 2007, BlogAdNet announced that bloggers who were signed up exclusively with them would start to get more opportunities. Thus in March 2008 I attended a press film screening;<sup>80</sup> in April I attended a launch of a marketing campaign for a major telecoms company, and the bloggers were also treated like the press, though the bloggers themselves were enough of a novelty for the journalists there to treat as part of the story.<sup>81</sup> This particular way of treating bloggers changed quite rapidly, and at two similar events later in the year – one for a breath mints product and at another cinema screening – the bloggers no longer got the same press pack and ‘door gift’ as the mainstream

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<sup>75</sup> Blog post, Tommy, 30 March 2007: p00820; original emphasis

<sup>76</sup> Blog post, BlogAdNet, 12 March 2007: p00822

<sup>77</sup> Blog post, BlogAdNet, 22 April 2007: p00826

<sup>78</sup> Interview with Adeline, 7 May 2009

<sup>79</sup> Blog post, Maango, 2 May 2007: p00846

<sup>80</sup> Fieldnotes dated 26 March 2008

<sup>81</sup> Fieldnotes dated 11 April 2008



media attendees.<sup>82</sup> On the 7<sup>th</sup> July, there was the first cinema screening in the format that was to become standard – an online competition that requires bloggers to use key words and phrases, and then attendance at a premiere screening.<sup>83</sup> Throughout 2008 and 2009 then, BlogAdNet organised a series of cinema screenings, competitions, restaurant nights and blogmeets, culminating in a large regional blogmeet in November 2009. This was held in Singapore, with bloggers brought in from Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and Australia (discussed in chapter VII).

## 8 How to monetise a blog?

Having outlined the general progression of blog monetisation, this section will discuss the different blog monetisation techniques, as background material and to indicate how the blog affordances relate to monetisation as well as to the personal and collective aspects of blogging. It draws upon my experience with both the *anthroblogia* and *Tropical Gardening* blogs, as well as conversations and interviews with practitioners. Overall, the different means of monetisation on blogs tend to exploit similar affordances; these general points will be discussed in the first subsection (8.1; below), and in the further subsections below the specific points relating to particular forms of monetisation will be discussed where appropriate.

### 8.1 Affordances and monetisation

The most relevant affordance is the hyperlink, and the primary purpose of most advertisements is to induce the web user to click on a link that will take them to the advertiser's site. The cost-per-click (CPC) model (which pays a fixed amount per click on a hyperlink) means that the 'click-through rate' (CTR) is of central concern to both advertisers and bloggers. It determines revenue for the latter, and is a measurable return on investment (ROI) for the former. The reciprocal relations that often prevail between bloggers could benefit them when it comes to increasing the CTR – however, it is strictly forbidden to click on one's own advertisements, as well as to ask others to click on advertisements (Google 2010a) – this is one respect in which the monetisation can be said to changing existing practices that stabilise blog assemblages. This is usually termed 'click fraud', and shall be returned to later (Chapter VII, Section 6; p230).

The asynchronous communication and the modularity affordances mean that each blog post is a quasi-permanent, autonomous webpage, simultaneously accessible by an indefinite number of readers. Once the blog post is written, it can potentially earn income for the blogger and carry the advertisers' message indefinitely – the latter point is a distinct advantage for advertisers as

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<sup>82</sup> Fieldnotes dated 14 August, 20 August 2008

<sup>83</sup> Fieldnotes dated 8 July 2008

compared to the mainstream media where advertising is always transitory. The more blog posts there are, the more opportunities to attract traffic: one example of this is a blog post on *anthroblogia* entitled “Blogging and Democratization in Malaysia – Forum and book launch” – according to an installed counter, this has received as many as 154,054 readers<sup>84</sup> over about two years. Typically, an old post plays little role in the ongoing interactivity between the blogger and the readers, but it continues to contribute to the reader statistics of the blog and provide a location for advertisement display.

The accessibility and personalisation affordances mean that any person with access to the internet can easily set up a blog and thus potentially earn an income. In practice, a significant amount of time needs to be invested: for example, Haliza reported spending about four hours a day writing for her blog, and she was supported by her husband who also managed the technical aspects of the blog and relations with advertisers. Learning the techniques for maximising advertising revenue takes time too; if one knows where to look, they are mostly available for free, but one monetisation model is to sell such information to others seeking to monetise their blog (see ‘Problogging’ below – section 8.4; p107). Another time-consuming activity is interacting with other bloggers: a tried and tested technique for attracting visitors is to comment on other blogs, and/or to join one or more blogtals and engage with other bloggers there. For the *Tropical Gardening* blog, I joined a blogtal called ‘Blotanical’<sup>85</sup> and was able to establish some relations with bloggers there, some of whom linked to me in their blogrolls.

Anonymity is affected by monetisation in that, at least with regards to the advertisement provider, it is impossible to maintain anonymity if the blogger wants to get paid. Andy mentioned that they would keep bloggers’ details confidential, but in practice had not had any situation where a leading blogger was anonymous (*op. cit.*), so it is not clear how potential advertisers would react to a blogger wishing to maintain anonymity.

## **8.2 Advertisements**

There are different types of advertisements. Google AdSense offers ‘contextual’ advertisements – these return advertisements (generally text) based on keywords appearing in the text of the web page; as in the example seen in Screenshot 1, they appear alongside the main post. Advertisers place bids to have their advertisements appear on webpages with particular keywords, and can also

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<sup>84</sup> As of 21 December 2010. The mechanics of this particular counter is slightly opaque – the true number of readers may range between 38,000 and 154,000.

<sup>85</sup> <http://www.blotanical.com/>

specify the location and language of the users to whom they will appear. The importance of keywords means that these advertisements are best exploited by SEO techniques. In the extreme, these result in ‘splogs’ (spam blogs), which exist only to attract traffic using key words and strategic hyperlinking.



**Screenshot 1: Example of Google contextual text advertisements on the *Tropical Gardening* blog (2 December 2010)**

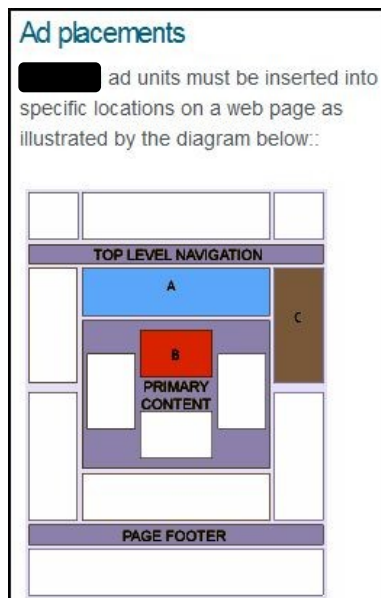
The more measured way to benefit from this type of advertisement is through the niche blog, which focuses on particular topics. When I started my ‘Tropical Gardening’ blog, I carefully chose the name, the subtitle, and most posts refer to ‘tropical’, ‘organic’, ‘gardening’, ‘compost’, and so on. I also used Latin names and the different versions of common names for plants, and inserted ‘alt tags’ (descriptions of the pictures) into their html code, meaning that the pictures were more likely to appear in image searches. Combined with the efforts mentioned above regarding creating relations with other blogs, this was relatively successful with my blog eventually appearing in the first page of Google (the gold standard of SEO) for some of these search strings; for example, a search for “organic tropical gardening” returned my blog as second of about 315,000 results (search dated 14 December 2010).

The other most common type of advertisement is the banner advertisement. This may be contextual (as in the case of AdSense), but the BlogAdNet advertisements are typically displayed regardless of the day-to-day content of the blog. However, the blogs would be chosen based on the size and type of the perceived readership of the blog, and the general topics discussed – for example, Haliza was chosen to advertise formula milk for babies, as she blogs about her two children and family life in general (*op. cit.*). The effectiveness of banner advertisements is generally not considered to be high (e.g. Nielsen 2007), however, they continue to be used on the same basis that many other advertisements are used, to increase brand awareness. ‘Rich media’ advertisements that invite interaction, for example asking readers to shoot moving targets on the banner ads, are used to increase the CTR.

### 8.2.1 Advertisement positioning

The positioning of advertisements on blogs is important, and the modularity affordance plays an important role in this regard. Screenshot 2 shows the places in which BlogAdNet requires that advertisements be positioned on the blog, so that their visibility is maximised. This is monitored, and

on one occasion I received an automated email from BlogAdNet suggesting that I readjust the positioning of the advertisements on one blog because “advertisers have chosen not to place ads on your blog due to the suboptimal placement of your Skyscraper unit [the vertical banner], or perhaps due to the clutter that surrounds your ad unit.”<sup>86</sup> Google AdSense also offers options to place advertisements within blog posts, and between them. Overall, the blogger has to balance displaying as many advertisements as possible without putting off readers.



Screenshot 2: Required positioning of BlogAdNet advertisements

### 8.3 Advertorials

As in other media, the great majority of blog readers ignore advertisements, and advertorials address this issue. As will be discussed in Chapter VII, the blog advertorial developed from the non-monetised ‘consumer post’. The closest parallel for the blog advertorial is the newspaper advertorial, and there is a correspondence with infomercials on television, and plugs in cinema. One respondent, who is also a journalist, said “Advertorials in newspapers you tend to write it like a news piece [...] on blogs they let you personalise it;”<sup>87</sup> thus the advertorial, written in the personal style, tells us something about the blog as a medium – as does the advertorial in the newspaper, which tells us that the newspaper is about ‘news’ (new, sensational, important, etc.). The principle is that an advertising message is contained within a typical text common to that medium or genre – thus masking the paid nature of the advertising message.

<sup>86</sup> Email, 18 March 2010

<sup>87</sup> Interview with Alvin, 1 October 2009

Whether or not the advertorial is ‘disclosed’, i.e. that the paid nature of the post is made clear, is a contentious matter and one which also highlights some of the differences between the mainstream media and blogging. Most bloggers practice disclosure, but in a discreet manner, typically using a tag or category which may be explicit – saying ‘Advertorial’ – or more ambiguous, for example saying ‘Lunch money’. Chee Keong was the most ironic in his category, which was “Live! Tonight! Sold out!!”<sup>88</sup> – this was doubly ironic in that it indexes the paid nature of the post in a self-critical manner that is however not obvious to the casual reader. The issue of disclosure, which is an example of boundary work, shall be returned to later (Chapter VII, Section 4.2; p218).

The earliest examples of advertorials in Malaysia (though they were not called that then) were from PayPerPost (as discussed above in section 7.1; p103). Parts of the PayPerPost Terms and Conditions demonstrate the way in which there is a desire to retain, or simulate, the authenticity of the blog. For example, the “Posting regulations” state that “Each PayPerPost post must be immediately preceded and immediately followed by at least one non-sponsored, original content post” (PayPerPost 2008a); in addition, their “Best practices” section says in regard to reviewing products or services of which the blogger has not had first-hand experience, “don’t go overboard and create ‘personal’ experiences [...] readers are smart folks – if your content seems insincere, it loses meaning and will lead to lower traffic” (PayPerPost 2008b).

For BlogAdNet bloggers, there is a similar concern with avoiding excessive advertorials, but there is a shift in emphasis. PayPerPost primarily offers clients a means to place contextualised links on the Web, the posts are typically short (two or three paragraphs), and spread across scores of blogs. However, BlogAdNet advertorials are limited to a small number of bloggers, relatively long, and developed through a negotiation between the blogger and the client; they are timed to appear in coordination with a campaign and one condition is that the advertorial stays on top of the blog for at least 48 hours, because the most recent post always gets the most attention. The payment for BlogAdNet advertorials is significantly higher than PayPerPost: James explained that usually the lowest payment is RM500 (USD150), and the highest could be RM4,500 (USD1,360)<sup>89</sup> per advertorial (*op. cit.*). By comparison, the median Malaysian monthly income in 2010 was reported to be RM2,830 (Mahavera 2010).

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<sup>88</sup> However, in December 2010 this seems to have been changed to ‘Sponsored Post’, after a switch to a new template. He also had ‘advertorial’ as a tag.

<sup>89</sup> All US dollar values reflect the exchange rate at the time (1RM = 3.3USD), and are approximate only.

The interactive affordance is particularly relevant to advertorials. It was reported that the comments were of interest to the clients, and BlogAdNet filters and compiles them for reports back to the clients. In addition, Nicky explained that she had been asked to enable comments on the advertorials, although she had previously made a decision to disable them.<sup>90</sup>

### 8.3.1 Public relations review

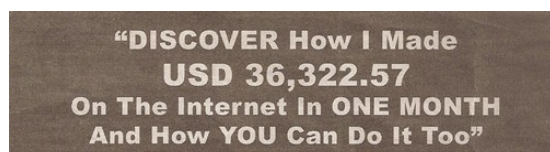
This is different from the advertorial in that it is not paid for directly. Instead, the blogger is offered a free product to review, or is invited to a product launch or other public relations event. The hope is that the blogger is going to write about it, but when they are not paid, the bloggers do not feel obliged to do so. Tommy explained:

ads are where I get paid money, PR [public relations] is where I'm not paid money. PR I have a choice not to write about it [...] If I don't like it [...] I won't write anything bad about it, but I won't write about it at all (*op. cit.*).

Tommy's attitude reflects his superior bargaining position, and Adeline similarly reported getting invitations for such events a few times a week (*op. cit.*). For the lower traffic bloggers the opportunity to attend an event at which celebrities (bloggers and otherwise) will be present, the door gifts, the free cinema tickets, free beer, and other non-cash rewards could be the main incentives.

## 8.4 Problogging

There is a particular type of monetisation process for blogs that is often identified as 'problogging' (short for 'professional blogging'). The



**Plate 6: Snippet of advertisement for Blog Boot Camp; *The Sun*, 17 February 2009**

meaning of this is varied: it may just mean doing some monetisation of a blog or, more often, it refers to the practice of developing a blog solely in order to monetise it. Apart from signing up for a mailing list and tracking some

probloggers online,<sup>91</sup> during my fieldwork I also attended a 'Blogging Boot camp', which was a free session that enticed people with the possibility of making more than USD36,000 in a month (Plate 6). The methods proposed at the 'Boot camp' were mostly a composite of those I had come across online.

<sup>90</sup> Interview with Nicky, 26 October 2010

<sup>91</sup> e.g. <http://www.johnchow.com/>

Based on those I had followed online, I expected the emphasis to be on creating content and maintaining an audience through answering comments and responding to reader interests; however, the speakers started out with a clearly different objective, saying that “blogs are just another form of website creation” and that they were “not interested in [...] personalised blogs [...] there are millions of them but none of them make money [...] we are here to learn how to make money from blogs.”<sup>92</sup> One speaker explained that he had had up to 600 blogs at one point, and mentioned various techniques: providing advertising space, gaining commissions from Amazon.com, affiliate schemes, accumulating ‘virtual real estate’, selling ebooks, writing blog posts for money, and selling links. The fundamental premise was to build a number of blogs – because they are the easiest way to build a website – and to use SEO techniques to make those blogs generate revenue. He even argued that you need not write anything, writers could be paid and an example was given of how he had been able to sell a blog for USD1000 “without ever personally writing a single word.”

This approach to monetising blogs emphasises the commodification of the blog (for example as ‘virtual real estate’) and the manipulation of search engines in order to channel the audience towards advertisements. Another significant aspect of problogging that was not emphasised at the session is the ‘multi-level marketing’ (MLM) component inherent in affiliate schemes whereby the recruitment of a ‘down-stream’ of distributors is rewarded by shares of their commissions too. The unstated goal of the session was to recruit people to pay RM4,000 (USD1,200) for the training, and to enter a ‘profit sharing’ scheme whereby they would pay a further RM5,000 (USD1,500) once they had been able to make more than RM15,000 (USD4,550) from their blogs.

Although some bloggers identified themselves as ‘probloggers’, this appellation took on a negative meaning for many, albeit that they would happily engage in particular problogging practices. This relates to the principle of disinterestedness as discussed earlier, but it was clear that as time went on, monetisation became more prevalent and normalised, shifting the boundaries of ‘problogging’.

In terms of affordances, pseudonymity becomes more common for probloggers – some bloggers reported to me that they had opened blogs just to make money, but preferred to keep them separate and did not share them with their normal readers. The ease of duplication also assists the creation of a multitude of blogs – material can be easily sourced online, adapted superficially and then presented as original content.

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<sup>92</sup> This, and all notes related to this event, are from fieldnotes dated 19 February 2010

## **8.5 Selling links**

Of all the techniques I experimented with, this was the most effective means to monetise my blogs. The process was easy: after signing up with a company<sup>93</sup> and getting my blog approved – their basic criteria are that the blog is at least three months old, has a certain level of activity, and uses original material – I would occasionally receive an email asking me to put a link on my blog sidebar. The company charges a 50% commission on fees charged to the client, which are based on various factors such as the number of incoming links, the average traffic, and Google PR.

Selling links is not welcomed by search engines, and Google explicitly creates a disincentive for it by downgrading the PR of sites that it can detect as doing so. It states that “Buying and selling links is a normal part of the economy of the web when done for advertising purposes, and not for manipulation of search results. Links purchased for advertising should be designated as such” (Google 2010b). The latter can be done by inserting some code to ensure that the search engine ‘spiders’ do not take the link into account.

I was also contacted directly a few times with offers to pay for a link. I did not take up one because it was from a minor, and another because I was not sure of the quality of the website. Some other bloggers offer links for sale, and one well-known Malaysian blogger did so for her blogroll. In February 2009 she advertised a promotion, two months for the price of one on her blogroll; although this is unusual, there were no remarks in the 26 comments left – suggesting general acceptance of her link selling.<sup>94</sup>

## **8.6 Blogshops and others**

There are other ways of monetising blogs. One that became more common while I was doing my fieldwork was the ‘blogshops’ – this is where someone uses a blog as a platform to sell goods directly. The most common are those that sell clothes, sourced perhaps in Thailand, or at wholesalers. Some bloggers, such as Nicky – who emphasise fashion in their blog – would occasionally sell clothes they had been given for photoshoots or purchases they no longer wanted.

Like the probloggers, for blogshops one main reason to use blogs is the ease of use. However, it is suitable for someone who is selling short runs of stock, but not for a shop that would keep a regular wide variety of stock, as only the most recent are displayed on the front pages. Some also sell offline, either in brick and mortar operations (Plate 7), or in flea markets.

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<sup>93</sup> <http://www.text-link-ads.com/>

<sup>94</sup> Blog post, Maango, 18 February 2009: p00505





**Plate 7: A shop that provides stock from a number of blogshops, February 2011.**

There were also other schemes that promised either money or visits in return for visits. One such scheme would guarantee a certain number of visits based on the registered user visiting other blogs. These schemes also offered visits for money, bypassing the need to pay for visits by visiting other blogs; one could also store up points that could then be sold for cash.<sup>95</sup> One such scheme discussed by Faizal (*op. cit.*) required one hundred clicks per day in order to remain part of the scheme. Some bloggers also have a 'tip jar', but the likelihood of this providing significant income is minimal.

## 9 Conclusions

Some broad conclusions can be drawn regarding blogging in Malaysia: over the last decade there has been a rapid growth of the number of blogs, a broadening of genres, integration with mainstream media, an increasingly significant role in the public sphere, and its use as an advertising medium has become mostly normalised. This chapter has also argued for the identification of different stages of development. However, as discussed earlier, a historical narrative inevitably imposes a certain chronological linearity, and a misleading teleology may result from the perspective of hindsight.

<sup>95</sup> e.g. <http://entrecard.com/>

The first mistake would be to assume a prelapsarian non-monetised past of blogging. One of the earliest traces of collective blogging practices, the creation of PPS, was also done with the intention of generating income for the bloggers involved, and beyond that, it is clear that every blogger has always lived in a world where generating an income through engaging with the market economy is defined as one of life's primary goals. With regards to monetisation in particular, although there was evidently a time when nobody made money from blogs, and this activity increased over time, it is difficult to isolate monetisation as a causal factor. Based on the evidence, most bloggers were always ready to accept income for their blogging, but this was not possible until audience numbers were large enough. As the audience increases, as the mainstream media use blogs as stories, as political interests seek to construct narratives and discourses, and as monetisation opportunities increase, there is a constellation of causal vectors over which each blogger navigates their own journey.

Most of the audience of the earlier bloggers were bloggers themselves, and thus there was a process of recursively localised exponential growth, as personal bloggers engage in consociation, and assemble themselves into relatively stabilised assemblage. In a similar manner, BlogAdNet was able to capture the attention of both bloggers and clients by developing a localised advertising service that became entangled with existing socialities and assemblages.

Most historical analysis revolves around the shifting control of resources – be they physical or discursive. The accessibility affordance of blogs has however meant that the relevant resources are virtually unlimited – any person who can go online is in a position to create multiple blogs without detracting from any other blogger's opportunities within the blogosphere. This has resulted in a particular dynamic whereby any conflict, such as over what constitutes proper blogging practices, is mostly defused by the often expressed assertions – 'I can do what I want with my blog,' and, 'If you don't like my blog, make your own.' However, by definition, monetisation does introduce a resource of limited value into the blogosphere and it can bring together those who choose to compete for access to the monetary rewards, but still there are many who can ignore it completely and be unaffected. Thus the blogosphere both increases in size, and becomes more decentred, as time passes, making it more and more difficult to identify any particular causal factors that are relevant across all blogs.

The following chapters attempt to answer questions about the influence of the monetisation of blogs, each one focusing on a different perspective of personal blogging and drawn together by a

common focus on the obligatory passage points of the blog affordances, the socio-geographical space of the Malaysian blogosphere, the personal blog genre, and the exchange of blogging labour for money.

# V. The blogger and her blog: (dis)assembling the relational self

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## 1 Introduction

As argued above (Chapter II, Section 3.2; p15), the personal blog is particularly connected to self-expression, and often framed in terms of authenticity. The personalisation affordance enables the blogger to dispense with gatekeepers and communicate directly, and the multimodal affordance allows a range of creative expression; however, the disembodiment, and potential for anonymity, allows her more latitude in terms of diverging from an habitual offline performance. Therefore, a common question is whether or not the blog is truly representing the self of the blogger, or, what aspects of it can be expressed. I have also suggested that a blog can be considered as an assemblage with expressive and autonomous properties. Thus, in this chapter I firstly describe the structural components of a blog, and then consider how the blog operates as a relatively autonomous assemblage within the internet. Then some sub-genres of the personal blog are proposed, their relation to affordances, and how they are examples of personal bloggers' self-expression.

If the blog not only reflects, but influences, the blogger, then a second question then arises: is there an authentic, unitary, self that *can* be represented? Many analyses of presentations of the self online owe a heavy debt to Erving Goffman's theories of the presentation of the self (1990 [1959]),<sup>96</sup> particularly in terms of the 'front' and 'back regions' – often referred to as the front and back 'stage' – and the inability online to read the social context fully. In the "front region," (*ibid.*: 107-111) actors undertake impression management, tailoring their performance to the location and audience present, and adjusting it according to their verbal and non-verbal reactions. The "back region" (*ibid.*: 113-22) is where the person is aware of the qualified nature of the performance, and where choices are made about what to bring into public view. Hugh Miller (1995) provided an early analysis in relation to home pages. Brake discusses blogs, arguing that Goffman was primarily concerned with face-to-face interaction, and thus the disjunction between the blogger and his audience means that the role of the medium needs to be accounted for (2009: 58–63). Bernie Hogan also argues similarly, proposing "the metaphor of an exhibition rather than one of a stage play" (2010: 384) – based on

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<sup>96</sup> See Hogan (2010: 379) for a list of thirteen such works.

the inability of the person to monitor reactions to their performance, and the presence of a third party ‘curator’ (e.g. a social networking site) that orders and filters the content in some manner.

This thesis will not engage in depth with the Goffmanian approach, but nonetheless, the key insight from Goffman is that people are able to more finely hone particular presentations by taking advantage of particular blog affordances – in particular asynchronicity. The focus here will be on the concept of a unitary self that is implicit in many of these studies. For example, Huffaker & Calvert (2005) argue that teenagers are not likely to disguise their identity, and see the blog as a means for them “to try on different facets of *who they will become*” (n.p.: emphasis added). This assumption of an eventual stable identity relates to a concern with authenticity.

In this regard, an early well-known argument is by Sherry Turkle who explores the psychosocial potentials of the “flexible self” (1996: 261), but her work focuses on people who create whole characters online in role-playing games, which does not relate to personal bloggers who explicitly connect their online presence with their offline lives. The discussion here will centre on the concept of the ‘dividual self’; this developed from a concern with avoiding the imposition of the western category of the individual on non-western sociocultural contexts – in India (Marriott, cited in Wagner 2008: 172), and in Melanesia for Strathern’s partible person (1990: 324), and Roy Wagner’s fractal person (2008). These studies show how alternatives to the unitary, individual, self predate the internet; however, here I will argue that it is also useful for understanding blogging, and draw upon Deleuze’s (1992) argument in the context of digital technologies, where he proposes the ‘dividual’ as an alternative to Foucault’s individual subject, formed in a disciplinary society.

The other aspects of the wider assemblage, the audience, other blogs, and so on, are bracketed out for the moment. In the following chapters, the blog will be placed in the context of other blogs and bloggers, and then in the context of monetisation.

## **2 The assembled blog**

To provide context, and as a guide to blog terminology, this section outlines the basic elements of a blog. Plate 8 is an annotated screenshot of my *Tropical Gardening* blog. Although it is a niche (hobby) blog, rather than a personal blog, it is used here because it is hosted on a commonly used platform –blogspot.com, and displays all of the typical structural components of a personal blog too.

Creating a blog is almost as easy as opening an email account, and there are many pre-designed themes as well as 'plug-ins' (i.e. additional components) available. The modularity affordance is demonstrated here, and also provides a practical example of the blog as assemblage – each of the components are programmed semi-autonomous 'chunks' of code. Bloggers will already have some notion of how they want their blog to appear, based on reading others, and therefore the result will be a combination of their use of the affordances, and derivations of other blogs (as discussed in Chapter II, Section 6.3; p49).

At the top of the screen, the header can be a picture, some text, or both. It appears on all of the pages of the blog, and can usually be clicked on to return to the main page. The subheading is optional, but many bloggers will have something there – usually a description of the purpose of the blog, or an idiosyncratic statement that reveals something of the character of the blogger. Plate 9 shows an example, and there are more in Appendix E; it is also relevant to note that the title and subheading play a significant role in the way the blog is indexed in search engines.

# Tropical Gardening

About a tropical garden in Malaysia, South East Asia. Maintained by an amateur gardener and his partner who make their own organic compost, grow flowers and vegetables, and have two

Header

Subheading

Compost Turning Equipment

The Industry Leader in The Organic Processing Arena for Over 30 Years

www.wildcatmfg.com

Amusement Parks

Find list of amusement parks, water parks & theme parks in Malaysia.

www.701panduan.com

Bird Control

Only the Bird Buffer guarantees safe automated 96% bird control.

www.birdbuffer.com

Banner advertisement (Google context related)

Monday, February 1, 2010

On an extended leave of absence...

Latest blog post

Sticky post

JORGE CHAM@THE STANFORD DAILY

(Source: [PHD Comics by jorge cham](#))

Thanks for dropping by :)

I am now in the process of writing up my PhD, and will only be able to do very intermittent updates of this blog. Please explore the archives (below right) for our experiences in organic tropical gardening and, if you like, visit my other blog [anthroblogia](#) where I will be posting a *bit* more often.

Posted by julian at 9:54 AM 5 comments

Ads by Google

Annual Seed

Tree Seeds

Herb Garden

Angel Seeds

Trumpet Seed

Sunday, December 20, 2009

Organic mealy bug repellent

Previous blog post

In the previous post I identified the [Papaya mealy bug - Paracoccus Marginatus](#) on our papaya.

So - I checked out what are the possible organic responses and found some good resources:

Skyscraper ad

About Me

Profile

Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia

[View my complete profile](#)

Other tropical gardeners

Blogroll

Fairegarden

Twiggy

Frederick's Orchid Flowers

Vanda Fuchs Delight

Garden Chronicles

Spicy Jatropa

Greenlandhome

Interested in Exchanging??

Growing vegetables with us

Body

Sidebar

Plate 8: Blog layout example

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On the main page the most recent entries, or ‘posts’ are displayed in reverse chronological order, either in their totality, or with an initial portion as a preview with a link that can be clicked to access the full post. In the example given, the first post is a ‘Sticky post’, which means that it will not scroll down. This can be done when there is a need to stop that post from disappearing over time, for example when organising an event, or – as on *anthroblogia* – to keep my research disclosure visible.



Plate 9: Example of a banner

The sidebar is a column (sometimes two) displayed alongside the body of the blog. Like the header, it is constant in every page of the blog. Typically, it contains: the profile; the blogroll; a ‘hits counter’ (a display of the number of readers); navigational tools in the form of an archive or tags; various ‘widgets’ – small applications that perform a limited function such as displaying a countdown to a child’s birth, a music player, the provenance of readers, etc.; ‘buttons’ – these are mostly small static images that announce an affiliation to particular portals or causes, services or perhaps displaying awards (see Appendix F for examples). Other possible side bar items are a chatbox (synchronous chat), and pictures. Herring *et al.* note the significance of the sidebar: “Archives [...] and badges [or ‘buttons’] [...] are found in a clear majority of blogs. These are not, to our knowledge, characteristic of any other Web genre” (2004: 7).

The default template provides for a ‘Profile’, or ‘About me’ section (due to space restrictions, Plate 8 only has a link to the profile). Bloggers typically have a photo or visual avatar, a short self-description, and may indicate their motivation for blogging. In the profile, one immediately gets a sense of how much they want to reveal about themselves, and they may also invite people to contact them (see Plate 10 for the one I created). 63.5% of the bloggers in the myBlogS survey displayed their real name on their blog, and this is most likely to be on the profile.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>97</sup> Only 10.1% were fully anonymous – i.e. did not have photos, or any way to know who they are.





**Plate 10: Profile example**

The header, subheading, and sidebar are areas where the template specifically provides for customisation, and prompts the user to do. As such, they are an important index of the ways in which the blogger wishes to display taste, particular affiliations, and/or public stances. Many of these components can also be connections to other assemblages: the blogroll connects to other blogs, while the relations evoked by the buttons cross on- and offline boundaries in both semiotic-expressive and machinic (when hyperlinked) connections to political causes, charities, blog collectives, and so on. Usually, however, they are not changed frequently, which explains the often limited significance of blogrolls (e.g. Schmidt 2007a). It is also a good location for advertisements, which connect with another complex of assemblages, and for which the motivations may be entirely different (further discussed in Chapter VII).

## **2.1 The blog post**

Each blog post is also a separate webpage, and the title of the blog post is usually also the 'permalink' – the hyperlinked URL of the webpage. Plate 11 shows a typical blog post:<sup>98</sup> the body of the post contains text, image(s) and can also have embedded video; the comments are displayed below, each with a time stamp and the name of the commenter – who may choose to leave a link to their blog or profile. When there are many comments, it is necessary to scroll down to read them all. The answers to the comments may be 'nested' – i.e. replies are displayed indented below the relevant comment<sup>99</sup> – or, as in this case, the answers appear grouped in one comment below and the reader has to scan up the page to see the comments to which the answers are referring.

<sup>98</sup> Due to lack of space, the header is not seen in this example.

<sup>99</sup> For an example, see Chapter VII, Section 4.2.1; p230

Typically, comments will be made in the most recent post, and die off after a day or two – thus the conversation around the post most mostly happens within a day or two of it being published, or until the next post is published. Usually, bloggers appreciate having comments, which at the least are evidence of a somewhat appreciative audience. Depending on the blogger, the comments may or may not all be answered (Baumer *et al.* 2008). In Plate 11, one of the comments has been removed, but there is a trace of it – it would also be possible to remove it without leaving any trace. In this case, I deleted it because it was a private communication that was not appropriate for the comments area, but spam and abusive comments would be the most common reason for deletion. Some different ways of responding to comments and their implications for collective practices are discussed in the next chapter (Chapter VI, Section 4.1; p152).

Monday, February 1, 2010

On an extended leave of absence...

Blog post

Sticky post

JORGE CHAM @THE STANFORD DAILY

(Source: [PHD Comics by jorge cham](#))

Thanks for dropping by :)

I am now in the process of writing up my PhD, and will only be able to do very intermittent updates of this blog. Please explore the archives (below right) for our experiences in organic tropical gardening and, if you like, visit my other blog [anthroblogia](#) where I will be posting a *bit* more often.

Posted by julian at 9:54 AM

5 comments:

lotusleaf said...

Good luck with your Ph.D. thesis!

February 1, 2010 5:56 PM

julian said...

Thanks lotusleaf ! :D

February 4, 2010 11:51 AM

Su said...

This post has been removed by a blog administrator.

February 9, 2010 10:35 AM

Dirty Girl Gardening said...

Good luck with your PHD!

February 11, 2010 1:41 AM

julian said...

Su - I removed your comment and answered by email. Thanks for your interest :)

Dirty Girl Gardening - thanks! I'll be needing it :/

February 11, 2010 10:19 AM

Comments area

LAUGH IT UP WITH GUINNESS® THIS ST. PATRICK'S!

1 Utama, PJ  
Fri, 19 March  
6pm onwards

Click for all the rib-tickling details!

GUINNESS

About Me

Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia

[View my complete profile](#)

A pet needs a home

Widget

Save This Animal!

Teddy, 5 Mths

BLOG malaysia

http://blogmalaysia.com

Bloggers Directory

FREE TRAFFIC

BlogClicker.com

Page Rank

3

Tags

[Alocasia macrorrhizos](#) [ants](#) [areca](#) [bamboo](#) [bee](#) [bird](#) [bloom](#) [blossom](#) [bract](#) [calathea](#) [chi](#)

Plate 11: A blog post

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## **2.2 Modular assembly**

The above section demonstrates the relation of the modularity and personalisation affordance. Within the limits of the template, the blogger is able to customise her blog, and her confidence grows with her experience and skill. It also demonstrates the blog as assemblage, for each time a new component is added, it affects the overall blog; in some instances, this can be dysfunctional when a new component conflicts with others, and slows down, distorts or even prevents the loading of the blog. When this happens the blogger can remove the component, or seek to rectify the issue. The latter may require more detailed knowledge of the html language, or other aspects of computer code, resulting in a greater ability to manipulate the relevant affordances.

Many plug-ins are self-installing, and can be added simply by clicking a button. However, adding advertisements usually involves adding some code to the blog template; this code will run a 'script' – a series of instructions that retrieves material located on another server to display the advertisement. Sometimes this slows down the loading of the blog, and when BlogAdNet first started, this was a bone of contention. Although BlogAdNet and other monetising services try to make it as simple as possible, some bloggers may therefore be discouraged from monetisation because of these extra steps, whereas others will necessarily learn a bit more about the underlying functioning of the blog.

## **3 The perceiving blog**

While the above section describes the structural components of a blog, this section moves to a discussion of the blog as assemblage. An assemblage presents itself as a network of sorts, and a dense network may provide more stability, but provide less opportunity of action (DeLanda 2006: 35). A blog is necessarily dense, there should be few or no redundant parts,<sup>100</sup> and it has a narrowly defined purpose. The opposite is true of the blogger who clearly has a greater range of action, for example being able to delete the blog,<sup>101</sup> and thus it is important to emphasise the difference in the potential agency of the blogger and the blog.

However, the blog continues to perceive, react and change even without the input of the blogger; indeed it can also generate an income after an initial setup. The most extreme example of this would be 'splogs' that are automated and able to draw content from RSS feeds in order to appear to

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<sup>100</sup> Redundant parts is subjective on one scale, e.g. a music player on a blog, which many readers, including myself, find extremely irritating.

<sup>101</sup> Although a cache or archived copy may persist online, the blog as positioned in a network defined by stable URLs will disappear.

search engines as if they are regularly updated (Kolari *et al.* 2006: n.p.). Similar to a molecule, or a crystal refracting light, a blog has ‘non-human expressivity’ (DeLanda 2006: 14) in the way that its affordances allow it to perceive and react immediately to the stimuli provided by data flows. A blog is reacting and changing all the time: accumulating traces of incoming traffic (displayed in the counter); fending off potential hack attempts; allowing or disallowing comments; displaying advertisements; and updating its software.

Google assigns ‘page rank’ to all websites, and this affects the number of visitors arriving ‘organically’ (i.e. spontaneously and of their own accord) from the search engine, and possibly subsequent incoming links. Although bloggers may seek to attract traffic – for example, Ibrahim explained that he used to use headlines that referred to recent items in the news, which helped his blog to appear in searches<sup>102</sup> – and skilled use of SEO techniques will improve a blog’s visibility, it is a matter of the blogger adapting to an existing assemblage whose causal relations are generated by search engine algorithms, and automated Web crawlers that interact with the blog independently of the blogger.

As argued previously, for most bloggers the blog affordances are taken as given. For example, Jaymee’s blog was initially set up as a birthday present by another more knowledgeable blogger, and she is able to customise her blog to some degree thanks to her “office full of programmers,”<sup>103</sup> but most bloggers are not so fortunate. Similarly, my brother, who is an IT professional, helped me on many occasions with my blog.

Another example is the way in which the comments area has a number of autonomous codes acting on it. Jaymee explained “I use Woopra<sup>104</sup> [...] so I can go and check who is on my blog right now, I know that they are there [even if] they just choose not to leave a comment” (*op. cit.*). Similarly, the moderation of comments (i.e. filtering comments, and determining whether they get published immediately, or need to be screened first), is sometimes done automatically. Thus Rachel, describing how she had had to enable moderation to deal with a troublesome commenter, said that

what’s good now, is after putting the comment moderation on and then taking it off is that his comments get stuck in the filter whereas everyone else’s get through [...] now the filter still remembers and it still filters him<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Interview with Ibrahim, 12 October 2009

<sup>103</sup> Interview with Jaymee, 13 October 2009

<sup>104</sup> A particular “blog tracking” software, that depends on using cookies to identify visitors.

<sup>105</sup> Interview with Rachel, 16 August 2009

What is important to note is that she did not know how this happened, only that it suited her the way it did – Magdalene and Stephanie described similar experiences too. The accessibility affordance is relevant here, and particularly the visual affordances as defined by Norman (1999). Accessibility is enhanced by presenting user-friendly interfaces, and there is a process of path dependency in that Web interfaces tend to resemble prior ones – for example, the Blogger interface is similar to an email interface. It still takes a certain effort and willingness to learn all of the intricacies of the software, and in most cases the new interface will “domesticate” (Latour 2004: 38) the blogger to a certain degree – in other words, the affordances have a territorialising influence on the blog/blogger assemblage.

The web analytics counter, that counts the number of times the blog is accessed – and, by inference, read by a person – is an important component. In relation to monetising, as will be discussed in more length later (Chapter VII, Section 2.2.1; p195), the counter is an obligatory point of passage for a blog that is to become a platform for BlogAdNet’s advertising services. However, with regards to the blogger, apart from comments, the counter is the only means to be aware of an audience. For those who pay attention to the readership (about 70%, according to the myBlogS survey), it translates what could otherwise be a personal diary into a public medium.

Bloggers therefore experience, to varying degrees, the blog as it also is – an objective, autonomous, actant. When I started *Topical Gardening* in September 2008, I had to add AdSense and Amazon affiliate functions by myself, but in April 2009 I noticed that these options were integrated into the interface. Plate 12 shows how subscribing to an Amazon affiliate scheme is presented as a naturalised option; the choices presented are to sign up, or to indicate that you already have done so – although you have to opt in, the option to say no is not as clearly presented. It is common to open the blogging interface and find that a feature has been added, or taken away. This reflects an aspect of Web activity where, more so than in many other spheres of life, users have learned to expect change as a default, and also that they have less control over interfaces that are provided for free.

However, the blog is always in a process of becoming, and it mostly does so meshed together with the blogger. The next section will look at the typical ways in which a blogger expresses herself through her personal blog, and thus address the relations between the blog and the blogger.

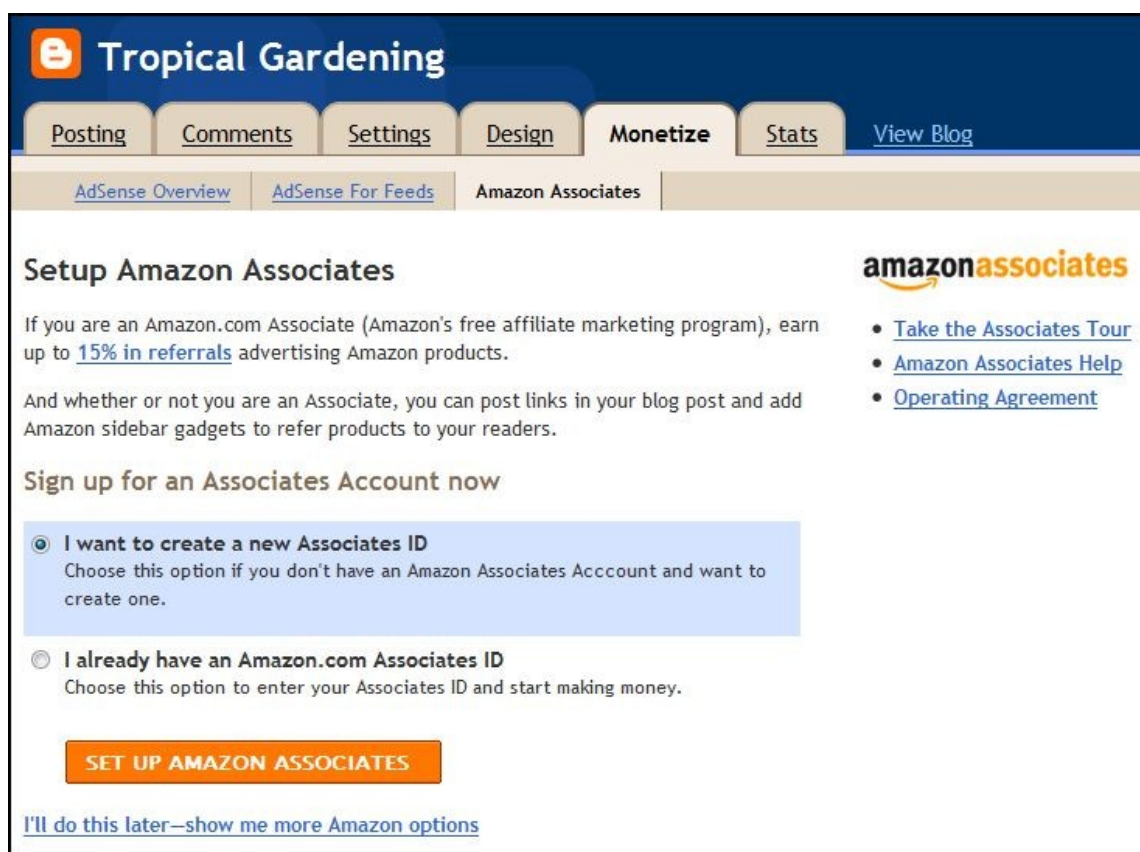


Plate 12: Blogger interface naturalises monetisation opportunities

## 4 The Malaysian personal blog

Having introduced the structural elements of a generic blog, the focus will now turn to the personal blog genre which was introduced in Chapter 2. Although there are broad similarities with similar blogs worldwide, the material in this section refers specifically to Malaysian personal blogs and a brief outline of common Malaysian blog genres is supplied in Appendix D.

In this section, I will describe some of the typical posts and forms of expression used in personal blogs – i.e. “definite and relatively stable typical forms of construction of the whole” (Bakhtin 1986 as cited in Doostdar 2004: 654). These are not only expressive forms, but also correspond to particular types of social or personal occasions, reflecting the genre as sociotechnical assemblage as outlined in Chapter II.

### 4.1 The subheadings

This first component is not a post, but the subheadings are a significant statement by the blogger with regards to what is to be expected in the blog. The uniting element of the personal blog is the uniqueness and explicit subjectiveness of the content which indexes the personality and experiences

of the blogger. Thus a blogger may talk one day about their dog, the next day about something they bought, and following that, an argument with their partner. Bloggers usually make no apologies for any bias, or partiality in their blog, and this subjectiveness is often foregrounded, as can be seen in the following examples:

my life carved out in words<sup>106</sup>

Life is like a storybook... Every storybook has its own tale... And this is the story about Harry.<sup>107</sup>

...shameless disgusting silliness!<sup>108</sup>

my views, my life, my rules! love me for who i am.<sup>109</sup>

This blog is created with 'end' and 'beginning' in mind. End in the sense that all bad stuff must come to an end. And so, it is then the beginning of all the others. It may be one hell of a roller coaster...but that's life from my perspective.<sup>110</sup>

## **4.2 The rant**

The rant presents itself as a spontaneous reaction to something that annoyed the blogger. It is usually written in a cathartic stream of consciousness manner, although the asynchronicity of the blog means that it can be very carefully thought out.<sup>111</sup> One example is a post by Jaymee about Valentine's Day, which she attacks as being commercialised and often insincere:

If you want to be romantic, take her out for a picnic lah. Put your house in her name. That's romantic. Open a joint current account, sign all the cheques and give her the cheque book. That's really fucking romantic.<sup>112</sup>

The title of a post by MaBlogger states that she wants to rant even though it's a Sunday, and starts with a warning that the post will be a long rant.<sup>113</sup> The explicit use of the term 'rant' demonstrates that readers are expected to recognise the particular expressive form the post will take.

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<sup>106</sup> Blog A, accessed 18 July 2008: b0233

<sup>107</sup> Blog B, accessed 18 July 2008: b0247

<sup>108</sup> Mary, accessed 15 August 2008: b0324

<sup>109</sup> Blog C, accessed 21 June 2008: b0111

<sup>110</sup> Blog D, accessed 20 November 2008: b0584

<sup>111</sup> Steven Vrooman has discussed some of the antecedents in internet newsgroups (2002).

<sup>112</sup> Blog post, 12 February 2009: p00717

<sup>113</sup> Blog post, 11 February 2009: p00456



### **4.3 *The random post***

The random post has elements of the rhizomatic and is a good exemplar of the Personal blog – it has no particular point, and may ramble across a few topics. Again, the apparent spontaneity may be calculated, but it may also be a response to pressures to post something within a limited time. As with the rant, it is a recognised form and may be referenced as such – for example, Adeline has a category on her blog which is “Random Musing.”<sup>114</sup> In another example, GeekMonk says “This is gonna be an oldskool style blog post with some shitty pictures I uploaded to Twitpic from my phone and a load of random jabbering, so there you go.”<sup>115</sup>

### **4.4 *Personal reflections***

These entries resemble most the type of writing that one would expect to find in the literary antecedent of the personal blog, the personal diary. They are more likely to take a considered tone, and relate their thoughts to formative personal experiences. Examples would be talking about a partner, hopes for a job, attitudes towards recycling, or friendship; another common form of this post is the ‘Review of the year’ post which highlights posts from each month of the past year, and comments and reflects on them.

Bloggers may however avoid being too ‘emo’ (short for ‘emotional’) – this generally means being introspective in a somewhat negative manner. Its negative connotations are sometimes acknowledged by an apology for being ‘emo,’ or by downplaying its importance – as Maango does in a post entitled “The long emo post,” by saying “Because it is very long so i hide it. Click to read.”<sup>116</sup>

Another example is a short post by Thomas, entitled “Denial Escapada”, where he makes a cryptic reference to “the haunting past”, and asks:

Or i am actually in denial all these while, denying the past and trying to convince myself that i'm fine with it and everything will be fine eventually ignoring the fact that IT WONT BE FREAKING FINE AT ALL.

Sigh. Its always at these times. ALWAYS. The times when i cant afford to have these.

Darn.

-comments off- <sup>117</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Adeline, accessed 23 October 2010: b0603

<sup>115</sup> Blog post, GeekMonk, 22 March 2010: p00801

<sup>116</sup> Blog post, Maango, 27 March 2007: p00558

<sup>117</sup> Blog post, Thomas, 27 December 2008: p0085

The last phrase – “comments off” – means that he disabled the comments for that post, probably to avoid having to field any questions.<sup>118</sup> Discussing posts of this type, he said that for “very personal” things, he “will write it in a way that, mmm, not many people will understand it.”<sup>119</sup> Thus, by disabling the comments, and using cryptic references, he is diluting some of the impact of having a public blog.

This circumscription of personal revelations is also reported by Nicky, who said that she has a second blog “that’s password protected; that one [is] all for myself. But I’ve stopped writing on it because I’m not so emotional anymore [hehe]!”<sup>120</sup> In addition, Nicky has a third blog which is not password protected, but only some friends know about it. About 10% of the bloggers in the myBlogS survey reported having a password protected blog.<sup>121</sup>

These examples highlight the selective recounting of personal experiences and thoughts. Not only are overly introspective posts considered less suitable for public consumption, but the content shared is usually carefully considered – especially by the bloggers with larger audiences.

#### **4.5 Social occasions**

The myBlogS survey showed that the most common blogging topics were ‘Friends’ and ‘Events.’<sup>122</sup> A personal blog will often contain references, usually with photos, to meeting friends, going to a restaurant, attending weddings, going out to a club, and so on. For example, in one post Chee Keong recounts meeting another blogger, who has a chronic disease and uses her blog to help raise money – there are some photos of them at the restaurant, he plugs her cause, and also shows some bottles of alcohol that a reader of his in the USA passed to her, to pass to him.<sup>123</sup> This example also highlights the ways in which online relations between bloggers can extend to offline connections too.

References to family would come under this category too, but the personal blogs I observed did not usually discuss family much. It was more notable amongst younger bloggers, and some of the interviewees noted that they blogged less about their family as their readership grew, in order to respect their privacy and avoid negative ramifications – thus Nicky recounted that her mother, a schoolteacher, was embarrassed by revelations on her blog that pupils read (*op. cit.*). A notable

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<sup>118</sup> A practice mentioned by a couple of interviewees

<sup>119</sup> Interview with Thomas, 13 August 2009

<sup>120</sup> Interview with Nicky, 26 October 2010

<sup>121</sup> See Questions 11 & 12: Appendix A – Survey responses

<sup>122</sup> See Question 16: Appendix A – Survey responses

<sup>123</sup> Blog post, Chee Keong, 29 January 2009: p00378

exception to this is Magdalene who often featured her family, and they would also leave comments in her blog. She explained that her parents “were always very involved” in her blog as she had initially started her blog to keep in touch with her family and friends (when she went overseas to university). Sometimes she cannot write everything she wants because they read it, but she also reflected that maybe she blogged about her family because “now that I am working and everything, there are so many things that I cannot blog about, so my family is the only thing that I feel really comfortable blogging about because there is nothing to hide there.”<sup>124</sup>

#### **4.6 *Post-blogmeet posts***

These are essentially another version of the ‘social occasion’ post, but are differentiated by a concentration on blogging and bloggers – typically there will be pictures of, comments about, and links to, other bloggers. These posts reinforce the connections made at the blogmeet, and may also be a way of enhancing status by showing photos with well-known bloggers and/or other celebrities. These posts are discussed more in the next chapter.

#### **4.7 *Camwhore post***

Often a version of the ‘social occasion’ post, this will focus on pictures of the blogger, by herself, or with friends or acquaintances. It is particularly popular amongst female bloggers, who can display their clothes and other fashion choices – one example is seen in Plate 13. In a blog post titled “Camwhore Japanese style 101,” Maango talks about a Japanese boy who

is the master of all camwhoreness. All bimbos pale in comparison. This person can come up with 100 difference poses and 100 different expressions in 10 shots. And this person is not even a girl.<sup>125</sup>

Andy, who is openly gay and a self-described camwhore writes (in response to questions from non-Malaysians) that the Malaysian understanding of camwhoring is when someone likes to take pictures of him/herself in different places, and he has examples of him camwhoring when he feels his hair is looking good, when he is visiting a new place, doing something quirky, or trying on clothes while shopping.<sup>126</sup>

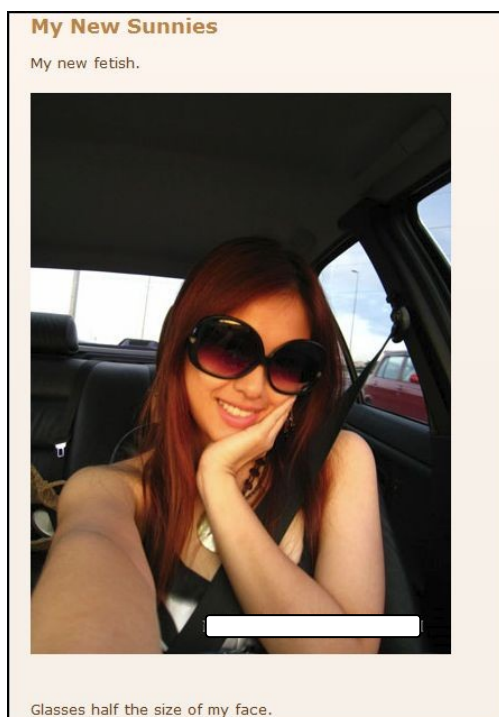
Like the ‘emo post’, excessive camwhoring is a mark of poor taste, and a criticism of one particular blogger was that she had too many photos of herself in her blog, although the blog was meant to be about travelling.

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<sup>124</sup> Interview with Magdalene, 22 October 2009

<sup>125</sup> Blog post, Maango, 10 February 2009: p00416

<sup>126</sup> Blog post, Andy, 25 December 2008: p0088



**Plate 13: Camwhoring and displaying a new purchase (Blog post, Carol, 30 December 2008: p00126)**

#### **4.8 Consumer post**

Personal bloggers will often talk about consumer goods, in a detailed review or a brief mention. It could also be a review of a film, or a restaurant, which may be combined with 'social occasion' post. A very common consumer post is the food review: talking about food is a popular Malaysian pastime – similar to the British talking about the weather – and the blogger will share some photos and opinions on the food. In another example, Adeline blogged about a satisfactory experience with a hairdresser; the post included photos of her getting her hair done, and a glowing recommendation:

The service was outstanding. Jojo was a joy. She patiently listened to my hair predicament and then told me what she could do. She was never once patronising and best of all....none of those product pushing bullshit.<sup>127</sup>

This is the type of post that has formed the basis of the advertorial, and the chapter on monetising will further discuss how it has developed in response to monetising opportunities.

#### **4.9 Filler post**

This type of post reflects the need to keep regular updates, but when the blogger has difficulty thinking of something to post about, he can do a 'filler post' – a short post with generic content. For

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<sup>127</sup> Blog post, Adeline, 10 May 2009: p00802

example, Alvin explained that he tries to vary the content, but “if you go to my blog, you’ll see certain days where there’s this one picture there and three lines, [then you’ll] know, ‘OK [Alvin struggled back there]!’ hehe.”<sup>128</sup>

Chee Keong has a ‘Filler post’ tag on his blog, and in one example posted a picture of cat sitting on a car, with a one-liner about public transport.<sup>129</sup> Explaining a related strategy, Haliza told me that she would divide up posts when she could, for example mentioning a new necklace and a new skirt in two posts, rather than doing them together.<sup>130</sup>

#### ***4.10 Living with personal blogging***

These types of posts can be called sub-genres, in that they tend to become shorthand ways of expressing particular types of life experiences. Those that involve other bloggers – such as the post-blogmeet post – are more likely to stick to regular patterns, reflecting the territorialising role of genres as sociotechnical assemblages that facilitate collective communication. Another way in which these sub-genres reflect wider social patterns is in their widespread avoidance of political issues. This may be done in order to avoid alienating any readers, but also for more practical reasons – as Haliza explained, “we are in Malaysia right, so we can’t speak out so loud” and referred to RPK, a notorious SoPo blogger now in self-exile, saying “so, because of blogs, so he’s now have to be running away from the country;”<sup>131</sup> for Rachel, however, her blog gave her the opportunity to express herself more because, as she said, “in Malaysia, you don’t have the opportunity to open your mouth so much.”<sup>132</sup>

These different stances highlight the heterogeneity of bloggers, and as with the previous discussion on genre, these categories of sub-genres are not presented as representational but rather as ways to understand the different ways in which personal bloggers express themselves – very often, any particular post will be a combination of the different types. Overall, perhaps the personal blog is the best example of rhizomatic expression in blogs, in that it can range over any topic that touches upon the blogger’s life in any way – from intense, physical or emotional experiences to references to passing interests and ephemeral internet ‘memes’.

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<sup>128</sup> Interview with Alvin, 1 October 2009

<sup>129</sup> Blog post, Chee Keong, 13 March 2009: p00699

<sup>130</sup> Fieldnotes dated 13 December, 2008

<sup>131</sup> Interview with Haliza, 16 October 2009

<sup>132</sup> Interview with Rachel, 16 August 2009

Having a personal blog means finding topics to write about, and I found that – with the repeated process of publishing blog posts – I started to be on the lookout for topics to blog about in the course of everyday happenings; similarly, a blogger at a blogmeet explained to me that he feels that he has to blog, so he would look for things to blog about during the day, for example his daughter, or anything.<sup>133</sup> Reed also mentions this integration of the prosaic into the creative process of blogging, and notes how “blog subjects are said to come instantaneously, without forethought, simply as a consequence of the senses being activated” (2008: 397). This process brings to mind Deleuze & Guattari’s notion of affection and affect; the instantaneous inspiration that Reed describes has parallels with affection and he also noted that “individuals find that they begin to collapse the moment of stimulation with the moment of posting” (2008: 401). Thus the process of transforming affection to affect occurs immediately – raising “lived affections to the affect” (Deleuze & Guattari 1994: 170) – and possibly resulting in a blog post.

However, there is the attempt here to reproduce uninhibited affection and perception, but the subject is reinforced, and not elided as Deleuze & Guattari imply artists do, saying:

the aim of art is to wrest the percept from perceptions of objects and the states of a perceiving subject, to wrest the affect from affections as the transition from one state to another: to extract a bloc of sensations, a pure being of sensations (1994: 167).

The difference is that the personal blogger usually does not propose their blog post as a generic, or universal, representation of affect, but instead relate it explicitly to their subjective selves, and claim the right to change their mind or attitude. As Reed argues, in terms of textual production, bloggers are not easily classifiable: “bloggers claim to occupy every subject position in the neighbourhood of the text; at different times they identify as what [anthropologist Alfred] Gell would term artists, prototypes, recipients and indexes” (2005: 225). That is, they produce the blog – as artists – but often the prototype, that which they are representing, is also themselves or unique subjective experiences; in addition they read – as recipients – other blogs, and also may claim that their blog is themselves (an index). As Nicky said, “Blogging is a part of myself. All the things that I have forgotten, they’re all collected there” (*op. cit.*); but she also reflected:

I mean the blog is *me* [...] I’m the only one writing it. But [...] from reading other people’s blogs, I know that you cannot expect the same person to be what you perceive them to be [...] I’m not always like

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<sup>133</sup> Fieldnotes dated 13 December, 2008

my blog, I'm not always like crazy happy, no I have my tired days as well, I have my days when I just wanna sit down and keep quiet (*op. cit.*; original emphasis).

There is a dynamic between the blog and the blogger. The personalisation potentially renders a blog uniquely indexical of the blogger, and the asynchronous and interactive affordances encourage regular blogging. A well-read blog needs to be updated regularly (e.g. more than half of the respondents of the myBlogS survey indicated a blog should be updated a few times a week – see Appendix A: Q8) and bloggers therefore are continually mining their daily experiences for content, looking for experiences to blog about, and experiencing events through the filter of blogging possibilities. For example, at one blogmeet, a blogger told me that he used to have another blog but had not been regular; and said that being with BlogAdNet was good because it gave something to blog about.<sup>134</sup> In my experience, the importance of using pictures in blog posts meant that the 'moment of stimulation' (Reed, *op. cit.*) for me was often the possibility of a photo – I would spot a scene, and imagine how that could lead to a blog post. The connections between the blogger and the blog thus become the means of online expression that flow through the blog affordances, which in turn may influence or circumscribe the offline activities undertaken – i.e. some choices may be made on the basis that they can lead to bloggable material.

## 5 'I blog for me'

I have argued that a blog can from one perspective be seen as an autonomous actant, interacting and expressing itself within the internet. I have also noted how the sub-genre components of the personal blog are evidence of the meshing of the blog and the blogger, wherein the personal blogger presents parts of her life in her blog, and also brings the blog into her offline life by exploring ways of transferring affect to the blog. The principle of 'I blog for me' (Reed 2005: 237), means that the personal blog is ostensibly an unmediated representation of the blogger. However, this is affected by the affordances of the blog, and although the reader is seemingly incidental to the relation between the blogger and the blog, we shall see that the audience, as well as monetisation, are two important influences on the content of the blog.

A pertinent question is – if the blogger blogs for herself, why then put it online? To this, I had varying responses from the interviewees: some had (or had tried having) a separate password protected blog, or did the occasional password protected post; others explicitly acknowledged the narcissistic

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<sup>134</sup> Fieldnotes dated 11 April 2008

element and discussed the apparent contradiction of making a ‘personal diary’ public. For example, Alvin said:

I know we always say this that – ‘you blog for yourself’ – but it’s starting to become you’re blogging for other people. So it’s like a diary, except that it’s no longer like the dear diary that you have for yourself [...] it’s a record of the things that you think people want to see [...] why do you blog if you don’t want to, you know? Because then you make it personal right? [i.e. you can password protect it, rather than leaving it public] (*op. cit.*).

To understand the way in which a blogger relates to her blog, it is useful to start with the motivations for blogging. For a general perspective, the myBlogS survey asked: “Why do you have a blog?” Making money, politics, and professional reasons were the least important, and a desire to write, a memory device, and hobby were the most important reasons (see Table 6). It should be noted that it is possible that the category “For my hobby/hobbies” was misinterpreted: I meant it to be for blogging about hobbies (e.g. cosplay, or toy cars), but it could also have been read as meaning that maintaining a blog is a hobby. Therefore, the fourth most popular reason is worth mentioning – it is “To help me understand more about myself” (64%). Overall, the survey results suggest that the personal bloggers see their blogging as something that both fulfils a creative urge, and helps them to reflect upon their actions – either as a memory depository, or as means to learn more about themselves. A number of the freeform ‘Other’ reasons given saw blogging as a form of emotional release, suggesting that these are probably connected; similarly Trammel *et al.* found that self-expression was the most prominent motivation for blogging (2006: 711).

Q14. Why do you have a blog?		
All Bloggers (n=356)	Three most important reasons for blogging	
	“Because I like writing”	76.7%
	“To keep a track of things I want to remember”	73.0%
	“For my hobby/hobbies”	70.5%
	Three least important reasons for blogging	
	“To make money”	54.8%
	“To influence Malaysian politics”	53.7%
	“For my job / professional purposes”	50.6%

**Table 6: Reasons for blogging**

Many of the interviewees mentioned keeping a personal diary before starting a blog, but their motivations were varied. Tommy started when he was moving back to Malaysia to be with his terminally ill father, and he thought that the “transition period would be an interesting part of my



life.”<sup>135</sup> Chee Keong mentions his love of writing and photography, the narcissistic element and the attention he gets; however, he concludes by saying “even if there’s no one reading it, I’d still be doing it. [...] Because I, instead of [...] writing down a diary, I just write on the net.”<sup>136</sup> Giving an example of what she chose what to write about, Nicky said that a weekend trip or a conversation with friends might become a blog post and, “More probably than not, if I don’t blog about it I will forget it a week after that” (*op. cit.*). Haliza had kept a diary as a teenager, but her reason for starting a blog was to document her experience in a reality TV show (*op. cit.*). Differently to the others, Stephanie started her blog as part of a project for a Masters dissertation, but links from popular bloggers boosted her traffic and motivated her to continue.<sup>137</sup>

Magdalene had also previously kept a diary, and started blogging when she had a long wait before starting university in America and, she explained, “when I went to the US, I kept blogging because like my friends wanted to know what’s happening to me” (*op. cit.*). This experience is not uncommon, and 10.1% of the bloggers in my survey were students overseas. This underlies the way in which blogging is often used to reinforce and retain existing relationships.<sup>138</sup>

## 5.1 *Blogging memories*

One sense in which bloggers blog ‘for themselves’ is by using their blog as a repository of memories, thus benefiting from the storage affordance. Brake has questioned the significance of this, noting that although the bloggers in his research mentioned this often, “it was not clear whether these bloggers actually re-visited their archives often or whether it was largely the knowledge that they would be available to them that they felt was important” (Brake 2009: 153). What one may call the ‘aspirational’ expression of intent that Brake noted may be evidenced in Magdalene’s statement – “I wanna look back and read. I want to remember all the small things that may be funny, lah, you know, but you forget because it’s not that important” (*op. cit.*).

However, interviewees did mention various ways in which this affordance was used by them, as a complement to their own memory. Nicky said “I actually read back my own blog posts, for myself, just to see like how I’ve changed, what I used to do, who I used to hang out with” (*op. cit.*). In addition, Andy specifically saw his blog as enhancing his memory, saying that he has a “selective

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<sup>135</sup> Interview with Tommy, 5 August 2008

<sup>136</sup> Interview with Chee Keong, 28 July 2008

<sup>137</sup> Interview with Stephanie, 6 September 2009

<sup>138</sup> However, during the fieldwork period, the emergence of Facebook seemed to make this factor less important. In support of this observation, the Technorati 2009 ‘State of the blogosphere’ reported 34% and 32% of bloggers saying that they spent less time blogging due to spending more time on Twitter and social networking sites, respectively (Technorati 2009).

memory” (the implication was that it was an unavoidable condition, not a psychological denial process). He said that, when competing on a reality TV show, he was worried about prejudices due to his sexuality:

so I actually deleted quite a lot of blog posts that stated my sexuality openly [...] But [...] I regretted deleting those posts, because now I have no idea what I wrote back then [...] I would like to have those memories still.<sup>139</sup>

Alvin recounted how, after having let his hosting service lapse, he had to recover blog posts from automated internet archives, and said: “So in retrospect yes, it’s definitely a storage space for information, and emotions as well” (*op. cit.*). The sense of a continuous selfhood is dependent to a large degree on the ability to connect one’s present to the past, and therefore it is possible that when a blog becomes part of a person’s personal history, the means by which self-expression is afforded by the blog generate a movement between the blog and the blogger that resonate and form a particular assemblage that includes both of them as co-creators of a ‘self.’ For example, Jaymee said:

it’s sort of a personal diary for me as well because sometimes I go back to my archive, I click and read on it and say ‘Wow I have grown or not grown so much as a person’ [...] or ‘This is what I did’, ‘this is how I felt’ back then when I was holidaying in Redang or something (*op. cit.*).

## **5.2 Blogging and catharsis**

Although I would argue that Brake has underestimated the significance of blogs as an aid to memory, it is clear that bloggers spend most of their time writing new posts, not reading old ones. In another example of how personal blogging can mesh with the sense of the self, many bloggers see their blog as a cathartic “brain dump” (Reed 2005: 228), and the blog can become an important addition to the blogger’s range of psychological coping tools.

Some of the free form answers to my survey question on reasons for blogging reflected this (quotes from three different anonymous respondents):

A blog is where I let out my feelings and it shouldn't be judge by any party what so ever.

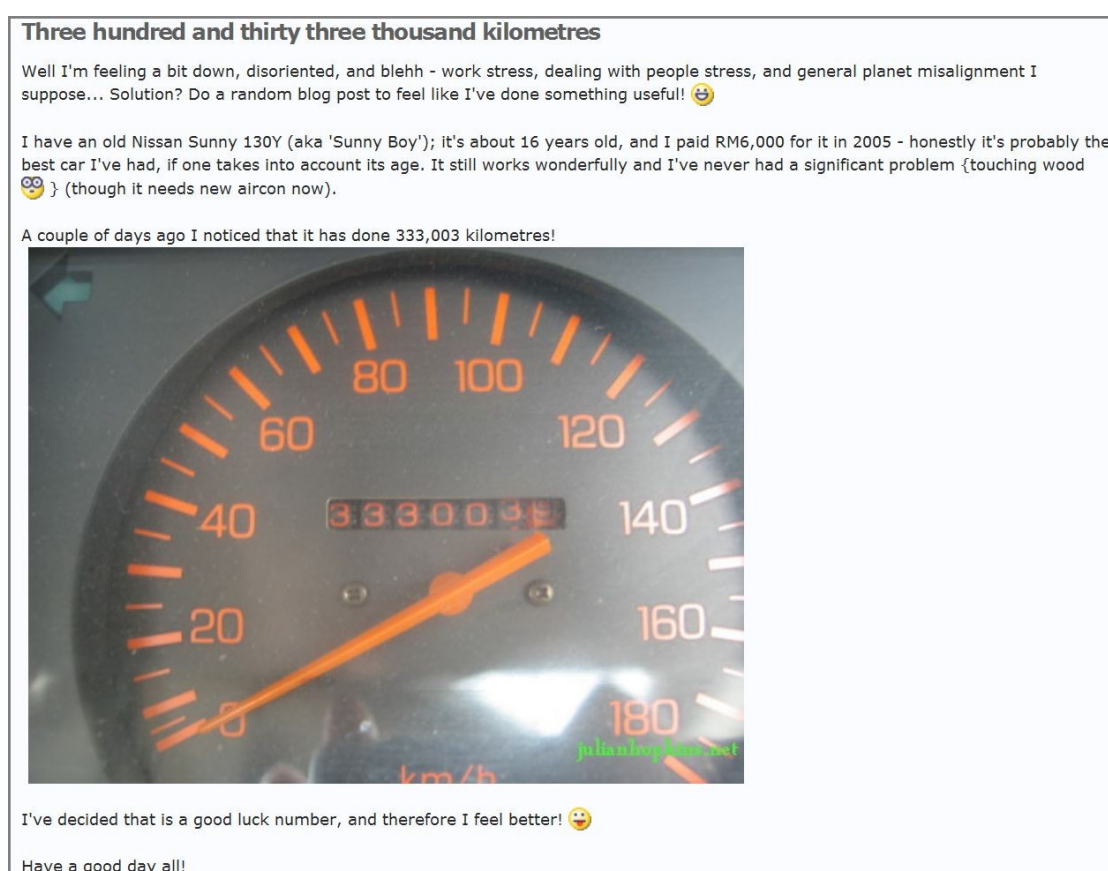
To get things/thoughts out of my system.

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<sup>139</sup> Interview with Andy, 10 August 2009

I blog to vent my creative and energy and also to provide my own personal views on matters. Apart from that, it is also liberating to know that you can actually affect the readers of your blog in a positive way.

An example of this from my own blog happened in two parts. One day when I realised my odometer on my car had reached 333,003 kilometres, and thinking it may be useful as a blogging topic (as bloggers are always on the lookout for material), I rapidly took a photo of it. A few days later, I used it – but by then the meaning of the post had shifted, in that I also used the post as a means to dispel some random blues (see Plate 14).



**Plate 14: Blog post from *anthroblogia*, 14 April 2009**

The act of sharing some feelings of gloominess was cathartic to some extent, and a supportive comment enhanced this feeling. Although there may be no readers, the experience of seeing one's blog post online and knowing others may read it, seems to afford some of the same relief as it would sharing with a person. In addition, the act of translating one's thoughts into a form that affords meaningful sharing can re-present those thoughts from a different perspective to the blogger herself – for example, a myBlogS survey respondent said that a reason for having a blog is "To get things out of my head and into a format I can analyse more effectively."

## 6 Blogging & the self

There is evidence therefore to suggest that personal bloggers tend to feel that their blog is an extension of their self, both as a cathartic means of self-exploration and a reflexive repository of their thoughts. In discussing the rise of the individual self as a feature of the modern era, Anthony Giddens highlights its reflexive nature and notes that “autobiography... is actually at the core of self-identity in modern social life.” (1991: 76) and an important theme is self-actualisation, whose “moral thread [...] is one of *authenticity* [...] based on ‘being true to oneself’” (*ibid.*: 78; original emphasis). “The capacity to achieve intimacy with others is a prominent part of the reflexive project of the self” (*ibid.*: 96), and this depends on a relationships wherein each person is in touch with their authentic self and thus give mutually reliable responses to certain situations.

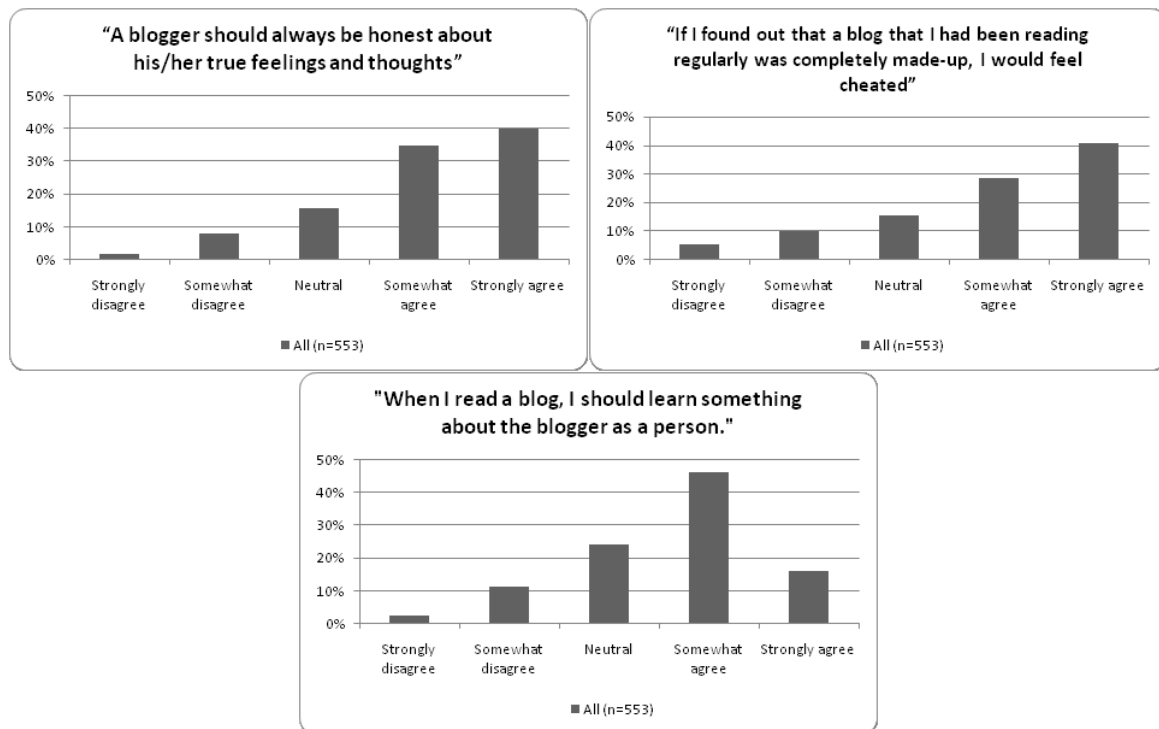
There is a parallel with the relationship between the personal blogger and her audience here; the personal blogger is certainly engaged in an autobiographical project, and the regular readers return to the blog because they are satisfied with the reliable performance. However, this thesis argues that the idea of a unitary self is problematic. It is a representational concept that depends on dichotomies between inner and outer orientations, and assumes a consistent unitary ‘self’ that does not take into account the relational construction of the person. Nonetheless, it is an important part of blogging discourse and a common advice by experienced bloggers is to ‘just be yourself.’ As Nicky says:

You can so tell when the blogger’s running something because they want to do or whether they have to do it. Or whether they just want attention, or not. So I try not to think about whether a reader likes it, *I just put myself out there* (*op. cit.*; emphasis added).

However, as we saw earlier, Nicky also questioned the extent to which bloggers *are* their blog, and this section will discuss this tension.

### 6.1 *Expectations of authenticity*

There is a marked tendency for bloggers and readers to expect honesty from a blogger, and that their blog be indexical of the blogger – so that they learn “something about the blogger as a person” (see Figure 1). This expectation of authenticity is important, and the discussion above shows that it is not an unreasonable expectation, both in the sense that the personalisation affordance allows the blogger a channel of direct communication to her audience, and also that bloggers use their blog to reflect upon themselves.



**Figure 1: Survey results**

To probe this aspect of personal blogging, one of the questions asked to interviewees was a version of 'Can the readers know about the 'real' you through reading your blog?' In response, Alvin said:

I do think that people can get to know me, but they get to know the external things, they get to know the tangible things about me – where I was, what kind of clothes I like to wear, what food I eat, what I don't; I don't think they can get into my head (*op. cit.*).

He also commented on one of the other interviewees, Tommy, with whom he had been in the same university, and said:

I tell you on record, he has never behaved this way before; he was as serious as you can get [...]. To a point I still believe that that's not, a hundred percent who he is [...] [his blog is] one facet of his life (*op. cit.*)

Chee Keong also echoed the partial nature of the blog-as-index, saying that the readers "usually get the wrong idea about me because what I write on my blog is what I want to portray about myself; I guess it is a fairly good representation, but only part of me, not the entire part." He also reflected on the similar difficulties of knowing someone through a blog, or offline:

No, it's impossible. I don't think it's possible, because there are nuances in your personality that no one would know, not even casual friends would know, unless they're really close to you. How you really feel, like what really bothers me [...] sometimes you don't share that with the world (*op. cit.*).

In answering the same question, Andrew gave an answer which was almost Goffman-like:

for some of us we have a different persona in our daily lives; when you're at home with your wife, when you're with your kids, with your boss. Everyone has a different persona that they need to change as [inaudible] did say 'the world's a stage', everyone is an actor on it. So for the blogs, it's a stage for them, it's a place where they can vent out their anger, their frustration, they can be whoever they want to be.<sup>140</sup>

I went on to ask him if it was ever possible to know a person fully through their blog and he answered, "No. It's impossible. Like I said, the world's a stage"; I probed, asking – is it any different to interacting with people face-to-face, to which he said "Hard to say. It's very hard to say."

The parallel with acting was also referred to by Tommy, who reflected on the performative aspect of blogging, saying:

I find a way to express myself [...] a different way through online, and I guess that's the same with *everybody*. I'm not alone in that. So you can't really say that I'm acting. Because if everyone's doing it, [inaudible – you can't really say I'm/everyone's acting right?] so... I think it's just natural, human behaviour, to behave *slightly* different online and offline (*op. cit.*; original emphasis).

These extracts reflect the general attitude by the respondents that that they share parts of themselves in their blogs. This is also noted by Viviane Serfaty who argues that

online diarists and bloggers use their writing as a mirror that allows them to see themselves more clearly and to construct themselves as subjects in a digital society, but also as a veil that will always conceal much of their lives from their readers (cited in Rettberg 2008: 12).

Magdalene reflected on this tension, brought about by her increased audience, saying:

there's too many people reading my blog [including colleagues and clients...] I don't know what to blog about anymore. Lately lah especially [...] most of my entries are – I don't know, just very very

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<sup>140</sup> Interview with Andrew, 15 August 2009

superficial on the surface [...] sometimes I wonder if I should set up a private blog or something. But in a way, it's like, when you blog you automatically [...] want people to read (*op. cit.*).

Another question that I asked most interviewees was to ask their advice on how to be a successful blogger. Alongside the paradigmatic counsel to 'be yourself', they recommended strategies such as regular postings, selective topics that interest readers, leaving comments and interacting with other blogs, and answering comments. These strategies may seem to contradict the advice to be authentic, to 'be yourself'. However, to argue that they are being self-contradictory would require a representational logic that presupposes a fixed self, and projects that onto those bloggers, in spite of how they express their situation.

One way to approach this question is to consider how blogs reveal what Hubert Hermans has termed the 'dialogical self'. Authenticity assumes a singular self, and theories such as those proposed by Hubert Hermans, and developed by Hevern (2004) with regards to blogs, allow us to see that the 'self' is a continually shifting position that emerges in a relational dialogue with "other selves and the cultural world more generally" (2004: 322). Analysing 20 blogs, he identifies distinctive types of postings – "each showing a differing performative intent" that are either "self-focused" – mostly descriptive diary-type entries, or 'thinking aloud' entries; or "'other'-focused" (*ibid.*: 327-8). These variable blogging practices, that can also include responding to comments, and presenting different facets of the blogger's identity demonstrate how "[v]oices within the self are varied, even oppositional, and resist any simple attempt to harmonize their multiplicity into an unstable synthesis" (*ibid.*: 330). Blogs offer the possibility of interaction with other people and cultural discourses, but the temporality of the blog medium – the always updating recent posts, and the archived past posts – offer insight into, and resonate with, the blogger's dialogical self that crafts "multiple positions, both internal and external to the self. These positions demonstrably evolve, shift focus, and interact with other positions in the rhythm of the author's life as chronicled daily" (*ibid.* 330; see also Sanderson 2008).

'Dialogics' is referred to in a number of papers on blogs, particularly from the discipline of Public Relations (Kelleher 2009; Kent & Taylor 1998; Smudde 2005; Yang & Joon Soo Lim 2009). It is a term that is subject to a few interpretations. A common interpretation is one that treats it almost as a synonym of 'dialogue', as bilateral communication (e.g. Brake 2009: 98–9). However, according to Morson & Emerson, Bakhtin's concept of dialogue "has often been taken as a synonym for interaction, or verbal interaction in general, and is thereby trivialised" (Morson & Emerson 1990: 49). One cannot 'enter into' a dialogue, for the dialogue itself is what creates the very condition that

is being considered (*ibid.* 50; see also Soffer 2009: 476) – as opposed to a dialectical view, one cannot hypothesise two distinct monads that will interact and synthesise but instead understand that the unending process of communication through dialogue is what gives rise to entities of thought and action.

This understanding of dialogics, that emphasises the centripetal dynamics of change, resonates with the assemblage perspective that emphasises the movements of deterritorialisation, and the ‘always already’ ontological status of dialogues. The idea of the dialogical self discussed by Hevern, locates the dialogue within the blogger, and with “other selves” (*op. cit.*); however, as argued in this chapter, the blog as an expressive actant should also be included in this dialogical process that is expressed as causal relations within both machinic and expressive assemblages.

However, in the above discussion of the dialogical self, the ‘self’ continues to be accorded a primary status. The situation has a parallel with a critique of analyses of Melanesian cultures provided by Wagner who argues that “a naively hegemonic dependence upon individuality and plurality” has clouded an understanding of Melanesian concepts of the person, and he argues that “at least for some Melanesians, the part/whole distinction and its systematic entailment is inapplicable” (2008: 160). He draws from Marilyn Strathern who argues for a relational conceptualisation of the self, that people are not isolated individuals, making society out of the sum of their relations, but they are persons based on the existing relations that form their social context, and themselves. Within those given parameters, they adjust, create or reproduce relations according to their intentions (Strathern 1991: 587). Related to this, in the context of Melanesian practices, she proposes a concept of “mediated exchange” which says that “persons are able to detach parts of themselves in their dealings with others” (1990: 192). Her argument relates to the circulation of artefacts, or substances, but it resonates with Reed’s observation that, “while individuals are happy to assert that ‘my blog is me’, they also insist that ‘I am not my weblog’” (Reed 2005: 230) – that is, they are able to detach part of themselves into their blog.

## **7 Conclusions: the relational self and affordances**

Viveiros de Castro talks of ‘flat multiplicities’ as a feature of Deleuzian thought – he references Wagner’s “fractal person” which is never formally divided from the aggregate with which it is connected, but “always *an entity with relationship integrally implied*” (Wagner quoted in Viveiros de Castro 2009: 224; emphasis added by Viveiros de Castro). Using this approach, the blog and bloggers can be understood both as relatively autonomous actors, but also as one assemblage, with each



moving through spaces of becoming together. The ways in which this can occur relate to the affordances, and by adopting this approach we can allow for agency on both parts, without assigning to either a primal status in terms of ontological genesis.

The above concepts of the self are taking from analyses of Melanesian societies (Strathern and Wagner), and psychology (Hermans). Similarly, Deleuze has also argued that we have moved from a Foucauldian analogue 'disciplinary society' characterised by series of contained observable enclosures, to a 'control society' that is characterised by digital networks and control through access to nodes. While the Foucauldian 'machine' moulds a subject through disciplinary mechanisms, categorising and enclosing them in a series of discrete spaces (classroom, heterosexual, factory floor), "In control societies, the form of content, the machinic form, is the distributed network, whose model supplants the Panopticon as a diagram of control" (Bogard 2009: 18–19). This results in 'modulation', which – like a frequency dial on a radio – regulates flows, opening and closing certain pathways for the Deleuzian 'dividual' self, generated as databases and networks gather and reproduce aspects of the self throughout. As opposed to the *individual*, the *dividual* flows and shifts, expressing itself according to context and contingency (Savat 2009b).

As noted above, the personal bloggers reflect facets of themselves in their blog, but the fact that the blog is not the same as the blogger should be taken to mean that it is therefore inauthentic, but that authenticity, like the dividual self, is non-exclusive and dynamic. The blog affordances act as the virtual machine that modulates ways in which bloggers can rhizomatically extend relations both on- and offline, and in the process enable reconfigurations of their dividual self that exists in conjunction with the other relational components which include their blog and the mediated relations afforded by the blog. The latter also include relations with others – the readers, and other bloggers – and will be discussed in the next chapter.

# VI. Assembling blogs and bloggers

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## 1 Introduction

The previous chapter focused on the relations within and between the blog and the personal blogger. By comparison, this chapter turns to relations between blogs and bloggers, and examines how they relate to the blog affordances. First, it looks at some theoretical approaches to understanding collective behaviour online. Then it looks at linking and commenting practices from the standpoint that they are interpersonal connections, and related in particular to the interactivity affordance which allows for extended parasocial relations to develop. I argue that the comments area of a blog introduces a deterritorialising movement into the blog, and can also be conceptualised as a generative node in itself – the ‘commentosphere’. Moving on to ‘blogtals’, which categorise and centralise blogs online, and blogmeets, which bring together bloggers offline, I then discuss emergent practices, and the relevance of the blog affordances.

Although most of the bloggers I interacted with and observed were engaged in monetisation practices, the detailed discussion of monetisation is left to the next chapter. This chapter focuses therefore on the non-monetising aspects of bloggers’ relational practices.

## 2 In search of community

[C]ommunity merits attention as a polymorphous folk notion widely used both online and offline, but as an analytical concept with an identifiable empirical referent it is of little use

(Postill 2008: 416)

The above quote from media anthropologist John Postill is a lucid statement of the dilemma faced by many scholars when analysing ‘community’. In internet studies, ‘communities’ abound, and research into the effects of monetisation on blogging needs to develop a means to deal with this ubiquitous but ill-defined term. The approach taken here is to consider ‘community’ as an actant: it is a semiotic term that in assemblage terms is part of the assemblage of enunciations, and as such it exists in causal relations with other components of the assemblage. However, it is not held to represent anything more than what the actors who enrol it expect from it. Thus, in addition to Postill’s position, we can look to Vered Amit who argues that community is “an effort [...] to mobilize social relations” (Amit & Rapport 2002: 20). Similarly, Nessim Watson, in an early study of ‘virtual

community', asks "Is there some power to be had in claiming a word like 'community'?" (1997: 102), concluding that claiming community status can reinforce claims to greater representation, and bypass local barriers.

Thus, a productive way to approach 'community' is to look at how it is implicated in movements of territorialisation and deterritorialisation. As Latour argues, the "social [...] is only a movement that can be seized indirectly when there is a slight change in one older association mutating into a slightly newer or different one" (2005: 36). He also notes that "any study of any group by any social scientist is part of what makes the group exist, last, decay, or disappear" (*ibid.*: 33). In that respect it is important to consider how the researcher, in looking for community, enrolls people into it, drawing and naturalising boundaries, and possibly overlooking how people are in multiple groups simultaneously or consecutively (*ibid.*: 28-33). In this manner, he not only risks assuming it into existence, but also has a direct interest in finding it – for what is an anthropologist without a tribe to her name?

## **2.1 What is community?**

Amit critiques much anthropology for prioritising the 'social' over the individual, and for essentialising 'community' in various forms (ethnicity, diaspora, etc.). She argues that there are two types of communality: one develops via 'consociate' activity – i.e. shared practices and interpersonal familiarity (2002: 59–60), from which more lasting dyadic relations may grow. However, these are difficult to maintain when the consociation no longer occurs. The second form of communality are social relationships that cluster within "boundaries that define ascribed collective identities ['ethnicity', 'diaspora', etc.]" (*ibid.*: 60). They may be maintained and overlap with relationships of the type mentioned above, but their existence is seen as anterior; and "the more distanced from existing intimacies, the more likely they will be dependent on the invocation of categorical oppositions and primordialized notions of moral obligation" (*ibid.*), and there will also be an increased dependence on symbolic markers. An important point here is that both of these types of communality need to be sustained, and therefore will change according to the ways by which they are sustained.

They are sustained through habitual practices, recalling the concept of field which, as discussed earlier (Chapter II, Section 3.2), is useful for understanding the micro-practices of daily life. An example of this is in Postill (2008), who has drawn upon Bourdieu's and Turner's development of field theory, and applied it to the use of the internet in a suburban Malaysian setting. He proposes the use of 'socialities' – i.e. modes of interaction circumscribed by informal and formal practices –

that intersect within a field, and will in turn be influenced by other contingent factors. He describes the different socialities of committees, night watch patrols, and an online forum which articulate with different social fields such as the “field of residential affairs” (2008: 426) – effective participation in these different socialities require different skills, different forms of capital may be accumulated and brought to bear. The consociation that Amit outlines above can therefore be argued to become relatively stabilised in socialities. In moments of crisis, Postill characterised the internet forum as becoming an ‘arena’, a term drawn from Victor Turner that describes a bounded space where individuals or groups openly clash in a “social drama” (*ibid*: 417), where context and terms are explicitly defined and debated, and there is a hegemonic goal (*ibid*: 425).

While accepting that there is no single objective referent, ‘communities’, therefore, are traceable by the interaction of bodies (consociation), and the use of a variety of expressive modes – these result in social assemblages that are contingent and subject to deterritorialising lines of flight. Postill’s socialities are an effective way of describing the contingent set of practices that animate the configuration of a social assemblage. The ‘social drama’ is a political process affecting a social group that starts with a breach, moves into a crisis, redressive action may then be taken, and it ends with “reintegration or schism” (Postill 2007: n.p.). This resembles the mechanisms of the movements of reterritorialisation, which sees the assemblage restabilising, or deterritorialisation which may result in lines of flight and stabilisation in a new assemblage.

## **2.2 Internet communities**

Much early research of the internet concentrated on the liberating potential of the medium where the opportunity for disembodied social interaction was seen as being a starting point for new forms of social interaction (*cf.* Rheingold 2000, Lejter 1998), and/or the exploration of different identities (Turkle 1997). Manuel Castells critiques these approaches as reflecting particular anarcho-libertarian standpoints (2001: 36-61) rather than being based on sufficient empirical evidence (*ibid*: 116-7), but nonetheless highlights the significance of computer-mediated communication (CMC) for cultural formation, arguing that it “begets a vast array of virtual communities” (2000:21-22).

Nancy Baym provides an early and influential case study of an internet ‘community’. Arguing against earlier “cues filtered out” (Baym 1995: 139) approaches to CMC, she argues that the activities of a Usenet group dedicated to discussing soap operas “created a dynamic and rich community filled with social nuance and emotion” (*ibid*: 138). Using a practice-based approach, one of her arguments points to how the group circulate “smiley face dictionaries,” i.e. documents that translate modes of

expressive communication, and argues that “the active collection and codification of the group’s expressive forms demonstrates the self-reflexivity of computer-mediated community” (*ibid.*: 152).

The significance of the work by Baym and similar scholars in the 1990s (e.g. Steve Jones 1997) was to demonstrate the inaccuracy of arguments that rejected online interaction as synthetic and essentially meaningless (e.g. Sardar 1996). Answering the question posed above, it seems that for these scholars using ‘community’ served this purpose (see also Hine – Chapter III, Section 1.1; p61), but it also brought with it baggage that obscures the multiplicity and heterogeneity of online interaction.

Baym seems to acknowledge this issue in a 2007 paper – titled “The new shape of online community [...]” (2007: n.p.) where she describes a loosely connected group of producers and enthusiasts of Swedish pop music, but is challenged by its diffuse and decentred network – a form of “networked collectivism” – that makes “[m]apping the boundaries of this online community [...] a challenge.” She recognises problems with the use of community, saying that she has “been intentionally vague in [her] use of the term. Ultimately it matters less what we call it than how well we understand it.”

Rather than arguing that the “the methodological challenge [is] of how to bound the object of study” (*ibid.*: n.p.), it is more accurate to say that the methodological challenge is not to *bound* the object of study, but rather to find out what *binds* the subjective and heterogeneous components that present themselves as a contingently assembled body. In other words, for CMC, what are the affordances that enable mediated interactions, and how are these actualised in the causal relations of assemblages? The establishment of the emoticons as a means to convey emotions and compensate for online disembodiment is such an example. The assemblage that Baym described is better described in terms of the means of association, rather than seeking boundaries.

### **2.3 Blogging communities**

The tendency to use ‘community’ as shorthand for emergent practices is also widespread in studies of blogging. However, these earlier studies in the 1990’s were mostly about collective interaction settings which were formed through a centralised information distribution and moderation of practices – for example, a forum or email list. One response to this is by Carolyn Wei (2004) who defines a community as all members of the ‘blog ring’ of knitting enthusiasts, thus providing a predetermined group.

A more relevant approach is taken by Efimova *et al.* (2005: n.p.) who note that blogs do not have such common space, so they propose starting from “weak clues” of community, and proceeding through an iterative process to identify community by using “artefacts can be used as indicators of the existence of weblog community.” These are: Meme paths; Weblog reading patterns; Linking patterns; Weblog conversations; Indicators of events; ‘Tribe’ marks, group spaces and blogger directories. They were not able to identify any community with certainty, and conclude that they “were able to identify a network structure with, a large periphery membership and a strong core with fuzzy or fluid boundaries [indicating] the potential existence of a virtual settlement of a weblog community.”

In a similar study, Anjo Anjewierden & Lilia Efimova propose “a framework that allows categorising digital traces of an online community along five dimensions (people, documents, terms, links and time)” (2006: 287), to do so they perform a series of searches that combine common terms, linking, and clusters of terms to uncover communities. Their paper is well researched and argued, but nonetheless the method they use acts as a filter that tends to exclude those centrifugal tendencies and practices that would militate against the affirmation of ‘community’. In other words, they state that a community will be any particular cluster of actors with a certain number of similarities, within a particular density of networked connections. Having set the terms of the search, they can then cluster the results together and call it a community. It also only used the online texts, and did not follow up with any investigation into the bloggers’ attitudes.

One solution to the difficulties of finding an empirical referent for ‘community’ is to dilute the term somewhat by narrowing its scope, which in its original meaning is holistic. For example, ‘communities of practice’ and ‘communities of interest’ (*cf.* Castells 2001; Wellman *et al.* 2003; Wenger 1998) – group particular practices, but limit the implications of this clustering. ‘Interest’ gives us an angle on the motivation of the participants, but is not as useful empirically as it is usually only perceivable indirectly, through practice.<sup>141</sup> Jan Schmidt (2007a: n.p.) proposes “communities of blogging practices” – this has the advantage of restricting the description of the collective phenomenon to shared practices, based on their usual subject matters and socialities such as their means of interacting with other blogs and readers. However, the word community is mostly redundant here.

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<sup>141</sup> Other approaches are noted by McNeill (2003), who cites Swales regarding “discourse” (*ibid.*: 34), and Miller regarding “rhetorical community” (*ibid.*).

There is no doubt that many bloggers regularly engaged in sustained interactions – such as distributed ‘conversations’ (Efimova & De Moor 2005), and clustered collectives are identifiable. However, according to Herring *et al.*, “blog conversations, while occasionally intense, are the exception rather than the rule” (2005: 2), and linking between blogs – often a marker of reciprocal recognition is not as widespread as is often assumed. Thus Herring *et al.* note in a study that “fewer than one-third of blog entries (31.8%) contain any links at all, and that the central tendency is for an entry to have none” (2004: 8). Therefore, the ‘community’ aspect of blogs is often overstated, partly as a result of social scientists’ interest in collective action, rather than atomistic individualistic behaviour.

With regards to blogging, the means of association is primarily the blog – specifically the blog affordances. Bloggers also communicate via other means such as email, instant messaging, and meet offline too. Research into blogging needs to trace symbolic, prosaic and ritual practices in order to reveal different socialities and place these into the context of relevant assemblages and affordances. As argued above, the *idea* (the symbol) of the community should be taken into consideration when looking at blogging, and community is often at its most basic expressed in the self-identity of the respondent – i.e. if a person says “I am a blogger”, we might assume there is a collective which would also stake a claim to a similar identity. However, bloggers may be “individuals who are conceptually but not personally connected, or, conversely, who do not imagine their personal commonalities in ongoing collective identities” (Amit & Rapport 2002: 5). Therefore identity and community are not necessarily linked, though they may be; what would link them would be further practices that explicitly share meanings and goals with others who identify as being in the same ‘community’.

In all of these situations, presuming a community does not help the analysis, but hinders it. Therefore, rather than identifying and categorising a bounded ‘community’, or field, this chapter traces causal relations, and offer ways for others to follow those same traces in order to arrive at further understanding of the emergent effects of blog affordances.

### **3 Hyperlinking**

The interactivity affordance is central to answering the question about what binds a blog assemblage, and hyperlinking is a key online aspect of this. This section looks at two ways in which bloggers use hyperlinks in socialities that enable expressive flows as well as channelling readers between blogs.

### 3.1 *Blogroll*

Although some studies have suggested that only about half of blogs have blogrolls (Herring, Scheidt, *et al.* 2004: 8; Schmidt 2007b: 9), it is very rare to see a Malaysian personal blog without one. As Schmidt also notes “Blogroll links also fulfill different purposes, for example recommending certain blogs, expressing personal acquaintance or friendship, or just being a sign of reciprocity” (2007a).

‘Link-exchange’ is the reciprocal posting of hyperlinks between two blogs, which may be initiated via a comment, or an email. For example, via my contact form on my blog, a blogger asked me: “Would you be interested in reciprocal blog exchange links with my blog [...]? This is good for SEO and page rank.” Doing link-exchange in this manner sometimes results in extremely long blogrolls, reducing their effectiveness as recommended links.

One indication of debates of this practice was on Thomas’s blog, where he had written “NOT.EXCHANGING.LINKS” under his profile.<sup>142</sup> He explained that he had previously exchanged links, but:

there are [i.e. ‘were’] too many links [...] [now] I just link people I like to, that’s all personal friends [...] Uh, I do not know if many people know about this but it actually helps in your search engine optimisation. [...] People would want to be interested in your circle of friends, and people will want to see. If it’s too long, people won’t bother about that.<sup>143</sup>

Probably as a reaction to these practices, some bloggers label their blogrolls in ways that mark their differences: GeekMonk labels his blogroll as “Blogs I Really Read;”<sup>144</sup> and others will use labels such as ‘Friends’, or ‘Important bloggers’. Asking for a link is not usually done by the more experienced bloggers, who see them as something to be used with discernment, and thus link-exchange is likely to mark out a blogger as a ‘n00b’ (a pejorative reference to a ‘newbie’ – someone new to blogging). However, some may sell links – thus GeekMonk has another category of ‘Other Sites’, and Maango – a popular lifestyle blogger – is unusual in that she directly offers to rent out links to people in her blogroll.<sup>145</sup>

### 3.2 *In-post linking*

Blogrolls are thus of varying significance, particularly due to their static nature which means that bloggers forget to update them, or hesitate to remove links to avoid displeasing the other blogger. The most important links are those that come with context and/or specific recommendation – i.e. in

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<sup>142</sup> Thomas, accessed 3 February 2009: b0061

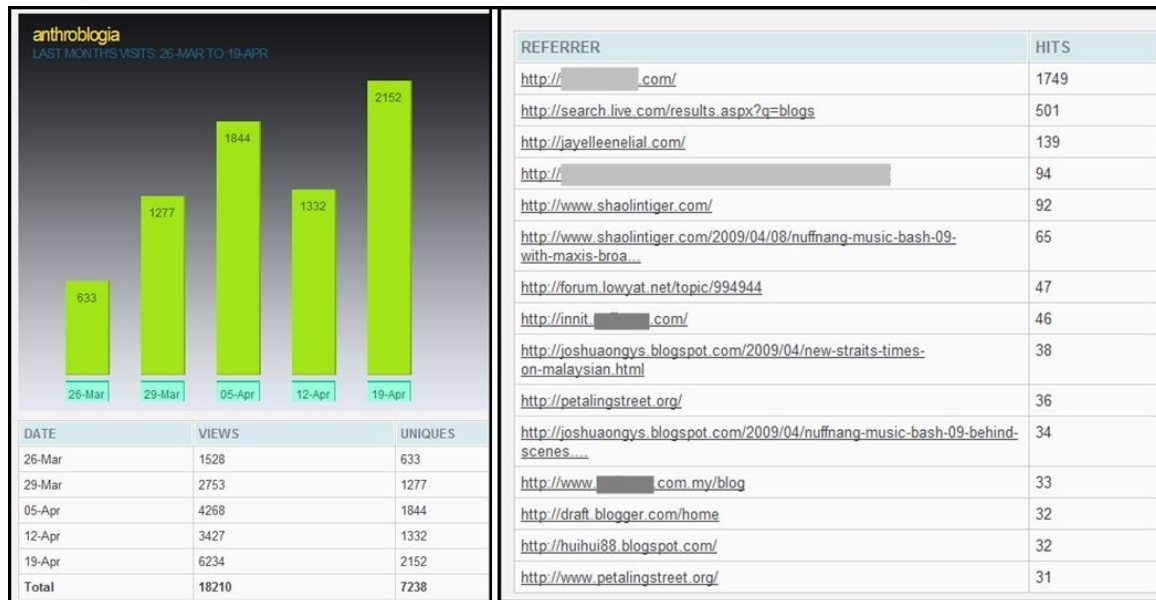
<sup>143</sup> Interview with Thomas, 13 August 2009

<sup>144</sup> GeekMonk, accessed 15 December 2010: b0594

<sup>145</sup> Blog post, Maango, 18 February 2009: p00505



the post itself. For example, I had recommended some blogs in a newspaper interview – one of whom was Magdalene. After this list was published in the newspaper, she mentioned and linked to me in her post, and I received at least 1843 visits from her blog over one week, at a time when my usual average readership was about 150/day (Screenshot 3).



**Screenshot 3: Web analytics example.** *anthroblogia*'s readership had been climbing gradually, to hit a peak when it was linked to by Magdalene.

Similarly, Tommy identifies one particular post as pushing him “from a nobody to somebody.” He explained that he had noticed the “phenomenon of celebrity bloggers,” and for an April’s Fool post in 2005 he parodied some of them. This was a popular blog post, and generated incoming links – some from the very “celebrity bloggers” he parodied, guaranteeing a boost in hits which he managed to sustain by continuing to provide popular content.<sup>146</sup>

## 4 The ‘Commentosphere’

After hyperlinking, comments are another actualisation of the interactivity affordance. In scholarly terms, comments in blogs are under-researched. One reason is the difficulty in ‘scraping’ blog comments using automated tools, meaning large scale quantitative studies overlook them; another reason may be the focus on blogs as text, meaning that analysts prefer to privilege the voice of the blogger as author, rather than seeing the blog as the intersection of a multiplicity of actors.

<sup>146</sup> Interview with Tommy, 5 August 2008

The comments afford the means to interact directly with the blogger, and arguably contribute to the production of the blog itself (Nardi *et al.* 2004). Rachel expressed this in a clear manner, saying: “The comments are very important and responding to the comments is very important, if you want to have a well-visited blog and a very interactive blog.”<sup>147</sup> As Figure 2 shows, only 14.3% of bloggers and readers in the myBlogS said they ‘Rarely’ or ‘Never’ read comments. Comments are expected, with 80.1% agreeing that a blog should have a comments function, and a negligible number of blogs not having comments enabled (Figure 3).

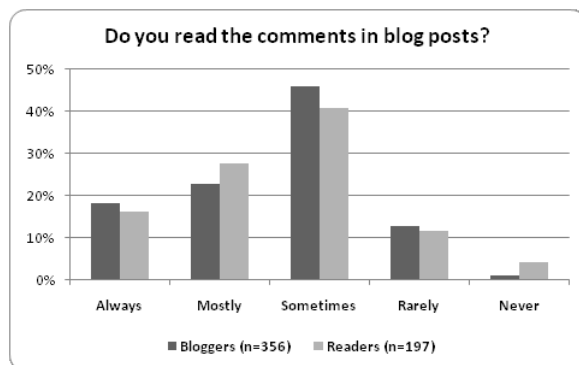


Figure 2: Reading the comments in blogs

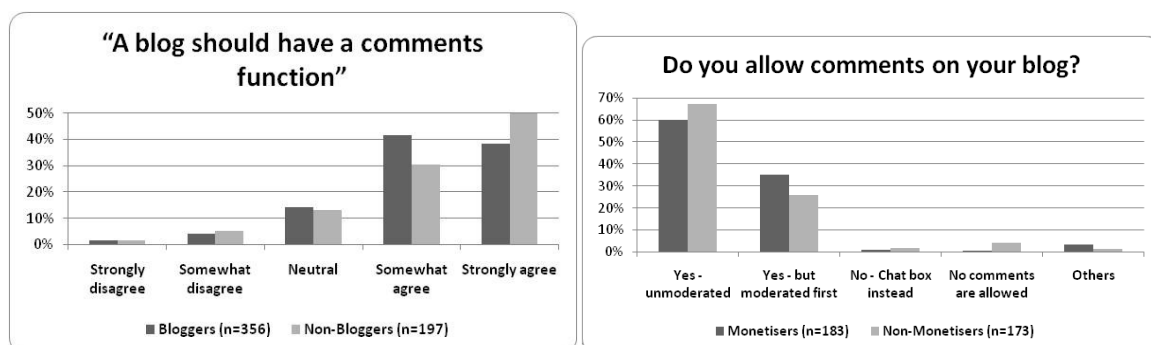


Figure 3: myBlogS survey results regarding comments

Only 12.7% of the respondents reported never leaving a comment, and 17.6% never responded to another commenter. From reading blogs and talking to bloggers, it is clear that comments are often part of the reason for reading a blog and thus complement the content of the post itself. While it is understood that a blogger has the right to moderate comments as he wishes, there is an expectation that the comments will be interfered with as little as possible: in the survey, 39% said they ‘Never Censor’ comments; the most common reason for censoring comments was due to “personal attacks on people” (48.4%); and only 7.4% of the bloggers said that they censored comments because they did not agree with them.

<sup>147</sup> Interview with Rachel, 16 August 2009

Linda Kenix is one of the few scholars who look more closely at the comments section, and argues that it “might be better understood as a separate communicative sphere from the blog itself” (2009: 808). However, she notes a strong communicational asymmetry between the blogger and the commenters – in that the former has complete control over who to respond to – and also argues that “the overwhelming majority of discourse found within these blogs did not suggest much interest in exchanging information” (*ibid.*). However, her focus is on political filter blogs in America and, as she acknowledges, “[e]ach type and category of blog needs to be examined individually to have a better understanding of the blogosphere as a whole” (*ibid.*: 815).

For the blogs of my respondents – mostly well-frequented personal bloggers – there are usually regular commenters who post comments and interact with each other (an example of this is discussed in Chapter VII, section 5; p224) and most of them regularly answered all of the comments. The most popular did not, but only because they had to stop once the volume of comments became excessive (see the next subsection). For the personal blog genre, as opposed to SoPo blogs, engaging with readers on a personal level via the comments is an effective way of stabilising the relations that develop between the readers and the blogger, and reflects the emphasis on affect as opposed to reasoned debate.

Eric Baumer, Mark Sueyoshi and Bill Tomlinson (2008) have provided another one of the few studies that provides insight into the comments function. They noted that readers had felt different obligations and had different expectations depending on the blogs they read – in particular, feeling the need “to read or comment [...] on friends’ blogs or blogs of which they felt that they were ‘a part’” (Baumer *et al.* 2008: 1117). They would also expect an answer to their comments, but for the big blogs they would comment less, and be pleasantly surprised if they got an answer.

Their novel approach focuses on the readers of blogs as opposed to bloggers, but unfortunately this suffers somewhat because of the fact that twelve of their sample of fifteen also had blogs. However, this aspect of their sample resembles my observations that most commenters were normally bloggers as well, an observation supported by a Canadian survey which returned bloggers as being “twice as likely to use their real name when posting comments to other blogs” (Braaten 2005: 33). This suggests that the comments are, in particular, a means for bloggers to interact, meaning that not only should the comments be seen in relation to the host blog, but also as a contiguous assemblage that affords a deterritorialising movement wherein bloggers – as publishers – extend their own online presence into other blogs, but also simultaneously interact as consumers of media

(recalling the earlier point made by Reed – Chapter V, Section 4.10; p135). There is tension in that the commenters may complement the post, but also may detract from it by criticising it or seeking to draw traffic away. The latter may be criticised, if done too blatantly (see ‘Free Rider’ in Table 7).

This section will look at different types of interaction that flow from the comments affordance, broadly divided into their directionality: the ways in which bloggers react to commenters; how commenters react to the host blogger; and how commenters interact with each other. It ends by reflecting on what may be seen as some of the emergent properties of the ‘commentosphere’.

#### **4.1 Blogger to commenters**

The disembodiment of online interaction takes away an important component of interpersonal interaction, which is usually finely attuned to the non-verbal signals present both in the environment, and made by interlocutors. From a study of Korean blogs, Jeong Kim notes that successful blogs need to be visible, but there comes a point where it is not possible to manage all the expectations of readers, and possible reactions are: ignore them; control visibility by creating private posts, deleting the blog; and, moderating and/or deleting comments (2007: 19).

Similarly, the respondents discussed different ways to respond to comments. Tommy explained that there were too many comments to answer them all. Chee Keong always answers all of the comments, saying that “it just shows that you care about your readers, you’re not just a faceless person [...] and you actually read the comments.”<sup>148</sup> In contrast, Rachel felt that “it’s [...] very artificial if you respond one-by-one to people, so I think your answer should be quite spontaneous” (*op. cit.*). In effect, it is common to see a blogger responding to comments with simple phatic one-liners such as ‘Cool!’, or ‘Haha thanks for dropping by’. This reflects the flow of affect that is a feature of the personal blog – thus it is noteworthy that Rachel’s blog was not a personal blog, but a blog focused on literary matters.

Stephanie explained that she used to answer them all, as a courtesy, but then when she was travelling she would not always be able to; in addition, she worried about how selective responses might be interpreted:

because it would be really odd if sometimes I respond and sometimes I don’t and then there will always be haters that comes in and says that, ‘Oh she responded yesterday, and you know I wrote

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<sup>148</sup> Interview with Chee Keong, 28 July 2008

about something today and she probably felt that whatever I say was *true*, and that's why you know that's why she never responded to me (original emphasis).<sup>149</sup>

After explaining how negative comments can influence a new readers' perceptions, she explained that she had

wanted to make [her blog] a free speaking space [...] but [...] when you have a lot of rumours, right, a hundred rumours might make it true. So, that's when I started like you know moderating them [...] when I think [...] 'I don't really like this comment,' I just delete it (*op. cit.*).

She was the only respondent to express this unilateral approach, and most took the stance as expressed by Ibrahim, who said:

I'm OK leaving any good or bad comments from people who tell who they are [...] rather than leaving good or bad comments from the anonymous commenter [...] At least their name or address, their nick, nickname, that's good enough for me – rather than just put 'anonymous'.<sup>150</sup>

However, he rarely deleted comments, only when there was "Offensive language [...] and [commenters who] try to provoke people, started to raise [...] sensitive issue [i.e. that relate to race and religion]" (*op. cit.*). The operation of moderation is opaque, although deletions can sometimes be inferred from a mention in another blog, by an orphaned follow-up comment, or by observation over repeated visits. There are usually some commenters ready to support such actions – rejecting the deleted comments as beyond the pale, whereas others may object. When comments are moderated, the pace of interaction reduces and commenters may be less motivated to comment, because, as Jeff Ooi put it, they do not get the "orgasm" of seeing their comment immediately; he said that he had had to implement moderation because of his public role (as MP), but the comments had then reduced significantly.<sup>151</sup>

A blogger may intervene in other ways, as in this example in a SoPo blog where the host blogger exposes a commenter using different pseudonyms, saying:

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<sup>149</sup> Interview with Stephanie, 6 September 2009

<sup>150</sup> Interview with Ibrahim, 12 October 2009

<sup>151</sup> Fieldnotes dated 23 October 2008

again, while i respect freedom of expression, it falls upon me to note that 'oky', 'i support war' and 'chong gin meng' in this comment thread have used the same e-mail and ip [Internet Protocol] address.<sup>152</sup>

## 4.2 Commenters to blogger

The motivations of commenters are multiple, and a broad typology is outlined in Table 7; they can be roughly categorised according to their level of engagement with the topic of the post, interaction with other commenters, and identifiability – primarily, the latter relates to the anonymity affordance, and the former two to the interactivity affordance, but others may be relevant too. For example, the Hater benefits from the anonymity affordance, and leaves vituperative comments that attack the blogger – thus when Tommy blogged about splitting up with his girlfriend, this comment was left: “hahahahaha..emo LOSERRRRRR!!!”<sup>153</sup> Regarding British blogs, Pedersen & Macafee confirm the prevalence of this kind of comment, noting that “[h]alf of the women and more than half of the men [...] had experienced feedback intended only to cut them down” (2007: n.p.). This experience led to two bloggers mentioning the need to develop a ‘thick skin’ (938Live 2009; also Nicky op. cit.).

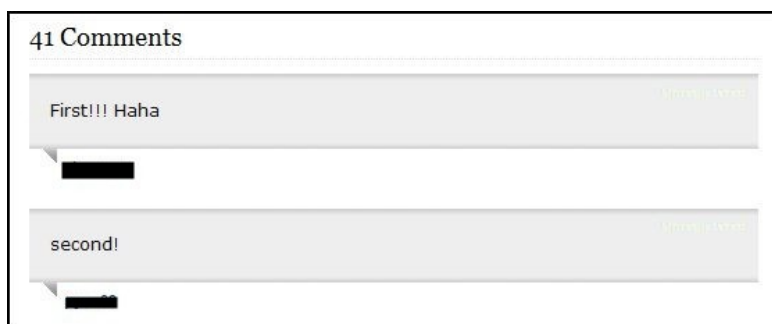
Screenshot 4 shows an example of a ‘Firster’ – this ritualised statement of being first to comment is an expression of the asynchronicity affordance,<sup>154</sup> and its lack of meaningful content reflects the construction of the comments area as a somewhere where mere presence has a significance. Although in fact the commenter is trying to be as synchronous as possible, it reflects the affordance in its attempt to bypass it. As Collier & Ong suggest, this movement is relevant too, in that the “circumvention [of an assemblage] and its effects are as much part of the assemblage as is the global form itself” (2005: 13).

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<sup>152</sup> Blog post, Alfred, 6 January 2009: p00193

<sup>153</sup> Blog post, Tommy, 24 December 2008: p00080

<sup>154</sup> Although in fact the commenter is trying to be as synchronous as possible, it reflects the affordance in its attempt to bypass it. As Collier & Ong suggest, this movement is relevant too, in that the “circumvention [of an assemblage] and its effects are as much part of the assemblage as is the global form itself.” (Collier & Ong 2005: 13)



**Screenshot 4: Example of 'Firster' (Blog post, Frank, 3 November 2010: p00804)**

Just as a blogger has a particular style of blogging, the comments will also tend to reflect her decisions and overall limits, and over time readers will come to expect a certain conversational ambiance on any one blog that reflects on their perception of the blogger too. The blog and the comments are both part of the reader experience, as this comment on a blog post by Shi Han indicates:

It's not only the posts are interesting.. but the comments. Haha! Dude, you are creating more dramas than what your non regular readers can take :P <sup>155</sup>

[Chee Keong responds]

I don't think they are my readers, I've never seen their nicks <sup>156</sup> before. :) <sup>157</sup>

As this comment suggests, there is also an in-group identification as regular readers, coalescing around the blog, and sometimes they may claim certain rights as such in reference to the imagined shared space of the comments area. Thus 'just a reader' says that in the past Chee Keong:

welcome[d] any kind of comments, good or bad... but these days, only the 'good' and 'put you up in high and might place' are considered good in your head.

[Shi Han responds]

I encourage any comments, good or bad, as long as it's not directed towards my family or my loved ones. Towards me, it's fine [...]

I'm still the same [Shi Han].com, and still the same [Shi Han] [...] (*op. cit.*)

The reference by Chee Keong above to his “old readers” indicates how the regularity of interactions over time develops a sense of association and familiarity between the blogger and some readers, and this theme came up more than once in the comments on this post.

<sup>155</sup> :P – Emoticon, representing a protruding tongue – i.e. a cheeky expression

<sup>156</sup> Nick(s): online pseudonym, nickname

<sup>157</sup> Blog post, Shi Han, 12 January 2009: p00234

Stephanie also demonstrates the ways in which regular patterns can develop, both positively and negatively; thus, she described one unwelcome regular commenter:

she will haunt me on every single post that I've ever posted in my life! OK. And she will leave a really assy long fat negative hateful spiteful comment about me. And she will come back every two hours [...] if some of my fans will support me [...] she will continue bashing my fans (*op. cit.*).

Bloggers usually see their readers positively and appreciate comments – for example Andy says “I love my readers,”<sup>158</sup> but even the enthusiasm of some commenters is not necessarily appreciated, as Haliza explained:

they are like giving comments like '[Haliza] you are so great', 'You are so', you know, all these good things about me, which sometimes I feel like want to puke! Come on! [smiling] If you like someone don't be too much lah, just be honest OK; simple, steady, '[Haliza] you are cool', OK fine dah.<sup>159</sup> Enough (*op. cit.*).

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<sup>158</sup> Interview with Andy, 10 August 2009

<sup>159</sup> BM: 'dah' = 'sudah' – i.e. 'already'



Typology of blog commenters					
Type	Description	Engagement	Interaction	Identifiability	Comments
The 'Firster'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Competes to be the first to leave a comment</li> <li>Usually the comment has no meaning apart from stating that they are the first</li> <li>Normally restricted to high traffic blogs; though not on SoPo blogs</li> </ul>	L	M	H	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Likely to be tracking the blog via Google Reader or RSS</li> <li>Asynchronous communication affordance at play</li> </ul>
The Follower	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Doesn't contribute anything new, but lends visible support to whatever position the blog post has taken.</li> <li>Applies to all genres and blogs – but the expression will follow the blog genre. Thus the SoPo blog follower will express support for the political position, whereas – for example – the female personal blogger may get positive comments on her looks.</li> </ul>	M	M	H	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>May overlap with the Firster</li> </ul>
The Hater (aka the Troll)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Will attack the blogger, usually with <i>ad hominem</i> remarks</li> <li>Will engage with other commenters</li> <li>Usually anonymous, possibly with a nick that reflects their stance (e.g. 'Blogger_is_stupid')</li> <li>Stephanie and Rachel recount repetitive behaviour, someone constantly checking, immediately commenting, always attacking</li> </ul>	M	H	L	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Usually makes use of the anonymity affordance</li> </ul>
The Engager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The core of many blogs' 'commentosphere' – they take up points in the blog post, expand on them, or disagree with them</li> <li>As with the Follower, the expression will follow the blog genre</li> </ul>	H	H	H	
The Defender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Takes it upon himself to defend the blogger against negative comments, haters, etc.</li> <li>May use reasoned debate or <i>ad hominem</i></li> <li>Will often invoke the principle of independence – 'If you don't like this blog, start your own!'</li> </ul>	M	H	H	
The Socialite	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Talks with others in the comments, often on matters unrelated to the blog post</li> <li>Makes many comments</li> </ul>	M	H	H	
The Free Rider	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The purpose of the Free Rider's comment is to attract traffic to her own blog</li> <li>The more effective ones will leave an engaging teaser, and say that they have developed the point more on their post – leaving a link</li> <li>Some will make Follower-type comments, and leave a link; or just bluntly ask for people to check out their blog</li> </ul>	L	L	H	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This is generally frowned upon</li> <li>Some comment sections can automatically display the commenter/ blogger's most recent post</li> <li>Hyperlink affordance being exploited</li> </ul>
The Hijacker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>May try to switch the topic to something else – more relevant to SoPo blogs</li> <li>May take over the role of the blogger: defending, answering other comments, interpreting the blogger's intentions</li> </ul>	M	H	H	

NB: L = 'Low'; M = 'Medium'; H = 'High'.

**Table 7: Commenter typology**

### 4.3 *Commenter to commenter*

Linda Kenix notes the interaction amongst commenters, but argues that it is limited: “there are one or two commentators who receive the weight of comments and disdain from others” (2009: 809). In the personal blogs, some commenters become ‘Defenders’, taking on the self-appointed role of defending the blogger. In the following example, one accuses another commenter of being a ‘Free Rider’ because he left a link to his blog in the comment:

[Commenter A]

Shame on you for trying to pimp your blog here!!

[Commenter B replied]

I'm really sorry if I come across as "pimping" my blog.

I'm just trying to provide a bit of commentary on the issue and since I've written a piece (which was actually published before this piece) I thought a link wouldn't do much harm.<sup>160</sup>

A common piece of advice to new bloggers is to leave comments in order to attract readers. This can work in two ways: firstly by directly attracting readers onto one's blog; secondly, as one can leave one's blog URL as part of the 'profile' of the commenter, there is an additional incoming link to one's blog that may improve its search engine visibility. However, as the exchange above shows, how this is done is important. 'Commenter B' is careful to emphasise that s/he had already written the blog post, thus was not being opportunistic. Nonetheless, the reason why it raised the ire of 'Commenter A' was that the link was posted in the comment – as Nicky referenced when explaining that “I would leave my link as well and hope that they will come onto my blog, but I wouldn't like paste my link there, obviously, I would link it under my name” (*op. cit.*).

### 4.4 *Emergent aspects of the comments area*

The affordances of anonymity (enabling 'Haters'), accessibility, and asynchronicity mean that the dynamics of interaction in the commentosphere have much in common with online forums and email lists, which are well documented (e.g. Kollock & Marc A Smith 1999). The significant difference, however, is that it is the *blogger's* 'forum'. Going 'off-topic' (to use a norm from forums and Usenet lists) is decided by the blogger, who remains the indisputable and ultimate arbiter of her blog and the comments. However, there also develops a conceptual separation between the comments and the bloggers – for example, Tommy explained that he is happy to leave non-anonymous abusive comments “because [...] I can dissociate that.” This distancing of the blogger from the comments is echoed by Rachel who said:

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<sup>160</sup> Blog post, Tommy, 10 January 2009: p00250

And the two-way thing about it is so interesting; because I see my job as simply to put up an entry and then stand back, and let everyone else have their say. If you leave things open-ended then they do (*op. cit.*; original emphasis)

Rachel also gave an example of how she hoped that this autonomous aspect of the comments would compensate for her own unwillingness to critique a short story by some friends that she had blogged about, but secretly thought very little of, hoping that the commenters would be honest in her place, saying “It doesn’t have to be you who always provides the honesty” (*op. cit.*).

In situations like these, the comments area becomes an ‘arena’ in the sense that Postill proposes. The commenters debate issues (the proper use of the comments, the quality of a post, the right of the blogger to censor comments) and the blogger may intervene too. In a blog post related to Malaysian public reactions to the Gaza-Israel conflict, a commenter asked Tommy to remove his post as it was attracting racist comments, to which he responded:

I'll remove the racist comments, but I am not going to censor myself by removing this blog post.

This is my blog. My blog is my house. My readers are guests to my house. If there are unruly guests, I will kick them out. But I shouldn't have to censor myself in my own house.<sup>161</sup>

This statement is a clear affirmation of the authority of the blogger, resonating with the principle of independence, but the interactivity affordance as actualised in the comments area is also deterritorialising. As we saw above, Stephanie had many hostile comments, and described commenters ‘taking over’ her comments: “they start [...] forming this little forum on my commentary section and like you know ‘Let’s go out together and hate [Stephanie] together’ haha” (*op. cit.*). So, she found ways to delete and block ‘Haters’. Others see the comments as separate, and hope for greater diversity to enter their blog that way.

The different ways in which comments can be used is demonstrated by Alvin:

I comment for two reasons [...] one is, um, if I know it can bring hits to my site [...] Sometimes I just go in [...] and go like ‘Oh nice hat’ and stuff [...] people see my name and they click back. So I have already changed the way I comment as well, I put my full name there, because people recognise [Alvin] more than [a previously used nick]. So that is strategic. But [...] I won’t do that on [another

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<sup>161</sup> Blog post, Tommy, 10 January 2009: p00250

columnist's SoPo] site even though I know it will bring a lot of hits in [...] I will only comment [there] when I know I really have something to contribute to the discussion that's going on.<sup>162</sup>

Alvin is a relatively well-known columnist, and found that his offline name was more effective in attracting readers. His remark shows how he may choose to interact meaningfully with the host blogger, or in effect try to attract other commenters towards his own blog. However, he selects the type of blog where he does this, and avoids doing it on a SoPo blog – reflecting the operations of genre.

Differently from the filter blogs Kenix (*op. cit.*) refers to, the personal blog revolves around the blogger as a person, and so the interaction in the comments tends to revolve around more interpersonal issues. The interviewees did not usually spontaneously mention the comments as part of a definition of blogs, or when I elicited differences between homepages and blogs. However, when asked about comments, they invariably agreed that they were important. This dissociation of the comments from the blog may reflect the often noted need to develop a 'thick skin' with regards to 'haters', and recalls the dividual self discussed in the previous chapter – in that they become more practiced in maintaining a distance from personal attacks, as well as negotiating the different relations that are afforded by the blogs.

#### ***4.5 The dialogical medium and polycasting: affordances & extended parasocial relations***

There is thus evidence of particular socialities that operate with regards to the comments area, or the 'commentosphere'. The interactivity affordance, and particularly the comments, are central to establishing interpersonal relations and stabilising the socialities. It is thus relevant to ask, as Joshua Meyrowitz does, "What sort of relationship is formed between people who experience each other through electronic media?" (1997 [1985]: 45). To answer this question, he uses the concept of "para-social interaction," as initially proposed by Horton & Wohl, where "although the relationship is mediated, it psychologically resembles face-to-face interaction" (*ibid.*: 46). Although his work predates the Web, his arguments regarding the increased interest in the personalities of television performers presages the current prevalence of reality programming that parallels the growth of blogging (see Chapter II, Section 6.3; p45), and his explanation of how "the para-social performer is able to establish 'intimacy with millions'" (*ibid.*) resonates with Amanda Lenhart's description of the relation between bloggers and their audience with whom "[d]espite their one-to-many mode of

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<sup>162</sup> Interview with Alvin, 1 October 2009

distribution, they are engaged with in a one-to-one manner” (2005: 102) – the latter happens mostly through the comments.

Television allows a parasocial performer to engage the viewer through the visual and audio affordances, and by using live performances, to bring the embodied person and the verbal and non-verbal signals that transmit affect, close to the viewers – some of whom respond by developing emotional and psychological ties with the performer. The paradigmatic example is of the person who feels true grief at the death of an admired celebrity (Meyrowitz 1997: 47), or attachment to a fictional character (Schmid & Klimmt 2011).

However, the parasocial relations afforded by television remain essentially unidirectional in contrast to the multidirectional interactivity afforded by blogs, as demonstrated above. We can thus consider the interaction afforded by blogs as allowing *extended parasocial relations* – these are still characterised by an unequal asymmetrical reciprocity (e.g. Kenix 2009: 813), but direct interpersonal exchanges between the blogger and the audience are habitual, may extend over time, and may even extend to offline interaction.

The previous section discussed hyperlinking, which Doostdar notes as an index of dialogic relationships between blogs, and he also argues that “bloggers take an active, dialogic stance toward the responses of their readers – both the comments already written and those they anticipate” (2004: 655). Bloggers interact directly with commenters on their blog, who also interact with each other regardless of the blogger – contributing to an extra facet of the blog that attracts readers.

Similarly, Yang & Lim argue that a “blog cannot exist unless it allows for the existence of a dialogical thread or the narrative construction of meaning through relational communications,” and conclude that this means that the “blogger’s self [...] is a *dialogical self*” (2009: 345; original emphasis). This argument is relevant, but fails to account for the blog itself, which is constituted by the interaction of bloggers, commenters and readers. These three resonate in a plateau, the *dialogical medium* of the blog.

As noted above (Section 4; p156), most commenters also have a blog where they produce their own competing or complementary content, and bloggers are thus positioned as producers and recipients depending on their actions. From this I propose the concept of *polycasting* – that adds to the extant concepts of broadcasting and narrowcasting, neither of which captures the position of bloggers as

nomadic media producers and consumers who cluster around a multiplicity of productive sites, both within and spanning on- and offline assemblages.<sup>163</sup> Around each blog there is a unique assemblage of actors and components, who gather there because of the blog – this particular type of assemblage I call a *hyperlocal assemblage*, in order to emphasise its clustering around and the necessary presence of the single blog.

The blog affordances channel the flows, observable in socialities, that animate these assemblages. The online presence and offline context interact via the blog affordances as well, and one cannot be understood without reference to the other. Dialogical relations can happen on a dyadic level, as with most of the examples above, but it is also a collective phenomenon, and the next sections focus on the on- and offline socialities that derive from collective practices.

## 5 Blogtals

The above sections discussed online interactions, mostly dyadic, based around blogs. Now we shall look at the means of association that are related to emergent socialities that form the movements of the social assemblages. First ‘blogtals’ – online aggregators of blogs that serve cataloguing and dissemination roles for blogs – are examined, then the following section looks at ‘blogmeets,’ where bloggers meet face-to-face and span on- and offline contexts.

The term ‘blogtal’ derives from ‘web portal’ – a ‘gateway’ to the internet, where links and content are provided. Thus, a blogtal provides a single location to view many blogs, often organised by category. It is updated automatically or manually (by the blogger) whenever a new blog post is put online, and typically the main page will display the most recent blog posts of participating blogs in reverse chronological order, meaning the most recent get the most attention. Often, they will also provide a means to vote on particular posts, with a ‘top ten’ displayed at the top. There may also be social networking features such as individual profiles, avatars, and the ability to talk to other users. However, the main purpose is for bloggers to display new posts in order to attract readers, and to see other blogs. For the owner, the motivations may include personal interest in blogging, a display of professional skills, and the possibility of selling advertising space on the site.

### 5.1 Project Petaling Street

The more veteran blogger respondents all mention PPS as a key moment in the blogger experience in Malaysia. It started in 2003, and its movement was a territorialising line of flight, drawing in the

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<sup>163</sup> NB: This is not necessarily related to the concept of “polymedia,” recently proposed by Madianou & Miller (2010).

machinic connections of the hyperlinks, distributing blogs, and becoming an expression of a collective blogging identity. For example, one blogger explained how she used to use Google to find other Malaysian bloggers, but then she found “the god sent [www.petalinstreet.org](http://www.petalinstreet.org) that opened up windows to a world of experiences. Nothing has been the same since I joined the community portal!”<sup>164</sup> ‘Pinging’ PPS (i.e. linking the new blog post to the blogtals’ database) is a way to increase visitors, and when visiting the site there is always the likelihood of being exposed to new blogs (see Screenshot 6).

At a blogmeet in 2008 the owner of PPS explained that it had first started as a means for a group of bloggers to keep each other updated on their blogs, but because they were already well known, others wanted to participate too. His first reaction was that they should make their own site, but they agreed to let more in and by 2004 the process was automated. He mentioned criticisms and suggestions regarding updating the site – which by 2008 was looking outdated – and even an offer to buy it. But for him, ‘It does the job’, and he argued that, if someone wanted to do something better, they should do their own.<sup>165</sup>

Having established itself as the prime place for bloggers to publicise themselves, the issue of who controlled it became more important. Most pings moved down the website, but initially there were static links in the sidebar that linked to the blogs of the founder members. These became a contentious issue almost immediately, reflecting a strand of egalitarianism that resembled the earlier internet cultures outlined by Castells (2001: 54), as demonstrated in this reflection by a contemporary user:

Who does Project Petaling Street belong to?

I believe I can answer that question.

It belongs to every blogger who uses it.

[...]

An idea made into reality. Built up. Refined and evolving with the help of many ideas as times go along. It made a community.

And the community makes it up.<sup>166</sup>

Responding to the above post, the owner and manager of the blogtal wrote that PPS was a webservice that was there to serve a community, and would generally listen to the wishes of that

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<sup>164</sup> Blog post, Mary, 1 January 2008: p00851

<sup>165</sup> Fieldnotes dated 14 June 2008

<sup>166</sup> Blog post, Tampopo, 5 July 2005: p00847

community. However, he also underlined that he was the person who kept it running, implying that he had to make decisions that may not please everyone.<sup>167</sup>

There was an online debate about the proper ownership of PPS – with some bloggers arguing that it should be run by a committee representing bloggers, and others pointing out that the site was paid for and run by one person who therefore had the rights to controlling it. Other issues came up relating to banning particular bloggers for inappropriate use of the service, such as multiple pings and spam. Rachel recounted having been banned from PPS for accidentally doing some multiple pings, and resented having to write a “grovelling email” asking for reinstatement (*op. cit.*).

With regards to ‘geeks’ – people with IT skills and an interest in innovating IT tools – Christopher Kelty has proposed the concept of the “recursive public” whereby these groups are able to imagine and implement particular forms of “social imaginaries.” The formation of PPS is an example of that, wherein the founders also decided to exploit internet affordances in order to develop “in common the means of their own association” (Kelty 2005: 186). This ethos was evident in a statement on a wiki created alongside PPS, as a means to document its development, which stated that: “Project Petaling Street belongs to the Malaysian blogging community. The core group members are simply facilitators and custodians.”<sup>168</sup>

Recalling the tension between private ownership and commercial motivations and communal values and egalitarianism discussed in Chapter II (Section 7.2; p54) it is interesting to note that Chee Keong – who was one of the founding members of PPS – explained that they were also motivated by the possibility of pooling advertising revenue (*op. cit.*). Eventually, in a contentious move in March 2009, PPS was sold to a blogger unpopular with many for his abrasive style and intransigent religious stance.<sup>169</sup> I discussed this with a few respondents, whose response was that they did not use PPS very much anymore – mostly because there are too many uninteresting blogs, and an RSS reader made it easier to follow preferred blogs – and this change in ownership made it even less likely. However, for newer bloggers, a blogtal is still an important platform where they can interact with other bloggers – to publicise their own blog, and learn about others. The next section looks at how BlogAdNet provides their own blogtal, which allows this process to happen amongst ‘BlogAdNetters’.

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<sup>167</sup> Blog post, Adil, 5 July 2005: p00848

<sup>168</sup> Website, June 2003: p00859

<sup>169</sup> It was sold for RM3000 (USD910), according to Nicky (*op. cit.*), which is a surprisingly small amount.



**Logged in as julian (MY)**

[Logout](#)

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[Inlink posts](#)   [Inlink tags](#)


keywords:

order by:

Relevance ▾

from:

All ▾ [view](#)

**Popular tags:** pictures  
love fun fashion  
malaysia  
entertainment blogging  
food life singapore  
photos friends politics  
thoughts video humour  
event internet merdeka  
funny random travel  
movie music google blog  
  
personal photography


**most popular:**

<p><b>53 Worst Men To date</b> <a href="#">0 comments</a>, added 12 hours, 15 minutes ago by <a href="#">hollyjean</a></p> <p><b>38 Not Your Average Man</b> <a href="#">0 comments</a>, added 7 hours, 3 minutes ago by <a href="#">nigelsia</a></p> <p><b>36 Definition of PMS</b> <a href="#">0 comments</a>, added 9 hours, 39 minutes ago by <a href="#">cathyc</a></p> <p><b>32 KY eats - Hai Sien with Cheddie at Lala Chong, Subang Airport</b> <a href="#">0 comments</a>, added 9 hours, 45 minutes ago by <a href="#">KY</a></p> <p><b>30 Only 435 Restaurants Authorised to Collect Service Tax</b> <a href="#">0 comments</a>, added 15 hours, 25 minutes ago by <a href="#">Johnny</a></p>	<p><b>20 10 World's MOST All 10 Record Breakers!</b> <a href="#">0 comments</a>, added 9 hours, 20 minutes ago by <a href="#">rtasal</a></p> <p><b>18 Sign, life of the rich and fehmes in Monash Uni..</b> <a href="#">0 comments</a>, added 13 hours, 27 minutes ago by <a href="#">Razalshorthess</a></p> <p><b>17 hardwork do pays off?</b> <a href="#">0 comments</a>, added 7 hours, 22 minutes ago by <a href="#">angelahere</a></p> <p><b>17 RPK detained under ISA</b> <a href="#">0 comments</a>, added 7 hours, 27 minutes ago by <a href="#">dwan76</a></p> <p><b>15 why do woman cry?</b> <a href="#">0 comments</a>, added 13 hours, 10 minutes ago by <a href="#">patsygeh</a></p>
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**1 Petrol Prices Down !**  
<http://sunchair.blogspot.com/2008/09/petrol-prices-down.html>

[!\[\]\(2f42b9711300b468f9d9acae351241ca\_img.jpg\)](#)   [!\[\]\(64b4186e25b65de13988b2ae966d2132\_img.jpg\)](#)   [0 comments](#)

Petrol prices are down


[added 2 minutes ago by \[crlic\]\(#\)](#) 

**0 Emo? Angry? Disappointed**  
<http://kchi1952.blogspot.com/2008/09/emo-or-disappointed.html>

[!\[\]\(34cc8bac7607d8d239b3ed08dcf64975\_img.jpg\)](#)   [0 comments](#)

there i go again....emo-fied

[Tags: \[emo\]\(#\) \[life thoughts\]\(#\)](#)


[added 4 minutes ago by \[burningce\]\(#\)](#) 

**0 Carrefour contest**  
<http://realmaximum.blogspot.com/2008/09/carrefour-contest...>


[!\[\]\(d1e726f10d1ecf5485e9e3cfe50f7b01\_img.jpg\)](#)   [0 comments](#)


read yourself la


[Tags: \[entertainment event\]\(#\)](#)


[added 5 minutes ago by \[elendi\]\(#\)](#) 


**Chatbox**


 christoo :  
jess...lol.. u see later lah...hehehee...  
[00:35 Sep 13](#)

 aerox1982 : f'm xlepy now it go ahead people  
[00:35 Sep 13](#)

 benicaesss : sherry thanks babe for 10000000 tme! :) )  
[00:35 Sep 13](#)

 cathyv : alvin : fine.. dun let me see u in connaught  
[00:34 Sep 13](#)

 benicaesss : christ, im honoured. i want it too :) i think a badge shud be more apt than a banner?  
[00:34 Sep 13](#)

 stakinchew : don wan...XD  
[00:34 Sep 13](#)

[« prev](#)

julian :

Post it

Project Petaling Street

a malaysian blog-tal

Teresa Kok Arrested: OPS LALANG 2?????

Who is next???

The Dandelions | September 13, 2008 12:18 AM

F\*CK YOU! Stop arresting people under ISA!

3 people became the victims of ISA. This is too much. All this happens while Ahmad Ismail walk away a free man!

Signs of Life | September 13, 2008 12:17 AM

day 35 - suited

"they're about to lock up all the civil society activists again.. like they did in 1987... :)

watch out for Malaysia in the news... "

Youth in Asia | September 13, 2008 12:15 AM

The Sassy MP Kena ISA

Not able to sleep already. Might as well keep updated.

Malaysians Say The Darndest Things! | September 13, 2008 12:14 AM

Teresa Kok is the latest to be arrested under the ISA

Kok, who is Seputeh MP and also assemblyman for Kinrara, was arrested at 11.20pm on Friday 12th September 2008. Deputy IGP Ismail Omar has confirmed Kok's arrest.

mindful mariner | September 13, 2008 12:12 AM

Next Victim:Teresa Kok Arrested Under ISA

A source of mine has just told me that Teresa Kok has been arrested under the ISA.

It's truly shocking that they would resort to this manner of action

t.he. r.e.b.e.l.w.i.t.h.i.n.u.s | September 13, 2008 12:11 AM

Tonight A Lot of Malaysians Cannot Sleep

I for one is emotionally distressed. The arrest of Tan Hoon Cheng, SinChew Daily reporter who reported racially sensitive remarks from Ahmad Ismail were being arrested without trail under the ISA. I am in such a shock that I just dont know what to fe...

My So Called Life | September 13, 2008 12:06 AM

Read Malaysiakini (RPK.Sin Chew Editor and now Teresa Kok?)

ABOUT PPS

PPS is the #1 Malaysian blog-ping aggregator!

If you're a blog reader, PPS will give you the links you crave! If you're a blogger, PPS will give you the traffic you deserve!

Be a member of PPS! Register to access the PPS public pinger! Registration is FREE!

Write to pps(at)petalingstreet.org for any questions and suggestions or to report ping abuses.

SEARCH PPS

Search the PPS Database for previous pings. Want a list of all pings related to particular topic? Use this search feature to get a list!

PPS SERVICES

• PPS Blog

• PPS Pinger (Password)

• PPS Search

SPONSORS

## 5.2 *Wassup?*

PPS was the first blogtal in Malaysia, and central to the early development of the blogosphere. However, its usefulness diminished with the introduction of other technologies, in particular RSS feeds and readers such as Google Reader. Nonetheless by 2010 there were up to 10 such Malaysian websites, some focusing on BM blogs. This section will discuss some examples of practices from the blogtal set up by BlogAdNet, called *Wassup?* (see Screenshot 5).

### 5.2.1 *Yay-ing and Nay-ing*

*Wassup?* has a system for voting blog posts up ('Yay') and down ('Nay'), and the top ten in any one day are displayed at the top of the page. Getting into the top ten has an exponential effect on readers to the blog, and there are examples of bloggers soliciting 'Yays'. In one blog post Thomas reproduces a MSN conversation,<sup>170</sup> saying: "Just not long ago where i just posted my latest post on [*Wassup?*]. Ha. Almost immediately, i had one MSN chatbox coming in and this was the conversation."<sup>171</sup> The interlocutor asks him for the *Wassup?* link so that he can vote for the post, as opposed to just looking at it directly on his blog, but Thomas humbly declines. In another similar example, another blogger reproduces a conversation where his interlocutor jokingly makes a very florid request for the blogger to vote for his blog post

Not like some other few people who just send message like

"[Yay] Pls... (Insert Link)"

I know a few of you bloggers who has my MSN does that and that's very annoying!<sup>172</sup>

These examples show how bloggers use MSN and other media to communicate, and also how self-promotion is only acceptable within certain limits. Adeline mentioned one blogger who transgressed boundaries by going to the extent of texting (via mobile phone) her and other bloggers, asking them to 'Yay' his post.<sup>173</sup>

It is interesting to note that the option to vote down (to 'Nay') blog posts is rarely used, but one blogger tried to form a group of bloggers to do just that – some of whom responded. He created a blog, whose subheading stated his reasoning: that too many bloggers 'Yay' their own blog and that he wanted to share his reasons for 'Nay-ing' blogs, and encourage others to do so.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> i.e. A synchronous chat session on Microsoft Messenger

<sup>171</sup> Blog post, Thomas, 5 March 2009: p00534

<sup>172</sup> Blog post, Tan, 9 July 2008: p00849

<sup>173</sup> Interview with Adeline, 7 May 2009

<sup>174</sup> Blog post, , 13 September 2008: p00850

There were some bloggers who joined him, but overall the option to 'Nay' was rarely used, probably reflecting the Malaysian preference not to publicly criticise people when possible, and the fact that voting is not anonymous. Some bloggers use sensational titles (intimating sex or scandal) to attract hits, and on one occasion a group of bloggers announced and carried out a collective move to drive each other's blog posts into the Top Ten list. *Wassup?* was not used by all those who registered with BlogAdNet, but nonetheless it is a significant territorialising influence, where socialities are negotiated and audiences generated.

## 6 Blogmeets

The previous sections looked at online associations, and now we shall turn to offline contexts which were generally invoked when interviewees were questioned about 'community'. Blogmeets tend to follow the pattern of most organised events in Malaysia: there is a registration desk, a door gift – such as a 'goody bag', an emcee who introduces speakers and hands over tokens of appreciation, and refreshments laid out on a buffet table. It is therefore important to ask, are there habitual practices in blogmeets that derive from blogs *per se*, or more precisely, blog affordances?

The earlier blogmeets – such as the one Alvin describes when he said: "I think the community really came together in 2005, when PPS had their first party" – recall Bourdieu's argument about autonomous fields (1998: 61). That is, within a restricted context – such as a smaller number of blogs and one blogtal only – they showed a focus on blogs-as-blogs. However, for my fieldwork I attended as many blogmeets as I could, and I realised that I was one of the rare bloggers – if not the only – blogger who went to all the different blogmeets. Later, as the SoPo bloggers began to organise amongst themselves, and the personal bloggers had the opportunity to attend events organised by BlogAdNet, and others, the blogmeets began to revolve around other themes such as the relation with the mainstream media, or marketing campaigns. Thus, the blogmeets tended to reflect the blog genre (particularly SoPo and personal blogs), and also offline affiliations such as BlogAdNet and AppAds, with BlogAdNet organising the most – which is partially what led them to become a focus for my fieldwork.

These also reflect bloggers' individual motivations too: personally, I tended to find the SoPo blogmeets more interesting, because the older bloggers and conversational topics suited me more – whereas in the other blogmeets the focus was predominantly on socialising between younger bloggers, and on winning prizes.

However, even when they are not wholly centred around blogs, owning a blog still remains a condition for participation, and blog-oriented practices can happen on an interpersonal level, such as asking questions about interlocutors' blogs – how many hits they get, what they blog about, what platform they use; taking photos with other bloggers – especially celebrity bloggers ('blogebrities') – for later display on one's blog; exchanging blogging tips, and so forth.

In order to trace some blogging socialities, this section looks at blogmeets, and identifies particular practices that relate to blog affordances to see how the latter enable the blogging assemblage to mesh between the on- and offline contexts.

### **6.1 *Camwhoring***

Although the term 'cam whore' originates from people who supply pornographic or erotic performances via webcams (Senft 2008: 89–91), the term is defined in the Malaysian context as "Posing for a picture" (Hassan & Hashim 2009). More precisely, the term seems to be an ironic acquiescence to the prevalent somewhat excessive, or obsessive, posing for the camera, and it carries the suggestion of being bound to the demands of the camera.

Personal blogs without photographs are very rare, and the ways in which they are used give some insight into relations between bloggers, as well as the production of personal blogs. Post-blogmeet posts typically have photos of other bloggers, in particular blogebrities, and the most obvious shared practice at blogmeets is taking photos, as this blog extract exemplifies:

[Tommy] was here too.. I managed to grab and talked to him while there were not many people around [...] Xixue with her boyfriend Mike were there too!! Haha.. Managed to grab a shot before everyone was rushing there~~~ Hehe.<sup>175</sup>

Both on- and offline, lines of attention are drawn to the bloggers who have higher traffic – the high-status blogger has more 'incoming' photographs (see Plate 15), just like his blog has more incoming hyperlinks, and in both case he is less likely to reciprocate. In this way, camwhoring at blogmeets can be territorialising, in that higher status bloggers' positions get confirmed and reinforced, resulting in more incoming traffic online.

This is not the only reason though, as I experienced at one blogmeet – it had a costume theme of music stars, and I had dressed up as Bob Marley, complete with a dreadlocked wig and dark face

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<sup>175</sup> Blog post, TanFan, 25 October 2009: p00852

paint. This successful disguise was to win me the first prize of the evening (a Sony PlayStation 3), but I also noticed many more people than usual asking to take photos with me – my disguise was providing narrative material for their blog posts. Some of them told me afterwards that that they thought I was a part of the event.<sup>176</sup>



**Plate 15: Blogebrities are photographed at a blogmeet (15 March 2008)**

Amongst bloggers of a more equal status, taking a photo together is also a good way of breaking the ice, and with an exchange of blog addresses, the tie can be recreated online. The example in Plate 16 shows how this can be a very somatic process too: the classic pose with the camera held at arm's length means that the subjects of the photo need to get close together. In the example shown, they examined the first photo, decided they would not want it to be posted online publicly, so they took another. The photos are taken with the expectation that they are going to go online and will remain there indefinitely. There is a clear awareness of the consequences of the storage and reduplication affordance, and their selectivity is a practice that emerges with it.

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<sup>176</sup> Fieldnotes dated 4 April 2009

In another example of an informal gathering of a group of bloggers, the reciprocal camwhoring territorialises by occupying time spent together:

Camwhoring/Taking Picture sessions lasted for a while and around 11.03pm we decided to make a move. We went out of the cafe and we took group pictures again and it lasted us 30 whole minutes. **HAHA.** Of course, many stuffs happened then. Imao.<sup>177</sup>



**Plate 16: Camwhoring and selecting a photo; the first photo was rejected, and they try a second time (9 October 2009)**

The personal blogger does not only take pictures of people, but also anything that may be a useful topic for the blog; the food provided is very popular, but also typically other photos are taken that are used to construct a narrative of the blogmeet. The ubiquitous presence of the digital camera means that everything is a potential photograph, as bloggers store opportunities to blog about, interacting in a virtually asynchronous manner and building a blog narrative while simultaneously navigating the offline event.

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<sup>177</sup> Imao/LMAO: 'Laughing my ass off'. Blog post, Thomas, 24 December 2008: p0071; original emphasis

## 6.2 Online meeting offline

Online interactions are often extended to the offline. For example, Andrew noted that when bloggers meet face-to-face they can continue conversations started online: “it’s easier for them to like communicate, [...] and then just happen to start to talk, and then you probably answer the same [question] that was never answered in that particular blog post”<sup>178</sup> (Tommy mentioned this too; see also Reed 2005: 236).

Bloggers who have interacted online are not strangers, and interact as acquaintances, but in the first instance at least, carry over relations that are shaped by the blog affordances – as this account from Tommy’s first blogmeet shows:

A typical conversation at the bloggers meet-up went something like this.

Blogger: *"HEYYYYYYY.... Hello [Tommy]!"*

[Tommy]: *"Ummm... hi!" \*scans for name tag\**

Blogger: *"Its me, my name is HunnyWunnyBunnyKins [or some other obscure online nicknames]. Remember?"*

[Tommy]: *"Oh! Hi! Yea yea, I remember you! You commented before. How you doing?"*

*\*Repeat process with 20 other bloggers\**<sup>179</sup>

Thus the interactivity affordance as used in the comments becomes a means to effect a further relation offline. I usually found that I was more likely to remember bloggers by their blog name or nick, rather than their name (if it was different), and it is common to refer to bloggers by their nick even in offline contexts; most of the interaction happens online, in a disembodied form, and in that sense the online blogging affordances have a territorialising influence on the offline, but the offline also extends to the online in ways that extend and stabilise parasocial relations.

The minority of bloggers who like to remain anonymous can ask not to have photos taken, but a common way, which is less disruptive of prevailing socialities and has the added advantage of attracting attention to one’s blog, it to mask one’s face – as can be seen in Plate 17.

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<sup>178</sup> Interview with Andrew, 15 August 2009

<sup>179</sup> Blog post, Tommy, 30 June 2005 : p00803; original emphasis and square brackets





**Plate 17: Blogger at blogmeet extends online anonymity (15 March 2008)**

Just as at any social gathering, there are clusters of people, and although an empirically reliable statement about the parallel on- and offline clusters would require more data than I have, my estimation was that bloggers who hang out together online also tend to hang out together offline. This is the most obvious with the A-list bloggers, who typically group together, and are often described as ‘cliques’. One such was Adeline and her friends, but she pointed out the history behind her group of friends and she said: “these new bloggers that came into the picture say ‘Oh, you know, those cliques,...’ and ‘those people’, and all that. They don’t know our history, we’ve known each other since forever” (*op. cit.*).

When asked about ‘community’, Jaymee said that it was divided into cliques – but online one is able to interact with more people:

obviously in real life you will hang out with people that you can click with [...] online as well [...but] online the clique gets wider lah, because, I mean there are only so many people you can hang out with in real life.<sup>180</sup>

In other words, it is easier to maintain connections online with a wider group, because it requires less effort. However, there can be tensions when this online interaction is not replicated offline – Magdalene mentioned how she had briefly met a blogger/reader in one blogmeet, then they had a chance meeting in a shopping mall four months later and she initially failed to recognise her:

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<sup>180</sup> Interview with Jaymee, 13 October 2009



but she was quite offended that I didn't remember her [...] I think it's because, like, to her [...] she knows so much about me from reading my blog so she gets insulted that I don't know anything about her. Which is kinda unfair because [...] I'm not reading her blog or anything.<sup>181</sup>

She also reflected on the tensions caused by hierarchies that developed amongst bloggers, mentioning some criticisms when she and other A-list bloggers were included in a television programme:

I mean, it's natural that people will judge a blog by its traffic, but it doesn't sound nice to say lah. [...] someone commented and said 'These big bloggers don't read our, the small bloggers', blogs anyway so why should we go and read their blogs to support them?'

Blogmeets thus tend to see relational patterns that develop online through the actualisation of the affordances being replicated offline too. Interpersonal interactions may be mediated through the genre of the blog in that bloggers seek content for the blog, and act accordingly – for example, using photos with other bloggers as suitable content for a personal blog. For the last two interviewees (Jaymee and Magdalene), they see their activities on- and offline as being influenced by underlying interpersonal preferences for which the blogs are intermediaries, and not mediators in Latour's terms. However, for other observers such as myself, and even more so for 'small bloggers' who did not ask questions like I did, their clustering offline seems to reflect an elitism created by the online calculation of their traffic.

### **6.3 *Post-blogmeet posts***

The post-blogmeet posts on *anthroblogia* were the most likely to have comments. I would try to link to everyone I had talked to, and most of them (apart from the blogebrities) would leave a comment (usually phatic). It is possible that they monitored incoming links, or that they checked my blog on purpose, or saw it in the blogtal. I would also visit their blog and comment, and these reciprocating visits thus reinforced whatever ties were made at the blogmeet.

A commenter on Chee Keong's post after the Regional Awards (discussed in the next chapter) referred to the usual practice of linking to the bloggers in photos: "You could have linked the names to their blogs so people can hop over to look-see...or maybe you don't wanna increase their traffic?"

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<sup>181</sup> Interview with Magdalene, 22 October 2009

Hahahahaha!”<sup>182</sup> Chee Keong responded that he had just been in a hurry, but this exchange demonstrates how the withholding of links can be seen as a questionable matter.

Another typical feature of blogmeets is to find people telling their experience of meeting people ‘in the flesh’ for the first time. Thus the blogger previously mentioned (above, Section 6.1; p175) said “Anyway it was nice meeting [Tommy].. and I didn’t know he was that ... hmmm ... “tiny” lol.”<sup>183</sup> These reflections on the first embodied encounter relate to how expectations are initially formed influenced by the online interaction that flows through the anonymity and disembodiment affordances.

#### **6.4 Blogging socialities**

This section has described some blog socialities – regularised clustering of practices – that demonstrate the meshing of the on- and offline in ways that belie the frequent dichotomisation of ‘virtual’ and ‘real-life’ activities. The digital camera in particular reveals itself as a key actant – as implied in the term ‘camwhore’, it is an almost obligatory point of passage in connecting the on- and offline. Deleuze has argued that cinema cameras and editing enable different experience of space and time – for example through the use of camera angles that offer otherwise impossible reflexive views (Colebrook 2006: 90). Digital cameras allow multiple frames and post-editing – thus engaging smoothly with the need for personal bloggers to develop narratives and the blog affordances of perfect reduplication and multimedia.

Just as an affordance both limits and expands opportunities of perception and experience, allowing for different forms and intensities of becoming, the lack of the affordance results in a changed flow, and the requirement to adjust to a deterritorialisation. For example, the offline context precludes disembodiment, and the blogger hiding his face in Plate 17 resisting that deterritorialisation and trying to keep his anonymity. He explained to me that as a journalist, he preferred for his offline identity not to be joined with his online one.<sup>184</sup> However, on my post-meet blog post, someone left a comment saying who he was. About a year and a half later, he formally ‘came out’ and abandoned his online anonymity,<sup>185</sup> perhaps due to the greater acceptance of blogs by journalism in general, or the increased public visibility due to the increase in events, mostly organised by BlogAdNet.

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<sup>182</sup> Quoted in Blog post, Chee Keong, 28 October 2009: p00751

<sup>183</sup> Blog post, TanFan, 25 October 2009: p00852

<sup>184</sup> Fieldnotes dated 15 March 2008

<sup>185</sup> Blog post, Jaymee, 29 June 2009: p00596

Anonymity is rare, however, and most bloggers capitalise on the blogmeets to overcome the limits of some of blog affordances – reminding us that affordances are important in their operation as much as their non-operation. Nonetheless, the offline blogmeets are seen in the context of blogging, and thus there is a territorialising movement by the blogs, as happens through the taking of photographs, and the participation in content provision for blogs.

## 7 Personal bloggers and community

Usually, defining the ‘blogosphere’ was relatively straightforward, being identified as the collection of anyone who has a blog. Sometimes it would overlap with the ‘blogger community’, but this was a much more difficult concept to pin down.<sup>186</sup> Most of the interviewees were asked about community, with a version of ‘Is there a blogger community?’; a few mentioned it spontaneously and I probed further.

Overall, the most common themes that were mentioned in relation to ‘community’ were Project Petaling Street (PPS), BlogAdNet, and people who meet offline to spend time together – the latter is often due to blogmeets organised by the former. For example, Stephanie described the blogger community as: “probably the active bloggers that are mingling around the blogging scene, like you know there’s always a blogger event” (*op. cit.*). Magdalene also referred to BlogAdNet, and I asked her if they represent all the bloggers:

I think they represent the majority of bloggers who are active, [...] not to say active in blogging, but active in being part of a community [...] So I think, I don’t know if I mean it’s that part of the community I belong, but I think because it’s so big [referring to BlogAdNet] that I just automatically think about that (*op. cit.*).

In addition, the longer term bloggers typically referred to the ‘early days’ when PPS as being a closer community, for example, Chee Keong said – “There used to be a very strong blogging community based on petalingstreet.org” (*op. cit.*). Alvin also expressed a similar sentiment above (Section 6; p174), and referenced changes, saying “I think the biggest community at the moment is the ones, the young ones, the events where they’re going together; they’re sneaking into press conferences together” (*op. cit.*).

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<sup>186</sup> One of my survey questions asked for responses to the statement “The blogger community is important to me;” however, on reflection, this question was not well phrased – it presupposes community, and in any case the answers were not strong enough in any direction to make it useful.

Strong ties with bloggers *per se* were not so common, although Rachel expressed an affinity with other bloggers, saying “I personally feel there’s a great kinship with anyone who blogs. I think other bloggers feel it too” (*op. cit.*). James was enthusiastic about community, “I started this with a very strong passion to do something for the blogger community, right, because I’m a blogger myself, and I really enjoy people I met up with,”<sup>187</sup> and Andrew displayed close personal investment in a blogger community, saying

blogging community is something more of a virtual type of home [...] for us bloggers we have people’s MSN contacts, we talk to each other [...] So it’s more like a family. That is what a community means, a family (*op. cit.*).

It was a comment by Adeline that brought home to me what had been a growing realisation that in my search for community was probably going to be in vain. She said

you’re studying different characteristics of people, you can never understand this blogger is doing this, and why that blogger is doing that, and why this blogger is doing this – or they may be all doing the same thing, but they all have different reasons why they do it, you know? (*op. cit.*).

Adeline’s comment was responding mostly to journalists, and to me in this instance, who often develop a narrative of bloggers as a homogenous group, identifying them in positive or negative manners, but trying to assign a label and a meaning to them. She was underlining the way in which, although there were some overall commonalities, such as meeting face-to-face and associations with BlogAdNet (for those bloggers that I met), there were also so many divergent opinions. In the interviews, when probing further on factors such as locality, or specialised interests, there were many different types of ‘community’ acknowledged.

For some, ‘community’ also seemed to be sometimes something that other people do – as evidenced by Magdalene remark above, and most clearly by Nicky, who said: “Yeah of course there’s a blogging community! [...] I’m just not a very big part of it! [laughs]” (*op. cit.*). In response to a question on my blog, one commenter said that she felt neither part of the BlogAdNet community, nor the Malaysian blogger community, but she felt that there was such thing. In this sense community is used to homogenise or differentiate those who were not part of one’s closer circle.

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<sup>187</sup> Interview with James, 11 February 2009

Face-to-face meetings are clearly emphasised by all those who spoke about the meaning of a blogging community; to be a blogger one has to have a blog, and interact online, but without the offline, there was not a strong emphasis on community. They are in effect defining community in terms of consociational practices, saying that bloggers who repeatedly do blog-related things together, are a community. As discussed above (Section 2.1; p143), Amit argues that as ongoing consociation decreases (due to dispersal, or increase of population) “categorical oppositions and primordialized notions of moral obligation” (Amit & Rapport 2002: 60) become more important for retaining communality. With respect to the bloggers I observed, there was no such strong symbolic markers, although PPS has taken on a status as primordial community to a certain extent, and some – such as Rachel and Ibrahim – were more attached to a moral thread connecting bloggers. However, Adeline expressed the more prevalent attitude, explaining that she used to perhaps feel a special bond when meeting a stranger who blogs, but that had changed now. She gave the example that although one of her colleagues is a blogger, she does not connect with her in that respect (*op. cit.*). Amit argues that if a consociate relationships shifts to a more long-lasting personal one, “the relationship shifts from being principally constituted through a consociate membership in a collectivity to a more dyadic link within a personal network” (*ibid.*: 59), and the following section looks at how such dyadic relations were expressed by bloggers.

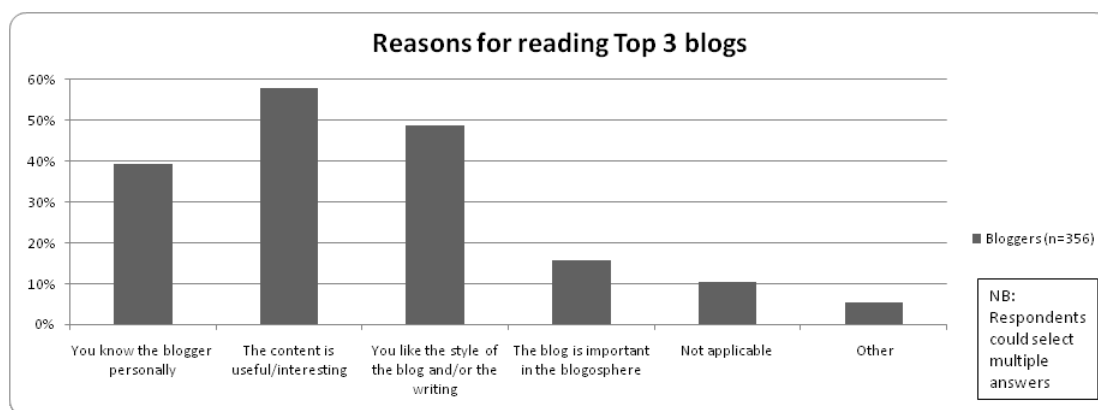
## 7.1 ‘Blogger friends’

Understanding what is meant by ‘friend’ is as subject to various interpretations as ‘community’. It is another type of relation though – community is ascribed to a certain degree, but friendship is uniquely personal and chosen. Therefore it represents another way of approaching blog-mediated extended parasocial relations.<sup>188</sup>

‘Friendship’ implies varying degrees and types of reciprocity, and this section looks at what types of reciprocal actions are enabled by blogs, and this may shed light on what ‘blogger friends’ are, or can be. In a context where no reciprocal action is possible, it is difficult to imagine any conception of friendship arising. Though it must be noted that how any friendship develops is highly contingent, and depends on a number of factors not related to blogging.

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<sup>188</sup> As stated earlier (Chapter II, Section 2.1; p11), this thesis focuses principally on blogs. Due to this, scholarly work related to ‘friending’ and the establishment of reciprocating mediated relationships in social networking sites (e.g. boyd & Ellison 2007; Quan-Haase 2007; Thelwall 2008) is not touched upon, although it is a fertile area for further analysis.

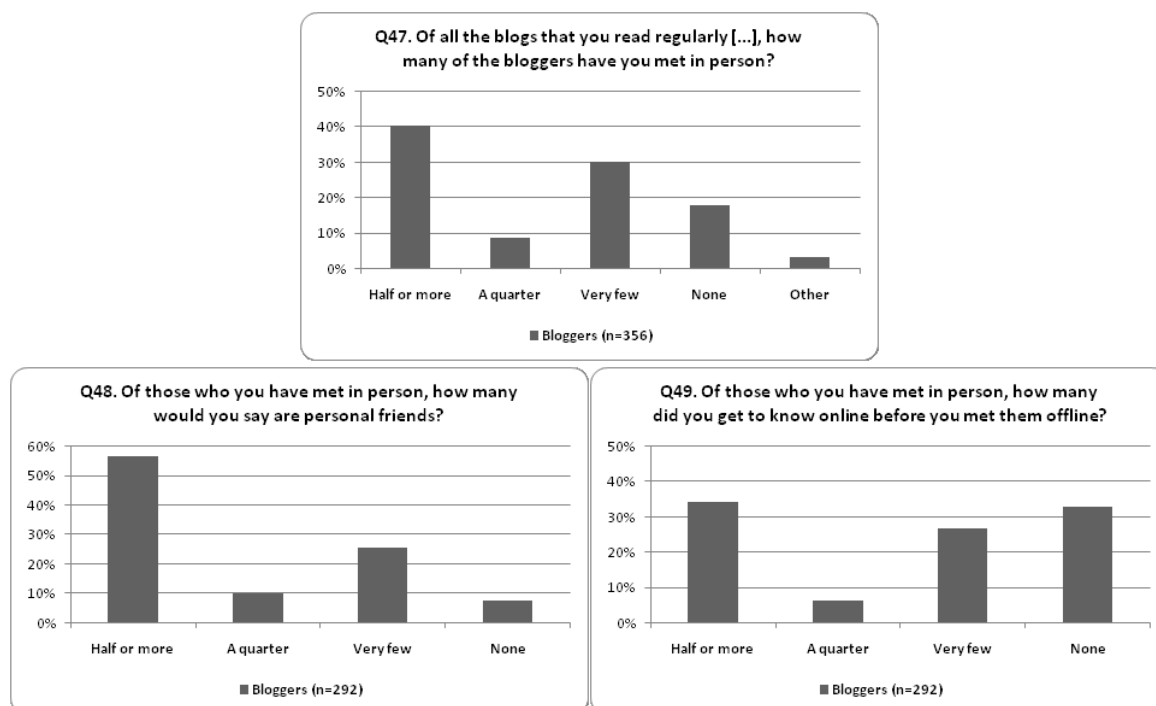


**Figure 4: Bloggers' reasons for reading favourite blogs**

Meeting online friends offline is the most common means to assess the significance of online friendships. For example, Di Gennaro & Dutton (2007) compared the use of different online means of communication, and found that “[b]logging [...] had a negative effect on making online friendships,” arguing that this is probably because bloggers are “one-to-many broadcasters, rather than one-to-one or interactive communicators, fostering interpersonal relationships [...] since only a small proportion of bloggers and blogs gain an audience or comments from an audience” (*ibid.*: 615). The other online contexts which predicted more formation of online friendships were “posting messages on message boards, posting photos on the Internet, having a website and chatting” (*ibid.*).

This is interesting, but needs to be used with caution because it is based on the British sociocultural context, and there is no detail about the blog genres. The bloggers I interviewed, and most of those I interacted with, did have audiences, and would get comments from more or less regular readers. In some cases, as Figure 4 suggests (39.2% of blogger’s favourite 3 bloggers are known to them personally), this may be (pre-existing) offline friends or acquaintances, and in other cases, the comments would come from those who participated in the collective events organised by BlogAdNet, and the online blogtals.

I found that the interviewees clustered into small groups, with a lot of overlapping – some had got to know each other via IRC, some had been to school or came from the same hometown. The younger bloggers however seemed more likely to have formed groups based on the blogmeets and shared blog experiences. Overall, they all had blogs in common, but this aspect was possibly more emphasised to me because that’s how I came across them in the first place.



**Figure 5: Relations between regular blogs read and the bloggers**

Figure 5 gives some indication of the relationship between bloggers and the bloggers whose blogs they like to read. The answers to Question 47 showed that there was 40.3% who had met half or more of the bloggers they regularly read, and 48.1% had met very few, or none.<sup>189</sup> Of those who had been met in person, a majority (56.8%) considered half or more of them to be personal friends, but Q49 showed that most of these were pre-existing friends, with 59.6% saying very few or none of them were encountered online first. This presents a different picture to that of Di Gennaro and Dutton (*op cit*); the most likely reason is that their study does not distinguish between blogs, whereas most of those that responded to my survey were of the personal type, and another possible reason may be different blogging practices in Malaysia and the UK. However, this is not possible to ascertain without more details, emphasising again the need for more intercultural research into internet practices.

When interviewing the bloggers, the definition of 'friends' was again very difficult to be precise about; usually, it was a subtle shift in emphasis, a meaningful glance, that indicated that what was being referred to was 'blogger friends' was being opposed to 'real' friends. The most negative description I heard was from Mary, with whom I chatted while at a blog meet. She described 'online friends' as "'Hi and Bye' friends", saying that they are only interested in getting hits, by having you

<sup>189</sup> A portion was omitted in the chart for presentation purposes. The full question was, "Of all the blogs that you read regularly (not just the three mentioned above), how many of the bloggers have you met in person?"

mention their blog and/or visit it. Using the expression “in real life”, she contrasted online friends with those with whom you have something in common – the same home town, the same school. I asked her was not ‘online’ also ‘real life’ – she agreed, but it was “different.” Although it was the first time I had met her, her openness about ‘real friends’ was possibly related to the fact that she was a close friend of someone I knew quite well, and who had mentioned me to her already – thus we already had a common non-blog context, one of her ‘real life’ criteria.<sup>190</sup>

When the phrase ‘blogger friends’ was used, it referred to people whom they had met online first, or those with whom they only interacted with online. However, although Adeline said “right now I have a bunch of close blogger friends but the funny thing is we’ve know each other before blogs”, she went on to explain that her ‘blogger friends’ were made via IRC<sup>191</sup>

whenever they say you can meet like new close friends from blogs – I guess so, but it’s still not easy [...] my generation was the IRC time – we’ve got a lot of friends from the IRC who have evolved into, who have become bloggers; so maybe the younger bloggers now, would take blogging as though it was IRC for me then (*op. cit.*).

In other words, her blogger friendships were also initially mediated via an internet technology of an earlier ‘generation’ of internet users. In effect, Thomas (a younger and more recent blogger), said that he had “definitely [made] a *lot* of friends [...] actually my bigger circle of friends are actually all in the blogosphere” (*op. cit.*; original emphasis). It is worth asking how blog affordances can mediate interpersonal relationships in ways that differ from other forms of interaction. One way in which blogging can help in forming friendships is the ability to observe without interacting, and to peruse the archives, can give a new reader a commitment-free opportunity to form an opinion of the blogger – when meeting the person for the first time, it is easier to share interests.

The expression ‘blogger friends’ recalls others such as ‘high school friends’, or ‘university friends’ – all of these are bounded in a way that simple ‘friend’ is not. The context of the initial friendship is seen as somehow constitutive of the nature of the relationship, and may bring with it certain obligations and practices. A key difference with blogging friendships is that much of it is sustained by disembodied, asynchronous online interaction. Certain practices accompany this – such as commenting on each other’s blog; on observing blogs, these repeat commenters were easy to spot.

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<sup>190</sup> Fieldnotes dated 14 August 2008

<sup>191</sup> Internet Relay Chat – i.e. synchronous online chat rooms



Alvin noted how regular visits by friends can have an unintended consequence: “[they] will just come on and comment anyway. I don’t think they realise the impact of their hits [...] every single day.” Alvin’s comment “friends, who will just come on and comment anyway,” implied that they are ‘real’ friends as opposed to ‘blogger friends’. ‘Real’ friends may also have blogs, and they keep in contact with each other via their blog – but the blog is incidental to the relationship. ‘Blogger friends’ are defined in terms of the medium, and the medium is seen as the proximate, if not actual, cause of the reciprocal social relation.

Interaction also happens via other media too – typically MSN, and sometimes bloggers post extracts from these conversations; and many interviewees mentioned getting emails from readers too. Jaymee mentioned a change in her practices, saying:

These days, I don’t comment as much, I mean, because [...] I read most of my friends’ blogs right? If I see them I just say ‘Hey that day you wrote’, ‘How is your new puppy’ or whatever, I just carry it offline (*op. cit.*).

Thus it is important to note that whereas the extended parasocial relations possible via blogs do expand a person’s opportunities to meet new people, the offline dynamics remain significant. I asked Thomas, who as mentioned above stated that he had made many friends via blogging, whether he would not have met those people if he hadn’t blogged. He said that it was possible he would have met them anyway, as he discovered other connections such as shared mutual friends, or crossed paths in Facebook or Friendster (*op. cit.*).

## 8 Conclusions

The previous chapter discussed some concepts related to analyses of Melanesian societies. I would like to return to Strathern, who critiques

those Western explanatory modes that regard one ‘area’ of life as imposed upon or as an exteriorisation of another, and force as applied to something beyond and external to the acting subject [...and with regards to] Melanesian concepts of sociality, there is no indigenous supposition of a society that lies over or above or is inclusive of individual acts and unique events. There is no domain that represents a condensation of social forces controlling elements inferior or in resistance to it (1990: 102).

Jensen & Rödje note Strathern’s theoretical debt to Deleuze & Guattari and argue that “this does not imply that Melanesians lack, or have failed to discover, these concepts,” but that these analytical

categories “may be quite inadequate for describing or understanding the life of Melanesians” (2009b: 23). I have already argued against conceptualising the blogging assemblage as a community, let alone a culture, in the same way as a people of the New Guinea highlands is held to be. However, this insight can be used in the context of personal blogging. Although references were often made to a ‘community’, this was often either in reference to others, or in reference to the past. With a few exceptions, the respondents’ own actions were typically framed in terms of personal decisions, or relating to close associates such as colleagues, family, or friends.

Denying a concept of society, or community, does not mean that the alternative – as Western thought would often have it – is unbridled individualism. Personal bloggers assert varying degrees of a sense of duty and loyalty to their readers, and readers express both loyalty and criticisms of the bloggers. The blog becomes the central node the hyperlocal assemblage: the blog, blogger and the readers gather in contingent clusters; they accept and recognise the relevance and interests of others – in particular the principle of independence, and the right to ownership of original content (i.e. not to be plagiarised). This molecular composition of the blogosphere promotes clustering around individuals and their blogs, rather than groups or a collective idea, as happens with open source, forums, or SoPo blogs. The accessibility affordance removes a moral argument that could result if there were limited shared blogging spaces. The comments also operate with this affordance to some degree – the cost of engaging via a comment is very low, and the consequences for an anonymous commenter are negligible.

The previous chapter argued that the blog is a dialogical medium, constituted by the interaction of blog, bloggers, commenters and readers which overlap and form a generative site of social meanings and practices. Where hyperlocal assemblages form, there may also be the formation of socialities (which may or may not resemble each other across blogs), which are in the first instance defined by the blogger. However the host blogger has to negotiate the dialogical dynamics that encompass the machinic assemblage of the blog with automated search engine crawlers and spam bots, as well as the expressive assemblage sustained through the comments. Each finds different ways to do this: thus Stephanie found it necessary to censor commenters, whereas Tommy decided to ignore ‘Haters’; Chee Keong always answers all comments, and Rachel doesn’t.

This chapter has discussed the relevance of blog affordances for the emergent collective practices of bloggers. It first argued that a prevalent focus on ‘community’ as a frame for understanding internet-related collective practices tends to overemphasise centripetal as opposed to centrifugal influences.

Using assemblage, and understanding the folding and unfolding of movements of territorialisation and deterritorialisation avoids this assumption of stability. Different components of assemblages have opposing or even dual roles in this regard. As DeLanda has argued:

One and the same assemblage can have components working to stabilize its identity as well as components forcing it to change or even transforming it into a different assemblage. In fact one and the same component may participate in both processes by exercising different sets of capacities (2006: 12).

For example, the PPS blogtal and earlier blogmeets engendered a number of lines of flight, actualising the accessibility affordance and multiplying genres, as well as attracting attention from the mainstream media and government (Chapter IV, Section 5; p93ff). These lines of flight were enabled by the same affordances that initially stabilised the earlier, smaller, blogging assemblage – one which apparently had a somewhat more actualised communal identity.

In the online context, hyperlinking and commenting stand out as important territorialising influences. The comments in particular are also a source of deterritorialisation: they are usually seen as integral to blogs, and they contribute to the dialogical production of the blog medium; however, they are also a means for readers to further their own interests, and for other bloggers to advertise their competing content. The online presence and offline context interact via the blog affordances as well, and one cannot be understood without reference to the other – thus it is possible to talk of a larger blogging assemblage that extends beyond the hyperlocal assemblages that mostly operate online.

Blogging assemblages are stabilised through the blog affordances that allow consociation amongst the bloggers and readers. For the personal blogs, these experiences are individualised experiences, always told from the subjective point of view of the blogger and shared as such. Regular postings, consistent performance, and interaction with commenters sustain the hyperlocal assemblages that coalesce around individual blogs. The A-list bloggers have the greatest reach in this regard, sustaining a larger assemblage and also being important nodes of wider blogging assemblages, such as that which collects around BlogAdNet as will be discussed in the next chapter. They do this by acting as prototypical examples, and also by being a node where other bloggers interact, most notably within the comments or the less common blog-hosted chatbox.

However, the accessibility affordance means that there is a tendency towards dispersal. New blogs may deterritorialise existing assemblages, and for less popular bloggers who want to access an audience as well as for readers who want to find more blogs, the blogtals are another territorialising influence on a different scale. The blogtal operates as a centralised collection of links, and a “centre of calculation” (Latour 1987: 215–17) for blogs, each one being subject to automated calculations based on time and provenance, but also allows for interactive evaluation based on the self-categorisation and voting mechanisms. Blogtals operate similarly to blogs, with interactivity afforded and reverse chronological displays of blog links and descriptions, but the ‘Top Ten’ list offers one way to counteract the way in which blog posts gradually disappear from view on the blogtal and to actualise interactive affordances. However, these interact with different expressive relations such as some groups operating together to promote their blogs, and the strategic use of titles (typically those that reference sex or scandal attract visitors), as well as machinic components such as the time of day, or the number of other posts. Expressive relations are the most effective when operating in the context of shared social assemblages. Thus, an important aspect of PPS and other Malaysian blogtals is that they enhance the possibility of consociational experiences by collating locally produced blogs, increasing the chances for personal blogs to be exposed to readers who are more likely to find common relevance in shared experiences of offline.

For the offline context, blogmeets and the anchoring of perceptions of community was discussed. In contrast to most research on Web-based collectives, the predominant explanation of community by respondents was made in reference to the complementary offline associations. This does not necessarily negate previous scholarly analyses and reported instances of online-only communities. But in this situation, the offline was integrated into the online assemblage in different and defining ways – thus, in blogmeets and in other interpersonal relations, socialities that link the on- and offline are important. However, offline meets are more subject to constraints – spatial, temporal, logistical and, not insignificantly, financial. The next chapter will discuss how BlogAdNet has been important in providing ways for bloggers to meet up offline, and thus territorialising the Malaysian blogosphere in particular ways.

# VII. The monetisation of blogs: assemblages and markets

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## 1 Introduction

Chapter V emphasised the relative autonomy of the blog and the generative relation between the blog and the blogger, and argued for a conceptualisation of the dividual self that overcomes the essentialist logic of an authentic, unitary self. Chapter VI emphasised the personal blog as a dialogical medium, noting how the blogging assemblage develops beyond the blog/blogger assemblage to include extended parasocial relations between bloggers and readers. The most active commenters are often bloggers too, engaging in polycasting, and forming heterogeneous assemblages that articulate both on- and offline. In particular, the causal relations effectuated via the comments, hyperlinks, blogtals, blogmeets and the discourse of community were proposed as central to this phenomenon. This chapter will ask how monetisation, and specifically the arrival of BlogAdNet as an actor interested in creating a blog advertising market, meshed with the causal relations already animating the blogging assemblage.

Thus, this chapter will return to the central question of the thesis, which is how does monetisation – the introduction of market oriented practices and components – affect the blogging assemblage? As argued above (Chapter III, Section 4; pp34-5), a chronologically linear model that assumes a non-monetised pre-existing blogging assemblage does not reflect the way in which both the internet and the bloggers were always embedded in a sociocultural context characterised by pervasive market-related practices. Nonetheless, specific socialities and software did undergo change as monetisation increased.

A typical approach is one that posits a “virus of commodification” – as Slater labels the “traditionalist or Marxist” approaches (2002b: 59) – arguing that as the market economy impinges on existing non-market economy systems, relations become depersonalised, reciprocity undermined, and money becomes the lowest common denominator through which people learn to interact with and judge each other. In other words, it is assumed that actors in the cultural setting become disentangled and disempowered, develop instrumental interpersonal relations, needing the centralised node of market exchange to sell their labour, obtain material comfort and to express their identities. Deleuze

& Guattari also adopt a similar neo-Marxist approach, but as was argued earlier (Chapter II, Section 7.2; p56), it is possible not to see market assemblage as dominating all forms of interaction, but still develop their argument regarding the ability of the market dynamics to recode and territorialise assemblages. An example of the latter that will be developed here is the use of branding to express 'lifestyles' that allows relations to develop within a logic of consumerism.

The 'virus of commodification' would suggest that the blog no longer becomes a means for reproducing social relations in the manner outlined in the previous chapter, but instead becomes an intermediary for the circulation of money, with the exchange value of the blog overtaking the use value and a subsequent fetishisation of the blog. This reductionist approach fails to recognise how money is implicated in the development of rich social relations (e.g. Eiss 2002), and can take on different meanings according to context (e.g. Zelizer 1997). Representational arguments that also rest on the logic of an authentic self, impeded or enabled by blogs, would translate the fetishisation of a blog into self-alienation. However, the arguments proposed in chapter V, that the blog affordances enable a conscious expression and modulation of aspects of the self, suggest that bloggers recognise the contingent and limited perceptions of the self that are actualised with particular relations. The blog is not a static commodity, but a dynamic construction of the ongoing shifting, strategic, self-expression of the blogger; it is an assemblage stabilised around sociotechnical affordances that allow dialogical relations between blogger and readers, as well as the expressive practices of the blogger.

These collective patterns are relatively opaque to non-bloggers, but the audience is seen as representing a demographic that is appealing to particular commercial interests – i.e. a young and affluent population with a higher disposable income, also often understood to be less accessible via the traditional media (e.g. Vijandren 2009). Following the commercial media pattern of commodifying the audience (Ang 1991), BlogAdNet was able to position itself as an effective point of passage to this market segment, promoting the 'blogger community' as a source of value for those commercial interests as well as to bloggers. By doing so, it also created this market to a large extent, setting the basis of its metrological genesis (i.e. they developed the means to calculate relevant blog audiences, and translate them for the advertisers). Thus, in ANT terms, BlogAdNet is a mediator – both joining the bloggers and advertisers, and also translating each to the other; in assemblage terms it is a line of flight, deterritorialising and reterritorialising as it draws blogs, bloggers and advertisers into an emergent assemblage.

The bloggers, in turn, are the mediators between BlogAdNet and their clients on the one side, and on the other the audience of potential consumers – i.e. their readers, with whom they are entangled in extended parasocial relationships that are not based on market economy principles. It is how these two contiguous flows of desire – between the client and the blogger (mediated by BlogAdNet) and between the blogger and his readers – are stabilised which is the fundamental question to be answered.

A complete picture of the monetisation of blogs would include those components of the assemblages that operate within BlogAdNet and the advertising clients. However, during my fieldwork, I had little access to the clients, and limited access to the internal workings of BlogAdNet (Chapter III, Section 3; p70 *ff.*). This chapter will draw upon studies of advertising (e.g. deWaal Malefyt & Moeran 2003a; Mazzarella 2003; Moeran 1996, 2005; Slater 2002b) to surmise how the clients and advertising agencies may seek to integrate blogs into their campaigns, and on what terms. Thus, the focus is on the blogs, bloggers and BlogAdNet, with which I had repeated interactions and interviews from two important employees.

This chapter will propose that the lifestyle blog emerged as a new genre, and BlogAdNet was central in deploying sociotechnological strategies to commodify the blogging audience, and entangle bloggers and readers in an assemblage that articulates effectively with the market economy. There are incidents of the instrumentalisation of relations, and evidence of changing blogging practices. However, to argue therefore that bloggers become agents of commercial interests would be to overstate the case and ignore the multiplicity of articulations that are possible due to certain affordances of the blog – such as its modularity and personalisation – that enable bloggers express their dividual self, maintaining a distance from the clients and avoid becoming simple intermediaries of them.

Important analyses of market economies such as Arjun Appadurai's demonstration of the fluid nature of the commodity (1986), and studies of gift economies (e.g. Parry 1986) focus on the changing status of objects as they circulate, the extent to which their exchange involve reciprocal obligations and result in the recreation of social ties. Scholarly interest in the internet has engendered a new cycle of interest in the gift/commodity dichotomy which was revived by studies such as those above, but took on another dimension when brought together with apparent social formations online (Barbrook 1998; Raymond 1998a). These models that focus on the commodity status of objects are relevant in that they emphasise the contingency of the materiality or

commodity status of any one thing, but not sufficient for the analysis of the monetisation of blogs, because monetising blogs involves engaging in heterogeneous practices that enable the personal blog to be both defined in terms of a commodity (available in exchange for money), and of a dialogical parasocial process that rests upon socialities that explicitly reject a commodity status. This is why the concept of the assemblage is helpful, as it emphasises the directed nature of the fitting together of components, it does not rest on an ability to represent a fixed condition, but proposes fluid movements; an assemblage is never complete, it is a multiplicity of material and expressive nodes that territorialise and deterritorialise through the intensive causal relations.

In other terms, mirroring Tiziana Terranova's comment that "the Internet is always and simultaneously a gift economy and an advanced capitalist economy" (2000: 51), the blog is neither part of a gift economy, nor the market economy. Looking at particular practices enables the tracing of how networks form on flat planes and span these presumed oppositional spheres of the economic and non-economic – one such practice, in a general sense, is labour. This is behaviour that is seen as potentially creating economic value, and thus is one way of labelling actions that move from non-monetising to monetising. A particular concept that addresses such hybrid behaviour is proposed by Axel Bruns: 'produsage' highlights the continuum that exists between market and non-market activities (2008: 9), and is a precise exploration of how the articulation of the different systems works in practice. In this vein, this chapter will look at how the blogger's work is territorialised as labour and question to what degree it is transformed in the process of monetisation as new connections are formed through blog affordances and in other ways.

## **2 Assembling a blogging market**

To understand the process of the monetisation of blogs, we have to engage with theories of the market. An anthropological approach requires a critical approach to the theories supplied by the study of economics which tend to naturalise the 'market', and divorce it from its cultural context – regarding the latter as aberrations of an idealised true market which is used to formulate theories and advise policy (e.g. Hewitt de Alcántara 1993). This section develops the debate touched upon earlier (Chapter II, Section 7.2; p54) with regards to Michel Callon's actor-network approach that argues for "markets as social artefacts that are instituted via purposive strategies and technologies of calculation" (Slater & Tonkiss 2001: 94). This argument has three main components: markets are created (with 'economies of qualities' being important in this regard), calculative agencies are central to the latter, and they create overflows, or externalities.



Callon describes the “process of ‘marketization’, which, like a process of framing or disentanglement, implies investment and precise actions to cut certain ties and to internalize others” (1998a: 19). Importantly, he does not claim this to be a natural outcome of *homo economicus*, but argues that it is the result of a particular conjunction of the ability of the discipline of economics to normalise its assumptions, and subsequently related government policy. Thus, economists inform policy makers who create a frame that enables market activity and certain types of behaviour to be naturalised and engendered. *Homo economicus* – the rational, self-interested, and calculating agent at the centre of economic theory – is not an inherent universal, but made contingently possible by various technologies, including economics (Barry & Slater 2002: 286). He provides the example of the creation of a strawberry market, based explicitly on academic free market theories, that – amongst other features – physically separates buyers and sellers and enables them only to transact via displays of prices and categories of produce (Callon 1998a: 20). This results in the disentanglement of particular relations (buying and selling goods) from overall cultural activity, enabling the reproduction of calculative agencies as a constitutive practice of this market.

Daniel Miller, however, criticises Callon for claiming to reject the economic model, but in fact reproducing the logic of the market; he says that “what lies within the frame is not the market system as an actual practice, but on the contrary a ritualized expression of an ideology of the market” (2002a: 224). In other words, the ideological forces of the market reframe particular activities as uniquely economic. However, he argues that in practice “the culture of business strips out most of what might otherwise be called economic considerations,” and instead focuses on entangling their commodity with the potential consumer, so as to capture their attention at the crucial “totalizing moment of purchase” (*ibid.*: 227) where all of the personal and cultural values and attitudes of the consumer coalesce on a particular choice of commodity at a particular moment in time.

In response, Slater argues that Miller prefers to “dissolve the market into broader social entanglements” because of the lack of evidence of “purified modes of calculability” (2002a: 240). However, Slater proposes another approach that reflects the particular context of market-based relations. Rather than focusing on calculation, he focuses on the potential for alienable market transactions, based on “specific forms of property right” (*ibid.*), wherein obligations consequent to that transaction are formalised “through a social technology of framing and individuating” (*ibid.*: 238). These do not mean that “for the actors the object loses its meaning or cultural connection [...] only that this particular piece of matter can indeed be transferred to someone else’s ownership”

(*ibid.*; original emphasis). In this way, there is the particular form of relation that is observable and experienced during market transactions, wherein reciprocal obligations are formally limited. For instance, someone buying a Christmas present is investing the commodity with a wealth of cultural connotations – Miller’s ‘totalising moment’ – but nonetheless their action contributes to the perpetuation of a particular assemblage, the ‘market economy’. The latter requires that relations be mediated through the exchange of money for commodities or services, and that at least the illusion of choice – and subsequent calculation – be maintained.

Using these arguments in relation to the assemblage model, a market shall be understood here as an assemblage, a contingently stabilised complex wherein the interrelated nodes are mostly able to reproduce entangled, mutually supportive and causal relations which are the dynamic underpinnings of its becoming. Those relations do not exclude cultural and ethical concerns, but these are defined alongside the opportunity of minimising reciprocal relations through market exchange *per se*, which itself has an ethical underpinning based mostly on the utilitarian model promulgated by Adam Smith (e.g. Dilley 1992; Silver 1990).

The arguments about the existence of a market, wherein calculations are made regardless of other social relations, are relevant to the monetisation of blogs because we have to consider whether or not bloggers who engage with the market economy via their blogs, need to take on particular attitudes that would enable them to operate effectively within that frame. This is where Slater’s argument is useful, in that it allows us perceive the blogger as someone positioned between “intersecting networks” and able to “transfer understandings across social locations” (Slater 2002a: 244). Operating within a market assemblage does not require them to submit to an alienating calculative approach to all blog-mediated relations, but there is the additional option of interacting with other actants on the basis of alienable transactions, something which was not present in the same sense before.<sup>192</sup>

We need also to consider how blogs become entangled with market relations. The following sections shall argue that this happens through the use of web analytics which coincide with methods derived from pre-existing mass media industrial models. However, calculation is not restricted to quantification – the other ways in which goods are qualified and transformed are through other blog affordances such as interactivity and personalisation, as well as through their inclusion in offline events.

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<sup>192</sup> Although the anonymity affordance offers the basis for a different type of alienable relationship.

## 2.1 Assembling the advertisement market for blogs



**Screenshot 7: An early (April 2007) BlogAdNet advertisement referencing the tension with advertisements and blogging**

Screenshot 7 is an early advertisement for BlogAdNet, displayed on registered blogs. It playfully acknowledges the contentiousness of blog advertising; simultaneously, it is framed as an opportunity for ‘community’ – the “Blog advertising community.” These two aspects – paid promotional activity, regulated by cold cash, and ‘community’, a source of informal comfort and security – represent the two poles of economy and culture that classical economics has usually separated out in the attempt to develop a scientific understanding of economic activity.

One indication of the paucity of economic theory is that although advertising and marketing are integral to all large-scale economic enterprises, Slater has noted that “advertising is almost never conceptualized as a form of business practice at all but rather as a cultural intervention in the domain of the economic” (2002b: 61). This contrast is symptomatic of the attempt by economists to disentangle cultural aspects from the ‘natural economy’. Nonetheless, it does point to how fertile a field it is for anthropological investigation. For instance, the founders of BlogAdNet are graduates of a British business school, and developed their strategic approach to blog advertising in terms of what they studied in economic and marketing theory. Nonetheless, the need to adapt to the online context of blogging, and the offline Malaysian context, makes their example somewhat unique.

Brian Moeran talks of the complex “tripartite business” of advertising, where clients, agencies and media come together “as each tries to sell the others the value of its products, services, or messages” (1996: 21). The mediating process that BlogAdNet has to go through is one of selling blogs to agencies and/or clients. They are situated in a somewhat unusual position of neither being an advertising agency as such, nor being directly the media either. In practice, with regards to the advertisers they carry out different roles, sometimes dealing directly with clients, or with their agencies, and also organising events, depending on particular situations. With regards to the bloggers (the media in Moeran’s triangle), they play a similar role to media agencies, booking and filling advertising space for a commission.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> However, according to respondents, their commission is 50% which is well above the usual international standard of 15%. This may be a norm for internet advertising, the company through which I sold links also took 50%.

To understand how BlogAdNet was able to successfully create a market for blogs as advertising platforms, Callon's concept of the 'economy of qualities' is useful – this states that products develop through a process, at each stage being qualified and temporarily stabilised as a 'good', thus enabling its exchange. Thus, for example, apples are sold based on certain qualifiable criteria to a juice processing factory, which then produces another good – tested and certified as 'fresh apple juice' – which is sold to supermarkets. The qualification may be done by specialised metrological instruments (e.g. to test the level of acid in apple juice), or other mediators – such as company spokespersons, advertisements or consumers who are all involved in the "strategic management of product qualification" (Callon *et al.* 2002: 201). The economy of qualities is "organized around two structuring mechanisms: the singularization of goods and the attachment of goods to (and detachment from) those who consume them" (*ibid.*: 202); these are achieved through various sociotechnical devices that qualify the materiality of the product and its presentation, attempting to attach or detach consumers from network associated with particular products. These networks do not only include those that are deployed by commercial actors (through marketing and logistical activities), but also the personal networks of the consumers such as their family or other consociates. In the last stage, the sale to the end user, the process of qualification is particularly bound up with advertising. As Slater explains – advertising is a process of creating markets by defining goods, entangling them with relations of consumption and competition – thus "a product definition [...] is a an operation on the meaningfulness of a thing that exists in a real social context" (Slater 2002b: 73).

In order to sell blogs to potential clients, BlogAdNet has to persuade them that blogs will help to translate their goods into meaningful repositories of cultural and personal value for their targeted demographic. In other words, that the blogs can enable particular relations to be generated with and through their goods (and these relations are quantifiable via clicks and other methods – see Section 2.2.1; p195), thus distinguishing them from other commodities. This argument is supported by Robert Foster's work on branding, which highlights, amongst other things, how a primary concern of business strategists is to avoid the "the 'commoditization' of their products and services [which] results in consumers seeking the lowest price possible for products regarded as generic and interchangeable" (2007: 716). This primarily requires distinguishing their products from others by branding exercises, which ideally would "inspire loyalty beyond reason" as the CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi, a global advertising agency, has argued (Roberts quoted in Foster 2005: 8).

### 2.1.1 *Intersecting relations*

BlogAdNet is in the position of brokering both ways – to the advertisers, they have to demonstrate the ways in which advertising on blogs can increase their sales; this is assisted by calculations based on automated analytics that are discussed further below (Section 2.2; p195). To the bloggers, the potential monetary rewards are made clear, but the reference in their tagline to the ‘community’ indicates that more is being promoted. It is an example of how, as Slater argues, in spite of different meanings embedded in networks, agents positioned between “intersecting networks” are able to “transfer understandings across social locations” (Slater 2002a: 244).

As one of the cofounders of BlogAdNet, James was directly involved with developing strategies that enabled the reorienting of existing assemblages in ways that enable an effective line of flight. With regards to concerns about alienating bloggers and the power dynamics of engaging with commercial interests, he recognised the paradoxical position of BlogAdNet saying “when you are always a broker between advertiser and blogger right, sometimes, you tend to blur the lines a little bit.”<sup>194</sup> He explained that they had offered free shares to particular bloggers so that, as part of the company, they could counterbalance the advertisers. This apparent democratising move is however mitigated by a lack of transparency: when BlogAdNet started, they announced (on a page titled “our community”) their intention to invite “bloggers with associated skills and influence” to take stake in the company, and promised that “Their identities will be revealed here over time!”<sup>195</sup> Three years later, this statement had not changed, and James told me that it was not for him to reveal the names, although I could easily find out who they were from the official Registry of Companies (*op. cit.*). In fact, at least one blogger knew about these share holders are, and implied to me that this was more of an example of cronyism rather than inclusiveness.<sup>196</sup> Also, the extent to which these bloggers do act as a counterweight to advertisers is not known: Ibrahim is one such shareholder, but told me that he had no more involvement other than signing routine documents;<sup>197</sup> another such shareholder told me that, as a lawyer, he had occasionally given legally-related advice, but this seemed to be on an informal basis.<sup>198</sup>

The discourse of community is one that implies reciprocity beyond monetary gain, but there is tension between this and the commercial imperatives of the market. James was quoted in newspaper article, arguing that blogging should not be about making money, he said:

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<sup>194</sup> Interview with James, 11 February 2009

<sup>195</sup> BlogAdNet web page, 2007-2010: p00755

<sup>196</sup> Personal communication, Instant messenger, 17 December 2009

<sup>197</sup> Interview with Ibrahim, 12 October 2009

<sup>198</sup> Fieldnotes dated 24 October 2009

Making money is just an added bonus for [bloggers]. If you want to earn well from blogging, you have to make sure your contents are good and people really want to read it. More often than not, this is only possible if your heart is in the right place. Blogging is all about passion and not monetary satisfaction.<sup>199</sup>

In spite of this, James mentioned that bloggers complain to him about their meagre earnings (the norm for the great majority (66.7% earned less than RM100/month (43.5USD) – see Appendix A: Q28) and/or the lack of other services from BlogAdNet. Citing economic theory, he explained that their perspective did not usually understand that bloggers are suppliers, not customers, and argued that they should support BlogAdNet as the dominant mediator for bloggers because

this market is actually a natural monopoly [...] it's limited by the amount of online adspend [...] that goes to blogs, which is tiny [...] [if] you have ad networks that compete, [...] in the long run they drive prices down. Bloggers will then have to take lower prices (*op. cit.*).

Also, it is interesting to note that both James and Andy (a BlogAdNet executive) strongly defended the benefits BlogAdNet brings to bloggers in terms of material reward. James noted that they send totals of six-figure sums to all registered bloggers monthly, and Andy stated that “every single blogger has the chance to actually earn from ads now that [BlogAdNet] is here,” and that “never before [were there] any blog events attended by bloggers which are totally free of charge [...with] food and beverages [...and] prizes.”<sup>200</sup> For the latter, I had to agree with him – since I had registered with them, I had had more rewards in terms of free gifts, cinema tickets, and prizes than ever before in my life. It's interesting to note that, in spite of genuine attachment to bloggers and blogging, they ultimately fall back on material gain to justify BlogAdNet – these different strands may be in tension, but they are not exclusive.

This same tension is mirrored in the relations between bloggers and their readers, and personal bloggers need to navigate these relations in a way that stabilises connections between the market and blogging assemblage. Contrasting the globalised chain of generic commodity production with the branding exercises of companies, Foster notes the “two-sided process of value creation – extreme commoditization on one side and the appropriation of consumer singularization on the other” (2005: 11). This parallel is useful for understanding the way in which the bloggers are able to

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<sup>199</sup> Quoted in newspaper article, June 2008. Details retained to maintain anonymity.

<sup>200</sup> Interview with Andy, 10 August 2009

simultaneously maintain parasocial relations with readers based on the promise of authenticity whilst also clearly engaging in paid promotional work. Bloggers engage in a form of ‘personal branding’, based on their presentation on the blog and relations are maintained via the emergent dialogical affordance of the blog. Readers are able to sustain relations with the blogger, and with other readers, in a process of “social materialisation” (Slater 2002c: 111) of the blog that parallels that of goods.

## 2.2 *Calculative agencies*

you have to figure out a way to measure this hype to justify the clients’ ROI [Return On Investment]

(James, *op. cit.*)

This section will discuss the ways in which “calculative agencies” (Callon 1998a: 3) are put to use in the creation of the market for Malaysian blog advertising. I use this term to refer to opportunities to accumulate or combine disentangled components in ways that reconfigure relations and result in intensive movements or emergent properties. Their most recognisable form are quantitative measurements that isolate particular properties of any thing. As the quote above shows, calculative agencies are an important aspect of BlogAdNet’s negotiation with potential clients. Bermejo demonstrates how, in the mid-nineties, the advertising industry recognised the need to create an independent agency that would supply a means to measure website audiences (Bermejo 2007: 213), though the issue of how to measure the audience remains contentious.<sup>201</sup> The different calculations that are used by BlogAdNet can be roughly mapped along a continuum from more objective – visitor count, geolocation, clicks – to less objective measures such as the demographics of readership or the blog genre.

### 2.2.1 *Web analytics*

BlogAdNet measures readers through a count of ‘unique visitors’ which uses cookies<sup>202</sup> to count each visitor once every 24 hours; those who are based in Malaysia are the most important, and this is determined by matching the IP address of the visitor with a specialised database. These two factors are the most important measure, alongside the number of clicks on the advertisements

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<sup>201</sup> It is also the locus of a market in itself, “the measurement market” (Bermejo 2007: 210); “to Meehan ratings must be regarded as products or commodities shaped by business exigencies and corporate strategies” (*ibid.*: 25). This market has its own dynamics, which will not be explored here.

<sup>202</sup> Small text files that store information about a website user, and make that information available to the same website in future. Typically used to track visitors (through being able to recognise the return visit), and to store information relating to registration details.

themselves. All registered bloggers are provided a web analytics tool that is available when they log on to their account in the BlogAdNet website. In addition to the unique visitors and location, it also shows their referral point (i.e. where the reader was before they came to their blog), and search keywords that resulted in incoming visits.

These statistics are ostensibly objective and transparent, but although the ‘unique visitor’ is the *de facto* industry standard, also accepted by most bloggers, Bermejo notes in that one cannot calculate with precision the “the number of users, or their demographic characteristics, not even their geographic location, or the place from which they connect to the Internet (home, work, etc.)” (2007: 134). There are detailed technical reasons for this, but his argument is mostly based on the inability to guarantee their complete accurateness, rather than an assertion that they are completely unreliable. It is important to note that the acceptance of these statistics are the important consequence of their use, for it actualises a territorialising centre of calculation. Making the analytics available by default to bloggers naturalises them, and they become a disciplinary sociotechnology that enacts a particular definition of the value of their blog as well as a means to self-discipline by seeking to achieve the suitable statistics. As Callon notes, this “integration [of the calculations of other agencies] is far easier when, during the process of market organization, a calculative agency manages to impose directly her instruments and mode of calculation” (1998a: 50).

The central problem that Bermejo points to is the fact that web analytics are always in fact counting exchanges of information between web browsers and servers – the demographic characteristics of the readers can only be surmised by other means.<sup>203</sup> BlogAdNet’s response to this is to ask bloggers for a description of their blog audience, and also to make available to users a short survey tool that is customisable so that bloggers can add questions of personal interest, but they always end with a question about the gender, age and occupation. This survey goes onto their blog, and readers are encouraged to fill it out.

Notwithstanding Bermejo’s reservations, the geolocation statistics are essential to the Malaysian local blog advertising market, enabling advertisers to target local consumers. Without this reassurance, it would be unlikely that the advertisers would commit their budget – intended to boost Malaysian sales – to blog advertising. Once the location of the reader is determined, the quantity is crucial – James explained that in order to be proposed to client for an advertorial, a

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<sup>203</sup> This is also a central matter of concern for Google and Facebook, for example, and an important reason for their market value in that they are better able to link online presence with offline demographics.



“critical mass” of 500 unique visitors a day was the minimum because otherwise “the advertiser has completely *no way* of measuring how effective the advertorial is” (*op. cit.*; original emphasis).

Although it was not explained to me, the only possible precise measurement of effectiveness can be in the form of ‘click throughs’ – i.e. clicks on links that carry the reader through to the client’s website – and related actions. Advertorials typically have links, most often to pages where further attempts are made to engage readers – for example a Facebook page which can be ‘Liked’, or a competition that requires registration. (Registration requires the user to provide demographic and contact details that are valuable for a company.) The advertiser may also use the ‘Pay per Action’ model in its agreement with BlogAdNet – this pays on the basis of particular actions by web users, such as a purchase, or entering a competition. The importance of clicks is central, as it is a calculable expression of a relational tie – that the blog has enabled a user to connect directly to the company. However, the validity of these clicks is carefully policed for instances of ‘click fraud’ – i.e. clicks that do not represent a genuine interest (discussed further below in section 6; p230).

### 2.2.2 *Blog genre*

Another way of estimating the audience of a blog is through a genre analysis of the blog. When bloggers register with BlogAdNet, they are required to select a category for their blog; Magdalene mentioned this, saying:

I never know how to categorise mine also [...] I put mine under humour so it’s like, I don’t know if that’s very relevant because like you know when, you give it to clients for proposal and they’re not going to choose this blog because it suits ‘Funny’.<sup>204</sup>

In a similar vein, Alvin reported selecting ‘Lifestyle’ when signing up for an online environmental campaign because “it’s the most vague of all the categories;”<sup>205</sup> and Faizal, while signing up for a blogtal, looked for a category “specifically about relationship” – the ‘family’ category didn’t suit him as he had no children, and he also wondered how non-married couples would fit in.<sup>206</sup>

Thus, the process of signing up to BlogAdNet – and blogtals in general – becomes partly a reflexive process, requiring bloggers to visualise their blog in the way that BlogAdNet wants them to be represented to clients, or other forms of classification, dictated by a disciplinary categorical logic.

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<sup>204</sup> Interview with Magdalene, 22 October 2009

<sup>205</sup> Interview with Alvin, 1 October 2009

<sup>206</sup> Interview with Faizal, 2 October 2009

### 2.2.3 Search engines

Another way of measuring the impact of blog marketing was suggested by a Brand Manager I spoke to briefly at a 'Pole dancing workshop' organised to promote a brand of mint sweets. She said that they wanted to use bloggers to counter their competition's online presence, and "to have a presence in the online community." As evidence of the success of their campaign, she noted that if you googled the brand name and the slogan of the campaign, there were many blogs appearing straight away in the results.<sup>207</sup> Thus visibility in Google – based on opaque algorithms – becomes an index of a presence within an 'online community'. In marketing and advertising discourse this online community is constructed as a desirable space of authentic expression, and one that needs to be accessed. At another branding event, the launch of a radio and online television project featuring bloggers, the representative of the primary sponsor (a global sportswear brand) explained to me that sometimes before they launch a product they put some material online and see what happens, because you can see the response of "the real consumers." When probed a little further she said they monitored comments too, but implied that the bloggers are indexical of the real consumers. When I suggested that paying bloggers may detract from their honesty, she said that they wouldn't do that, because it would mean losing readers who read them for their authenticity.<sup>208</sup>

The above two examples demonstrate how "Advertising often advances by means of *post-rationalization*" (Moeran 2005: 911; original emphasis). For marketing professionals, various forms of online presence become a symbolic marker of authentic consumers. This concern with accessing the authentic is described by Moeran (*ibid.*), whose careful analysis of the production process of an advertising campaign in Japan shows how there is an emphasis on getting feedback from 'authentic foreigners' (both himself, and on one occasion some models who were coincidentally waiting in the corridor outside the meeting room) for a campaign to be delivered in America and Germany.

### 2.2.4 Comments

Another overtly subjective means of assessing the success of blog advertorials are the comments, but James noted that these remained anecdotal, and without statistical significance. They select comments if they are

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<sup>207</sup> Fieldnotes dated 14 August 2008. However, it may be that this apparent visibility is more of a self-fulfilling prophecy, in that the brand name is unique and the slogan is a specific phrase, thus ensuring its appearance when googled. This suggests that marketing should focus on getting brands associated with generic terms such as 'happiness', or indexical terms or phrases such as 'How to make my breath fresh.'

<sup>208</sup> Fieldnotes dated 5 September, 2009

really good or really bad, you know, and if it's objective. If it's something senseless like 'Oh I don't like this brand because, I just don't like it' then we just leave it. But if it's something worthy, for example [...] 'my broadband doesn't work for me in this area' (*op. cit.*).

Thus the interactive affordances of blogs – both passive (via the web analytics) and active (the comments) are important elements in the successful monetisation of blogs. The blog is a means to stabilise an audience, which is then commodified for advertising purposes; therefore the successful monetisation depends primarily on retaining this stabilised audience, as well as qualifying it in some measure in terms of its demographics. The latter is done by the deployment of statistics as discussed above, but their underlying uncertainty, and in particular the opacity of the demographics of the audience, means that other means are used to predict the audience. One of these is by classifying blogs into genres, and – as will be argued below – the emergence of the lifestyle blog genre is an outcome of this process.

### ***2.3 Overflowing assemblage***

The previous two sections discussed the ways in which a particular assemblage identified as a 'market' is assembled, through the use of calculative agencies that target audience measurement in particular. An inevitable result of the reassembling of relations is that there are loose ends and new dynamics generated, enabling lines of flight or what Callon refers to as 'overflows' – a concept he borrows from Goffman (Callon 1998b).

When Callon discusses overflows, he mostly frames such overflows as generating groups with common interests in opposition to – for example – a polluting factory. Foster also argues that "sociotechnical networks" of consumers can form around the movement of commodities, suggesting that they be termed 'publics', which are

sociotechnical networks that form around the movement of commodities variously enable consumers to address matters of concern and perforce to constitute themselves as publics –as affiliations performed by attempts to hear themselves and make themselves heard on a particular subject (2007: 710)

The example given by Foster, that of "'fair trade' publics," is also framed in an oppositional sense and, similarly, I had expected there to be a negative reaction to the monetisation of blogs, and the formation of such a 'public'. However, after three years of fieldwork I was not able to identify any

tangible group that was expressing a common interest and organising against it in any manner – although there were individual voices of concern and generalised opinions on the matter.

Because I mostly focused on BlogAdNet for my participant observation, there is an inherent bias in favour of monetisation in most of the data used here. Here I will address some data from the myBlogS survey, to give some added perspective (for more details see Appendix A: Q26). In response to the statement “Blogs are too commercialised nowadays,” 50.1% of the respondents agreed. A content analysis of the open-ended comments at the end of the survey showed a similar balance of opinions: the greater proportion (22) made negative comments, 11 were positive, and 12 gave balanced opinions. Overall, about half of the respondents disapproved of some aspects of the monetisation of blogs, a quarter were non-committal, and a quarter actively approved. There was no appreciable difference between the Monetisers and Non-Monetisers (2% higher for the latter).

The statement with regards to commercialisation that received the highest agreement (66%) was: “When bloggers start to make money from their blog, their blog becomes less personal.” The second most agreed-upon statement regarding commercialisation was regarding the disclosure of advertorials – 63.7% agreed that “Bloggers should be required to always clearly mark advertorials as such.” (Non-Monetisers were 3% more likely to agree.) To gauge actual actions as opposed to opinions, one statement was: “I have stopped reading a blog (or some blogs) which became too commercialised.” For all respondents, 45.9% agreed (there was 12.8% of ‘Not applicable’, which can be interpreted as saying they had not), and comparing Monetisers and Non-Monetisers showed a difference of 5.6% in favour of the latter. One commenter stated:

As for bloggers who started blogging and continue to blog just for the sake of getting freebies or money, I feel that the reading quality tend to be very low and after reading a post or two, there's no point in reading on.<sup>209</sup>

Thus, although there are significant expressions of disapproval of monetisation, it is not an overwhelming majority. This did not surprise me; although I often saw disparaging comments, and a few blog posts, about bloggers who wrote advertorials, they stood out as a minority in the many other comments and blog posts. Thus, there is no public in the manner suggested by Foster, but this does not necessarily mean acquiescence, only lack of organisation. However, another relevant result from the survey was the 74% agreement with the statement – ““Anyone can do what they like with

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<sup>209</sup> Open ended comment, myBlogS survey, March-April 2009

their own blog.” This is likely to explain the reluctance to organise against or challenge the monetisation of blogs by those who object to it. For example, one commenter who was non-committal on the effects of commercialisation, said:

I personally think that blog is a space for people to share their lives and feelings, and the purpose of blogging is to encourage, inspire, and connect with people. However, I have no comments on bloggers who use their blog to earn money or to draw people's attention because I think that blog is a personal space - that's your blog, you can do whatever you want.<sup>210</sup>

The principle of independence militates against personal bloggers organising in ways that seek to control blog content. Overall, the most tangible “emerging groups and social identities [...] created or performed by overflows” (Callon quoted in Barry & Slater 2002: 303) that were present were defined by the commercial endeavours of BlogAdNet and AppAds. In particular, this was expressed through the discourse of ‘community’, and the relevance of BlogAdNet and AppAds can be seen in Thomas’s explanation:

of course actually nowadays there’s obviously two main communities [...] because of the blog advertising compan[ies] [...] actually most of one side’s events you will see the same faces, the other side of events you will see the same faces [i.e. each side will have different regulars].<sup>211</sup>

Thus the ‘communities’ are defined in relation to the blog advertising companies, and in opposition to each other. Contributing to this was how BlogAdNet had specifically formed a sub-category for registered bloggers, the ‘Bloggerati’, who would get preference for attending events and other advantages: the criteria for being a Bloggerati were defined in such a way as to exclude bloggers from registering with both BlogAdNet and AppAds.

Alvin also referred to the two companies, and while welcoming the work they had done for “progress,” he also implied that the old PPS community spirit had been “killed.” He gave an example of one prominent blogger who had ‘crossed sides’ to AppAds, and when he turned up at a BlogAdNet event was challenged and questioned on his presence (*op. cit.*). On another occasion, I attended an AppAds event, to which I had been invited by Faizal, and at one point he jokingly introduced me to as “from the other side” (i.e. BlogAdNet). Faizal was unusual in that he had opted to have two blogs, one with BlogAdNet advertisements and one with AppAds. Another person I

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<sup>210</sup> Open ended comment, myBlogS survey, March-April 2009

<sup>211</sup> Interview with Thomas, 13 August 2009

recognised from BlogAdNet events had a “I ♥ [BlogAdNet]” badge on his bag, and joked about how it might make him unwelcome.<sup>212</sup> In practice, I did not feel any particular pressure, but it was clear that the two groups did not mix much.<sup>213</sup>



**Plate 18: Two BlogAdNet banners at events. The picture on the left (15 March 2008) reads “We do blog advertising and build communities.” The picture on the right (7 July 2008) narrates the founding, and how BlogAdNet has built “a vibrant Community of Bloggers” (original emphasis).**

These sentiments were prevalent, but the degree of commitment to either of these ‘communities’ was weak, and they do not represent ‘publics’ in the manner described by Callon or Foster. Nonetheless, the merits of each company were debated openly, as can be seen in the following example of an overflow that occurred during the period when BlogAdNet was starting.

### 2.3.1 *Overflowing bloggers*

BlogAdNet reported targeting 300 registered blogs in three months, but had 250 in two weeks,<sup>214</sup> and 1,500 in two months.<sup>215</sup> This rapid spread of registrations not only demonstrated a pent-up demand for the monetisation of blogs, typically presented as effortless and only involving the inclusion of some code into the blog, but also the speed by which information spreads through the blogging networks. AppAds emerged simultaneously (in the same month) and the online dissection

<sup>212</sup> Fieldnotes dated 6 August 2009

<sup>213</sup> Except when speaking to ‘Peter’ (the AppAds owner), who offered help but never answered my emails; also to be noted that James said that one reason for agreeing to my interview that I was a ‘BlogAdNet blogger.’

<sup>214</sup> Blog post, Tan, 12 March 2007: p00822

<sup>215</sup> Blog post, BlogAdNet, 22 April 2007: p00826

of the relative merits of each company via blog postings and discussions in comments offers some insight into socialities that may stabilise or destabilise the blogging assemblage. The concepts of 'arena' and 'drama' (Chapter V, Section 2.1; p143) are useful here: in this example the arena corresponds in a narrow sense to a blog hosted by a blogger called here 'Reviewer', and the concept of 'drama' allows us to understand how the debate around the respective merits of BlogAdNet and AppAds spread across sections of the blogosphere.

The detailed review of BlogAdNet and AppAds' services by Reviewer attracted comments from the two companies' founders, responding to his well meant critique.<sup>216</sup> He was invited to visit both companies, and therefore made further posts about them and discussions in comments continued. In one case the AppAds founder – 'Peter' – reacted to comments targeting him and his company and asked the blogger:

Wouldn't it be ideal for you to censor anonymous users, who are making unwarranted personal attacks and specious claims? Such as the only one in this blog comment thread, who has no URL to his name?<sup>217</sup>

Peter was answered with another post, with a number of reasons, one of which is "It is not an obligation to leave a website URL. And you know that."<sup>218</sup> Reviewer also detailed how he looked at the IP address, and did some other checking such verifying whether the email left by the commenter [Commenter A] was valid. Another commenter (incidentally a well known and long-standing blogger) adds:

[Commenter A]'s commented enough times -and long enough - on various blogs for me to think that's warranted.

unless someone else coincidentally calling using the same nick.

[Reviewer answers]

Yeah, I did bump into one or two of [Commenter A]'s comments in some other blogs too.<sup>219</sup>

These examples show how bloggers are aware of each other, and stable pseudonyms are an important aspect of collective interaction. The desire for anonymity is respected but to use multiple pseudonyms is not. The tracking of IP addresses is often used to uncover commenters using multiple

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<sup>216</sup> Blog post, Reviewer, 31 March 2007: p00823

<sup>217</sup> Blog post, Reviewer, 6 April 2007: p00831

<sup>218</sup> Blog post, Reviewer, 7 April 2007: p00829

<sup>219</sup> Blog post, Reviewer, 7 April 2007: p00829

pseudonyms, and Reviewer later demonstrated that, over a few months, four different pseudonyms were used in his blog, and other blogs, to promote AppAds and/or attack BlogAdNet. These all had the same or similar IP addresses to those used by Peter when he left comments – and the pseudonymous commenters were noted to be active at the same time as Peter. Therefore, it was implied, Peter had been using the cloak of anonymity to pretend to be someone else and to simulate support for his company; he denied this, but most commenters considered Reviewer’s evidence to be credible. This, and other events such as delayed payments to bloggers, led to a loss of credibility for AppAds, and Peter’s personal integrity being questioned.

What happened to cause the above episode can be surmised and summarised as follows. The companies’ representatives were most likely using Google searches, and other means, to find references to the companies. Upon finding them, they left comments. By doing so, they raised the profile of the post, and other bloggers mentioned the post and linked to it, some leaving comments too – the dialogical affordance thus enabling the emergence of a blog post that overflows, or destabilises, the messages already distributed by the two companies. However, the anonymity afforded in the blog comments was seen to be abused, and – aware of the possibility of manipulating screenshots thanks to the perfect reduplication affordance – in the first occasion this happened Reviewer actually took a film of the web analytics displayed on his computer screen and posted the film on his blog. This pre-empted precluding accusations of faking screenshots, which would usually be used to display such evidence. This reflects the limits of the anonymity affordance, and also how bloggers can strategically navigate the ways in which traces of online presence are automatically collated as well as the possibilities of perfect reduplication.

As Reviewer noted in another post, he had only been blogging for a month at the time of his first review, but he had seen considerable traffic because of the controversy his blog posts had engendered.<sup>220</sup> This highlights the relevance of the heterarchical potential of the accessibility affordance, and the way in which he was invited to visit the company premises underlined the integration of the on- and offline.

Only a brief excerpt of a drama that spanned about a month, and a number of websites, has been presented here. It demonstrates emergent practices of blogging such as commenting, linking, anonymity, web analytics – all of which helped to rapidly spread the awareness of BlogAdNet and AppAds, and intensify practices along new axes of resonance – the BlogAdNet vs. AppAds, money

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<sup>220</sup> Blog post, Reviewer, 31 March 2008: p00823



and advertisements. However, this blogger did not remain a significant influence over time, and there was no evidence of a stabilised public in the way that Foster suggests; similarly, although Postill's uses of drama and arena help to describe the process, the decentralisation and the way in which blogs tend to emphasise the more recent posts, meant that this 'drama' never came to any firm resolution, with events moving on. The decentralised, ephemeral nature of this event should also be noted; the traces of it are left in the comments and the post, but this apparent durability should not be assumed to be translated into a durable public of motivated actors.

Overflows are deterritorialising lines of flight, and as BlogAdNet assembles its market, the intensification of certain dynamics that require the mobilisation of bloggers as representatives of, and authentic purveyors of, a particular audience results in a line of flight, destabilising the non-monetised blogging assemblage and reassembling it around the market-focused activities of BlogAdNet. As Callon describes it, there is a process of disentanglement and re-entanglement, with causal relations being reconfigured and reconceptualised by the actors; the most useful way to see this is in Slater's terms, as relations that become defined in terms of alienable transactions. The blogmeets, hyperlinking, comments, blog posts, and writing styles – these are means for causal relations which stabilise the assemblage, and the effect of changing particular activities (e.g. a blog post becomes an advertorial) has the potential of causing an effective line of flight, and/or a sufficient destabilisation that generates systemic reframing and a new assemblage. Some examples of these will be discussed later in this chapter.

Thus we need to consider the interaction of different assemblages. How does the market assemblage articulate with the blogging assemblage? The blogger is the obvious link, but as we have seen the blog too has its autonomous position – reflected in the importance of the web analytics. The blogger is essential in developing an expressive style that appeals to readers, maintaining parasocial relations with them, and enabling dialogical interactions. The form that the market-driven assemblage takes is dictated by the need to qualify products/brands and create relations with the readers. To explore this, the next section will look at labour, which is the way in which the actions of the bloggers are meaningful in terms of the market assemblage.

### **3 Labouring lifestyle: assembling the lifestyle blog**

A complementary way of approaching the overflows that bring about the movements of deterritorialisation is by looking more closely at how the actions of the bloggers become 'labour'. Labour is the moment when the particular practice is considered to have economic value: this can be

done theoretically or ideologically, such as when unpaid housework is reframed as 'reproductive labour' in feminist analysis (e.g. Slater & Tonkiss 2001: 112–6); in other circumstances – such as with blogging – the transformation of the practice occurs in a very practical sense, by offering money for a version of what was previously done for free. The moment of transformation of particular practices into labour is also a movement of intensity that enables the practice to take a line of flight to mesh with, or engender, another assemblage.

For the respondents who had started blogging before blog monetisation was an option, it was only after a gradual process of increasing audience and public profile (in particular through appearances in the mainstream media), that their hobby became a potential source of income. A similar process has been described by Terranova who, using a Marxist approach, explains how the articulation of subcultures with capitalism occurs through the lens of labour – i.e. the particular practices from which surplus value can be extracted. Using examples of 1970s fashion subcultures such as the punk movement, and drawing a parallel with online subcultures such as those enabled through AOL chat rooms (2000: 49), she argues that "Free labor is the moment where this knowledgeable consumption of culture is translated into productive activities that are pleasurably embraced and at the same time often shamelessly exploited" (*ibid.*: 37). It is important to note that this labour is not necessarily appropriated "but voluntarily channelled and controversially structured within capitalist business practices" (*ibid.*: 39); in effect, as individuals, most personal bloggers were happy to monetise their blogging activities.

The monetisable practices are those that are in the first instance disentangled enough so that they can be formalised as alienable transactions. This does not mean they are completely, or permanently disentangled, and the degree to which there is exploitation of free labour may depend on the extent to which further entanglements are not formalised although they are necessary for the successful outcome – for example, the blogger needs to persuade the readers of her sincerity, something which is not alienable but necessarily an expression of an intangible reciprocal trust. This is where the monetising of the personal blog can become controversial, and various techniques such as disclosure, or an explicit identification with the brand or goods being promoted, are deployed to mitigate the impression of inauthenticity. Thus, as the outcomes of personal blogging become requalified as goods in an advertising market, the productive activity mutates as it resonates with the changed machinic and expressive components of the assemblage.

### **3.1 Producers and prosumers**

One way to approach the mutation of blogging as a productive activity is through the concepts of ‘produsing’ and ‘prosuming’. These are two ways of describing hybrid forms of labour that span the gap between producers and consumers, but they apply to different circumstances. The concept of prosumers was introduced by Alvin Toffler, and refers to the possibility of consumers becoming increasingly involved in the process of production, by virtue of being able to feed information back to the producers and guide the future production of consumption goods – “Someday, customers may also push buttons that activate remote production processes. Consumer and producer fuse into a “prosumer”” (Toffler, quoted in Bruns 2008: 12). An example of this would be groups of enthusiasts who are enrolled by companies to test prototypes, and participate in promotional campaigns.

Axel Bruns has similarly proposed a “model of collective content creation” called ‘produsage’ which has similarities with prosuming, but is more attuned to the internet and information technology. He argues that four “affordances of the networked technosocial environment” make produsage possible (2008: 19). His argument recalls some of the blog affordances proposed in this thesis: the accessibility affordance is a condition of “equipotentiality” – meaning that all participants have the opportunity to participate equally – and the granularity of the tasks is similar to the modularity affordance. However, his model is predicated on the basis of more or less stabilised ‘communities’, within which there are common goals. Thus the affordance of “holoptism” – meaning that all participants can see the whole, and thus contribute and correct to the outcome in different ways – implies a finite field. Finally, without the openness of “Shared, not owned content” (*ibid*: 20), the previous three conditions will not function effectively. The paradigmatic form of this style of production is open source programming, but he also highlights Wikipedia, and news blogs that have a strong input from commenters and other bloggers (recalling the interactivity affordance highlighted in this thesis).

Although this hybrid approach has relevance, and highlights the use of affordances as a means to analyse web-based activities, it is of limited applicability to the blogs that I observed and interacted with in my fieldwork; as noted, the concept of community is loosely held, and while there is a general commitment to a collective goal of enabling bloggers to gain credibility and an income, there is a strong individualistic paradigm embodied in the independence principle – ‘I blog for myself’ – which underlies the authentic performance. Bruns does address the less collectivist aspects of blogging, and the dominance of A-list bloggers, and notes the blogger’s “role of sole gatewatcher,

journalist, and editor,” but argues that “the operation of linking and commenting across blogs also severely undermine the power of that role” (*ibid.*: 78). In other words, he sees in the hyperlinking affordance and the emergent interactivity affordance the potential for collective participation in producing effective informational contributions to the public sphere, and to democratic participation as a whole. He is referring to filter/SoPo blogs, and it is interesting that I tended to find a stronger commitment to an idea of an online community amongst respondents who have SoPo blogs, and also a generalised rejection of monetisation, on the basis of journalistic ethics and to avoid any appearance of bias.<sup>221</sup> One of the ways in which this becomes producing is that there is a “communal evaluation” (*ibid.*: 76) of the material presented in blogs – where an error is made, it is pointed out; where bias is assumed, it is called out. In my research, although there were interspersed objections expressed in comments to advertorials, and occasional responses by bloggers, there was very little filtering of the commercial message in a similar manner, one that critically examines the inherently biased commercial presentation. This reduces the usefulness of the produser model in relation to this context.

Bruns does however propose another model, initially developed by Leadbeater & Miller, which is closer to the monetised personal blogger – the Pro/Am (‘professional amateur’). He again outlines four “core requirements” for a successful collaboration of Pro/Am and producers (2010: 10). First, “Neither side of the collaborative project can be allowed to own the project outright” – the sharing of the process and the outcome (though perhaps with limitations) stabilises the temporary collective. Second, there needs to be easy “Mobility between Community and Corporation” – direct communication is needed, and the possibility of moving into the professional realm is present. Third, leaving open the possibility of further development of finished products allows the Pro/Am participants to continue to contribute; this is particularly relevant to software products that are always being redeveloped. In a similar point to the first, the fourth states that “corporations cannot expect to be awarded exclusive rights to make commercial use of the content created by the project,” arguing that “the main benefits for corporate partners [stem from] the immediate and long-term relationship which it enables them to form with the produsage community” (*ibid.*: 11).

In some circumstances the monetised blogger does resemble a Pro/Am, in that they are skilled communicators, passionate and successful at what they do, prefiguring and developing ongoing commercial mainstream media models of reality and celebrity programming. There are other similarities too – the mobility between community and corporation was one directly experienced by

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<sup>221</sup> Interviews with Jia Hao, Zul and Heng Yik, 16 May 2009

Ibrahim, who came to the attention of a leading cable company after blogging about a popular reality show. His blog became an important destination for fans of the show, and – he recounts – they “called me to work for them [...] they said to me ‘If you can’t beat them join them’, so that is why [...] they offered me a job to be their official website content provider” (*op. cit.*). Stephanie was given a regular column in a national daily, and – because of the *Tropical Gardening* blog – I was contacted by a Sunday newspaper and asked to write articles on gardening. Again, however, Bruns’s focus is on collaborative production of goods, and whereas advertisers wish to have relationships with the ‘community’, for the most common form of monetisation – hosting advertisements and writing advertorials – there is little or no sense of common ownership or collaboration in the sense described here. For example, Sebastian, the public relations practitioner and blogger, explained that he was not happy about the use of advertorials, saying:

if your goal is long term relationships then advertorials are not the way to go because it’s transactional, all right? They [the blogger] will say, ‘Yeah I don’t owe you anything beyond what I wrote for you and that’s it’.<sup>222</sup>

This recalls the alienated relations that Slater argued form the core of the market assemblage; paying for something allows bloggers to disentangle themselves from further non-specified relations. But Sebastian wants to avoid that, preferring a longer term relationship to develop based on other factors. For example, he argued that the advantage of engaging with bloggers is in terms of their feedback, noting that, as opposed to “Journalists [who] come to you to interview you [...] when you sit down in a room [with bloggers] and you talk with them they want to *tell* you stuff!” (original emphasis), and that it’s

not all just about creating marketing hype, or creating value in terms of that. It’s about relationships, it’s being there, being able to have a conversation with the bloggers [...]. Ultimately that’s what it is, it’s about a conversation (*op. cit.*).

This was the professional advice that Sebastian gave his clients, but he made it clear that there were other practices taking place, saying:

PR agencies are so confused if they go out and say, you know, to clients ‘If you have this event, fifty people will write’. And then they come back and they say ‘Let’s pay, X number of bloggers’ – that’s the safest way to do that (*op. cit.*).

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<sup>222</sup> Interview with Sebastian, 25 September 2009

I had an experience of the latter, when I was contacted regarding an advertorial for a deodorant: the terms were that I would attend an event, write two blog posts, and payment would be according to a sliding scale based on the readership of my blog.<sup>223</sup>

The conventional model of public relations is based around appearances in the media, and the client may calculate ROI by column inches, mentions on television, and so on. With blogs, paying bloggers may be a relatively cheap option and thus media presence is guaranteed; the advertorial model guarantees an even closer control, and is often used. Thus, there are a number of practices being engaged in, at the intersection of the blogging and market assemblages. In some situations the Pro/Am model appears to be more prominent, and in others it may resemble the prosumer model more; but neither is a complete match. This reflects the heterogeneity, and the heterarchical nature of the blogging assemblage.

### **3.2 *The lifestyle blog genre***

Although neither prosumer, produser or Pro/Am fit the blog monetisation situation closely, they are useful concepts in that they address the central question of how to understand the meshing of the different assemblages, and move away from the industrial model that radically separates the consumer and the producer – as Bruns says, “to describe a system in which market and nonmarket activities exist on opposite ends of a continuum of possibilities” (Bruns 2010: 9).

There is an answer to the latter from the anthropological tradition that argues that the material/cultural split implicit in the industrial model was always flawed. An example of this is Daniel Miller’s argument that consumption is “above all the form by which capitalism [is] negated and through which labour [brings] its products back into the creation of its humanity” (2002b: 182). Foster develops this, noting how Daniel Miller has argued that consumer appropriation of commodities is a creative process whereby they can “pursue the project of self-fabrication manifestly denied them in the realm of production” (2005: 11); but he extends this by arguing that this “consumption work [...] is itself vulnerable to appropriation” (*ibid.*). Surplus value is extracted from this process because “brands held as corporate assets are also produced by consumers, through the everyday practices in which consumers use branded goods to create social relations and shared meanings and affect” (2007: 717).

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<sup>223</sup> Email dated 31 December 2009

An advertorial does exactly what Foster argues is the aim of branding experts, who want consumers to develop an emotional relationship with the brands (or 'lovemarks', a term proposed by a leading advertiser) – "Creating lovemarks therefore entails inserting products into stories that shape people's relationships" (Foster 2005: 11). The blogger is expected to weave the brand message, along with hyperlinks and 'brand phrases' (both components of an SEO strategy), into the stories she tells – those that are central to her online performance that develops the relations with the readers.

Personal blogs detail the bloggers' everyday life, values, and consumption patterns – thus they become expressions of the blogger's 'lifestyle'. This is a category that has a long history within marketing circles, since it established itself in the late 70s when the Value and Life Style System (VALS) was developed in America. It marked a significant shift in consumer market profiling away from a focus on demographics alone and towards a psychological profiling based on questions about attitudes and regular practices (Mitchell 1983). As the 'Marketing News' noted in 1982, these calculations were made possible thanks to the "computer revolution," and – recalling the discussion on calculative agencies above – it also discusses how "a constant stream of data [...] [has] helped us to redefine the woman's market" (Marketing News 1982).

Combining an understanding of this category in the marketing industry, and how, as Terranova argues, contemporary "television and the Web converge in the one thing they have in common: their reliance on their audiences/users as providers of the cultural labor that goes under the label of 'real-life stories'" (2000: 52), we can see how the personal blog is an attractive medium for marketing professionals. As Slater argues, the aim of marketing is to be able to make an object "meaningful and desirable within specific social relations [...] can this object be culturally entangled? Can it be defined and represented in terms of consumer lifeworlds?" (2002a: 247). Thus, with regards to blogs, advertisers seek to capitalise on the existing relations created through the labour of the bloggers and the readers, engage with them, and by doing so create new resonances that transform the assemblage.



**Plate 19: BlogAdNet organises many film premieres. Participants get a free ticket, the chance to see the film before it is released to the general public, and sometimes extra gifts such as film posters or other marketing collateral.**

In effect, the lifestyle of personal bloggers includes frequent blog posts on their consumption of different goods; recalling Miller’s “consumption work” (*op. cit.*), these informative expressions of taste are a way to develop relations with readers who also consumed similar goods. This is an example of another type of overflow that Callon calls “voicy consumers” who are necessary to the economy of qualities and are “consumers who involve and express themselves, who talk, argue, suggest, criticize and share their feelings and emotions” (Callon 2001). These bloggers destabilise the existing assemblage that brings together media and advertising, and this destabilisation engenders a reterritorialisation that neutralises or internalises these ‘voicy consumers’.

The lifestyle blog thus tends to recount the life of the blogger as consumer. Consuming requires money, and when the interviewees were asked about the significance of their blogging income, the most common answer was that it was a welcome addition that supported a more expensive lifestyle. Thus, Chee Keong said: “It is very important, I won’t be able to live my lifestyle without a supplementary income” (*op. cit.*); and Tommy said “I can live a more luxurious life [and] make more savings for example” (*op. cit.*). Alvin and Magdalene mentioned paying off debts, and Adeline said it enabled her to save a lot of her day job salary. The less well-read bloggers, such as Andrew and Thomas, mentioned paying webhosting fees and small expenses. Of all the bloggers I interviewed, only Nicky was living completely off her blog, having recently quit her day job because she could make more by blogging – she was happy because it then allowed her more time to blog about all the



things that interest her, for the advertorials were otherwise taking up a lot of the spare time she had to blog.

Thus, it is interesting to note that the money from blogging often supports the consumer lifestyle that is then reflected in the blog. Strathern has described consumer culture as springing from “the perpetual emanations of desire held to radiate from each individual person [...] In meeting need and desire, the individual person expresses the essential self” (1991: 594). This putative essential (i.e. authentic) self is realised through consumption, and – as Foster argues – advertising and marketing focuses on a process of branding that “enables consumers to incorporate branded products into their own self-definition” (2011: 12).

Chapter V (Section 6.1; p136) argued for an understanding of the self as dialogical, or dividual, and in order to understand this contingent experience of an essential self, we can draw upon Roy Wagner’s concept of the ‘fractal person’. In the fractal image, as one delves into each level, a new complexity reveals itself, the fractal number recursively generating new yet numerically related patterns. These patterns reflect the spiralling movements of the relatively stabilised social assemblages that a person is part of, explaining how a “fractal person is never a unit standing in relation to an aggregate, or an aggregate standing in relation to a unit, but always an entity with relationship integrally implied” (*ibid.*: 163). The fractal person “cannot be expressed in whole numbers” (*ibid.*: 162) – that is, she is always unfinished, always already becoming and moving, territorialising and subject to deterritorialisation. Similarly, a blog is constantly reassembled, and the incorporation of paid components (advertorials, advertisements) is another aspect of the movement of the fractal person of the blogger who actualises the blog affordances that afford the causal relations that sustain the dialogical blog assemblage.

The following sections will look at case studies of specific instances of changes that can be associated directly with the monetisation of personal blogs. The underlying argument is that with the line of flight engendered by the encounter of the blogging and market assemblage, the monetising activity becomes stabilised by a new genre, the ‘lifestyle blog’, within a new social assemblage, which in this case is also often known as the ‘BlogAdNet community’. The latter provides a sociotechnical framework that leverages relevant affordances, provides means to develop interpersonal ties on- and offline, highlights prototypical examples of bloggers through eliciting their presence at blogmeets and also with a ‘Blogger of the month’ spotlight on their website, and – last

but not least – provides a steady stream of cash and other rewards in kind for those who participate as directed.

## 4 The arborescent advertorial

Consumer overflowings are welcome to the extent that they develop the brand in certain directions, but unwelcome to the extent that they exceed the frames of permissible or manageable use.

(Foster 2007: 719)

From the perspective of marketing and advertising agencies, ‘voicy consumers’ are an overflow of the blogging assemblage, and one that is not always welcome. However, because of the position of blogs in networks of desirable consumers, companies are interested in entangling themselves with them. As discussed in Chapter II (Section 7.1; p52), many companies have their own blogs, and on occasion may create one specifically for marketing purposes. I came across some examples of this during my fieldwork. For example, to promote a new blackberry and lemon flavour, the Ribena juice company created two blogs for the characters of ‘Berry’ and ‘Lemon’, and in the lead-up to Valentine’s day there were regular posts to document their ‘love affair’; it culminated in an event in a mall to which bloggers were also invited by BlogAdNet (Fieldnotes dated February-March 2009). In another example, LG, an electronics manufacturer, asked bloggers (including Xi Ving, one of my interviewees) to be ‘guest writers’ on their specially created blog; this is probably more effective in drawing in an interested audience of blog readers, but these efforts are less likely to carry as much weight as the already relatively stabilised network that exists around pre-existing blogs. Another way of entangling relations is through competitions that require the production of original content (e.g. a video) that is posted on the advertiser’s site, and votes by readers are required to select the winners. This frequently results in blogger participants asking their readers to vote for them, and it is a way of creating the prized ‘viral’ effect that grows the relevant audience exponentially, and in a rhizomatic manner.

These attempts may have achieved limited purposes, but not lasting visibility amongst bloggers and readers. As deWaal Malefyt & Moeran have argued, “If anthropologists ‘write’ culture [...] advertising *produces* it” (deWaal Malefyt & Moeran 2003b: 15; original emphasis). With the caveat that this applies to *successful* advertising, in the economy of qualities this process occurs when advertisers seek to redirect the relations between consumers, as well as between company and

consumers. The strategies outlined above are examples of this but the preference for using existing blogs suggests that they are more effective mediators for the advertisers' messages, and the advertorial in particular is a means to entangle the emotional and hyperlocal parasocial relations between the readers and the brand.

As discussed in Chapter V (Section 4.8; p128), the 'consumer post' is normally a spontaneous reflection on an experience occurring on the plane of rhizomatic personal experiences, reflecting the blogger's personal preferences (e.g. for red lipstick) and her available time and inclination to blog about a purchase. The advertorial, however, is part of an arborescent movement, having its origins in carefully structured marketing campaigns, planned in advance to coincide with a product launch, or a seasonal sales push such as Chinese New Year. The advertorials, and the bloggers, are one node within this managed process that starts with calculations on markets, and ends with calculations on the effectiveness of the marketing and advertising (e.g. Slater 2002b).

Thus the advertorial is situated in an assemblage that spans various media and organisations. The presentation of the advertorial itself is determined by the clients and/or the advertising agency. Once they have written a first draft of an advertorial, the copy is screened: apart from including the prescribed links, key phrases and selling points, the blogger may also be asked to adapt their usual style – thus Chee Keong said he had been asked to tone down some language,<sup>224</sup> Haliza reported having to learn what the advertisers liked to see,<sup>225</sup> and Magdalene explained that she had had to explain her idiosyncratic use of a potentially offensive acronym.<sup>226</sup> Once the advertorial is posted, it is normal for the clients to ask for it to remain as the first post for 48 hours.

This section uses a case study of an advertorial by a blogger (Shi Han) to discuss issues related to the advertorial, understood as the most important exemplar of the meshing of blogging and market assemblages. It is an advertorial for 'Music Telegrams', a service whereby subscribers to a particular mobile phone network can send songs with personalised dedications; there was also an ongoing radio commercials campaign, and some dedications were delivered in person by a performing team – which are filmed and put online. Called 'Saying it with Music Telegrams' (hereafter, 'Saying it'), this advertorial attracted a fairly high number of comments<sup>227</sup> and some controversy due to mistaken intent on various levels, the visibility of disclosure, the management of comments, the

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<sup>224</sup> Interview with Chee Keong, 28 July 2008

<sup>225</sup> Interview with Haliza, 16 October 2009

<sup>226</sup> Interview with Magdalene, 22 October 2009

<sup>227</sup> 71 in total: Shi Han made 11 comments in answering others, three were duplicated. Leaving 57 comments by 43 different commenters

status of certain regular readers, and the process of producing advertorials. It shows overlapping heterogeneous causal relations and interpersonal exchanges intersecting in a single blog post, through the multimodal and hyperlinked body of the post and importantly through the voices of readers as expressed in the comments section. Collective norms are debated and affiliations negotiated. I will go through the blog post and comments, interjecting various extracts from interviews, survey data and reflections from participant-observation to show how the themes raised here are relevant to blog affordances, the wider Malaysian blogging assemblage, and the dynamics of monetisation.

#### 4.1 In-post linking

The opening declaration for ‘Saying it’ – announcing his crush on another blogger, and the discovery of her reciprocal feelings (Screenshot 8) – gives no warning or indication that the post is any different than a normal one. He goes on to describe how he had wooed Mei Chan by sending her a “Music Telegram” via a service provided by a telco – these services are hyperlinked in appropriate places within the narrative (Screenshot 9). Although he does not ask or recommend readers to click on them, the opportunity is plainly offered. The first hyperlinks lead to Mei Chan’s blog – one to her main blog address, and one to a post where she had invited ‘applications’ to be her boyfriend. A comparison of the screenshots (Screenshot 8 and Screenshot 9) shows how they are inserted in the same manner; thus the potential for targeted consumers readers to enter into relations to the client is offered in the habitual setting of a post.



Screenshot 8: 'Saying it', selected portion (faces hidden by author)

For the contextualised link to appeal to the readers, the advertorial needs to be placed on the appropriate blog as defined by its assumed readership. In a newspaper interview, the “specific audience” of blogs was argued by Peter – the AppAds founder – to be a particular advantage of advertising on blogs, adding that “Knowing that each blog has its own demographic allows advertisers to put up more relevant ads;” in the same article James said that they ask the bloggers who their audience is, arguing that “Bloggers know their readers best, and we believe they will tell the truth.”<sup>228</sup> Although this is never more than an estimation, it is presented as a reliable calculation, as can be intimated from Andy’s explanation that clients choose particular blogs because they have their “target audiences, [and] they make sure that they can reach the right people.”

Clicks on these links will form the basis of the CTR calculations that are a partial measure of success of the advertorial. However, depending on the communications strategy of the client, more emphasis may be placed on measurable returns, raising brand awareness, or ‘starting conversations’. Through his performance, Shi Han models a use of the service that is meaningful in terms of the perceived readers of his blog, drawing it into the pre-existing relationship with his readers, thus entangling the good (the Music Telegram) by making it into an example of consociation with another blogger, and in a wider sense, a means to engage with a potential love interest. His general style on his blog is one of a no-holds barred ‘bad boy’, and his readers are more likely to appreciate and believe this story.

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<sup>228</sup> Newspaper article, May 2007. Details retained in order to maintain anonymity.

It seems that the more controversial the dedication is, the more likely it will be played on air. Plus, the more interesting dedications will have the honor of the DiGi Music Squad actually going over (!!!) to the recipient's location to play the song! The band will even perform the song live! Check it out at the [Radio Promo](#) microsite.



However, true love cannot wait (even though I've held it back for so long) so I decided to take matters into my own hands. I logged on to [DiGi's Music Store](#), chose an appropriate song and sent it to her cell phone.

I have known her cell phone number for ages but never did muster up the courage to call, fearing rejection.

With this nifty new method, I can easily pass it off as "Eh, I send to wrong number, sorry ya" should the recipient be less-than-receptive to my amorous advances. ;)

**Screenshot 9: 'Saying it', selected portion – the hyperlinks (in red and underlined) are inserted in the text**

A successful advertorial will therefore depend on the blogger's knowledge of his audience, and ability to appeal to them. The attitudes towards audiences by Monetisers and Non-Monetisers were compared in the myBlogS survey (Appendix A: Q26). Both groups tended to agree that the comments are good for finding out what readers want, and with the statement of independence – "I don't care what the readers want, I will blog about whatever I want." The most salient difference was in relation to regularly checking visitor statistics and trying to improve the number of visitors, with 55% of Non-Monetisers disagreeing that they did this, compared to 15% of Monetisers; and there was also a marked difference in relation to posting frequently in order to keep readers coming back (58.5% of Monetisers agreed, compared to 26.6% of the Non-Monetisers). It should also be noted that 79.2% of the Monetisers had statistics counter on their blog, compared to 49.7% of the Non-Monetisers (Appendix A: Q21). Overall, the Monetisers were more likely to pay attention to the audience, and strategise ways to increase their audience. This suggests a greater instrumentalisation of their readers, recalling the marketisation thesis that argues for a depersonalisation and instrumentalisation of relations in conditions of increased monetisation.

Signing off with a photo of Mei Chan and the announcement of success, “I’ve got a date scheduled with her on Saturday night. Wish me luck, everyone. ;)” the story seems to have a happy ending. For the sharper eyed, underneath the post the category “Live! Tonight! Sold Out!!” is a category label that is an ironic index of the advertorial, and the tags – “advertorial, digi [a large telco], music, [BlogAdNet]” – indicate that it is in fact a paid post (Screenshot 10); but the fictitious nature of the post was not evident to all of the commenters, as we shall see.



**Screenshot 10: 'Saying it', selected portion – Categories and Tags**

## 4.2 Disclosure

I implore those readers of [ShiHan.com] who have trouble understanding [Shi Han’s] posts to check under “tags” before commenting. It might help :/ <sup>229</sup> (commenter B, ‘Saying it’)

It’s not misleading la...look at the categories and the tags. :)

(Shi Han, ‘Saying it’)

The above quotes by commenters refer to the visibility of the disclosure of the paid status of the blog – this issue is a central one with regards to resolving tensions between the blogging and market assemblages. In general, disclosure is seen as desirable: interviewees all agreed that disclosure was preferable, the official policy of BlogAdNet is to encourage it, and the myBlogS survey showed that more than 60% of bloggers and readers believed that “Bloggers should be required to always clearly mark advertorials as such” (Figure 6).

There are two main methods of disclosure. One is in the blog post itself: this can be purposely visible – such as inserting ‘Advertorial’, or ‘Sponsored post’, at the beginning of the blog post; or, more commonly, by tagging it and/or categorising it as an advertorial (see Screenshot 10). Another method, not commonly used by those bloggers I interviewed, is a generalised statement that addresses the whole blog; this statement is often a derivation of a disclosure statement<sup>230</sup> initially

<sup>229</sup> :/ is an emoticon that indexes an ‘awkward’ expression

<sup>230</sup> See <http://disclosurepolicy.org/>

developed by PayPerPost in response to criticisms of paid blog posts (see Chapter IV, Section 7.1; p103).

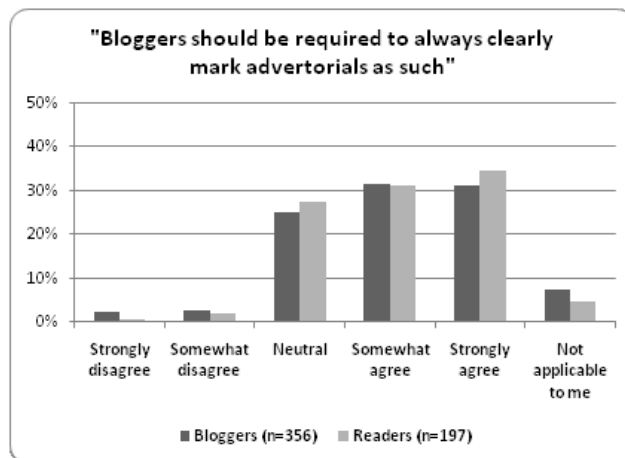


Figure 6: myBlogS survey results - Disclosure

However, there were cases where clients requested non-disclosure, and this was usually seen as the prerogative of the client – for example, Ibrahim said that he preferred to disclose using a tag, but “if the client did not allow that, I will not put” (*op. cit.*). The notable exception was Nicky, who recounted how she has insisted on disclosing in spite of a client making it a condition for doing the advertorial; in the event, with the mediation of BlogAdNet, they agreed to let her disclose (*op. cit.*).

Adeline, however, argued that disclosing was a form of absolving responsibility, saying that “I think that people who put disclaimer is just one way for them to take up a lot of advertorials without being responsible for it.”<sup>231</sup> Adeline’s argument is revelatory, it shows how the concept of authenticity contributes to framing the different approaches to disclosure; she argued that she would only blog about things she believed in, so a disclaimer would in fact demonstrate inauthenticity. Alvin’s attitude seemed to confirm Adeline’s suspicion, saying “everybody should declare an advertorial. I think that’s the main thing, and then everybody should take advertorials with a pinch of salt,”<sup>232</sup> but he also emphasised the need to be honest, though in a more circumspect manner, saying that it is always possible to say things about a product, without endorsing them as such: “I don’t have to say I *choose* iPhone or BlackBerry, [...] but I can talk about how good the BlackBerry is and what kind of features it has, you know” (*op. cit.*; original emphasis).

There is a similar dynamic with Malaysian newspapers, with advertising spending often influencing coverage. Alvin, who is a journalist, also gave an interesting insight into the overall media framework

<sup>231</sup> Interview with Adeline, 7 May 2009

<sup>232</sup> Interview with Alvin, 1 October 2009



for disclosure. He explained that “even in the press [...] we get goodies all the time;” thus, after writing articles about certain companies or products, it was common to receive vouchers or other gifts in kind (*op. cit.*). Most days, a look at the marketing and business pages of any Malaysian newspaper reveals a few articles that also look like poorly revised press statements. Anecdotally, a colleague in the corporate communications department of a leading private college told me that an advertisement was the usual price for an article in the Sunday educational supplement, and the article was usually a lightly revised version of a press statement provided to the newspaper. Adeline also recounted a similar incident, when she had contacted a newspaper regarding a charity event she was organised, and was told that she had to place an advertisement in order for them to mention the event (*op. cit.*).

#### 4.2.1 *Commenting on disclosure*

That disclosure matters to readers is demonstrated by regular remarks in comments. In one example, Screenshot 11 shows commenters asking why the advertorial was not stated as such, the blogger, Amanda apologises and rectifies it.

The comment thread is initiated by Commenter A, who indicates that she has seen an advertorial for the same product by another blogger and thus guessed that it was an advertorial. In effect, the clients usually time the advertorials’ release in order to coincide with their marketing campaigns. Stephanie had done an advertorial the previous week, about the same product, and posted at the top in an apparent afterthought: “Short note: Omg,<sup>233</sup> I thought today was Tuesday already. Damn it, posted on the wrong date.”<sup>234</sup>

Commenter B responds by pointing out that the post is filed under “Commercial Break”, but commenter C responds by saying that the post had initially been miscategorised. Amanda confirms the latter and apologises, having rectified the error. It is an example of the kind of gatekeeping that Bruns suggests happens with produsing, although it is not directed at the content of the post, but whether or not it is properly disclosed as being paid.

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<sup>233</sup> OMG/Omg: ‘Oh My God’

<sup>234</sup> Blog post, Stephanie, 8 February 2009; p00510



Screenshot 11: Amanda's blog - selected comments regarding disclosure (Blog post, 16 February 2009: p00504).

### 4.3 Asynchronicity

Asynchronous communication over a number of blogs means that readers with a minimal knowledge of blogging and search engines can rapidly check and assess the actions of, and relations between, other bloggers to a reasonably accurate degree, and bring this information to bear on ongoing conversations. In 'Saying it', commenter C linked to Mei Chan's boyfriend's blogs, saying "Don't want to disappoint you, [Shi Han]. But ain't she already have a BF [boyfriend], DEAR?"

In the meantime, Mei Chan noticed the post – which was published at 1.36pm – and at 12.23am she intervenes in the 13th comment.

OMG!!! I didn't know you were gonna write up a story like this when I took the photos for you ler<sup>235</sup> ...  
despite the popularity you're giving me, I don't appreciate that you're downgrading my character... I

<sup>235</sup> 'Ler': is similar to 'lah', but with a connotation of displeasure or disapproval.

hope you'll make a slight change in your post stating that the whole thing was just a make up story for advertorial purposes.

Probably having noticed an increase in visitors, and using her blog to clarify her standpoint, she also posted on her own blog immediately afterwards (at 12.27), “To everyone who dropped by from [Shi Han],” politely emphasising her gratitude for the extra visits she got from the post, but reaffirming “I’m seriously attached to my BF.”<sup>236</sup> Her post is an understandable attempt to state her case, but it should also be noted that it enables her to capitalise on the increased incoming traffic, giving visitors a post that refers to a shared experience, and the opportunity to comment on it. After I had won a top prize at a blogmeet, I knew that I had to post as quickly as possible so that I could give visitors a place to leave relevant comments. Bloggers and readers quickly shift from one event to the next, and the blogger who wants to benefit from time-sensitive interest, needs to act quickly. This is one reason why clients will require the blogger to leave the advertorial as the first post for two or three days, because readers will usually focus and comment upon the most recent post only. In effect, each post offers the opportunity for consociation, which may relate to one post only (e.g. when a number of readers come over via a link from an A-list blog), or which may relate to extended consociation over time on the same blog.

Monetising blogs means taking advantage of the features that distinguish them from other forms of media. Frequent and chronologically relevant posts are one such feature; but clients will usually want the advertorial to be timed with their campaign, and for the advertorial to stay up as the top post for a few days. This can interfere with the spontaneity of the blog, although it coincides well with the asynchronous aspect – enabling readers a wider space of time to read the post and interact with the blogger. Another distinctive feature of blogs is that the advertorial stays online and is accessible indefinitely – this is very different from the fleeting nature of mainstream media advertisements.

#### **4.4 *Negotiating the advertorial with the client***

James insisted that “you can *buy* a blogger’s attention with an advertorial, [but] you *cannot* buy the blogger’s opinion,” (*op. cit.*; original emphasis) saying there had been many occasions when a blogger had reviewed a product, not liked it and said to the client:

‘Look, this what I’m gonna write about it. Are you *sure* you want me to publish it? If not then, take it back, and don’t pay me’ [...]. It’s just like a newspaper [James continued], you can invite them to the

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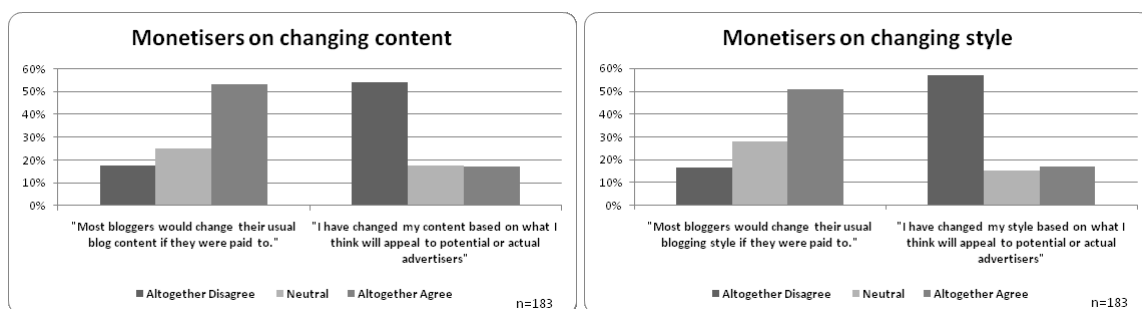
<sup>236</sup> Blog post, Mei Chan, 13 January 2009: p00752

press conference, you can get their attention, but you can't dictate what they are going to say. The same for bloggers lah (*op. cit.*; original emphasis).

The blog is a reflexive performance, and the advertorial forces a greater reflexivity, bound by the need to represent the client in a particular way while maintaining their usual style – entangling the authentic blog and the commercial message. The advertorial is expected to be woven into the usual prosaic narrative of the Personal blog, its casualness belying the careful planning and negotiation that goes into its creation. Bloggers explained to me that they would receive a brief, which may include instructions about using particular pictures, 'brand phrases' (relevant to SEO and marketing strategies), and hyperlinks. They would then have to prepare a draft which is screened first by BlogAdNet, then sent to the advertisers.

There are tensions between the blogger and the client about the appropriate performance or style of the advertorial but these are generally presented as minor. James said that the process is "very open," that they don't even impose a word count and "it's a very natural flow" (*op. cit.*). The interviewees reported relatively minor interventions in the content, such as Nicky who said "Most of the time they're not major changes, it's just small details, or 'Change this picture', or 'Insert this line', so it's quite simple" (*op. cit.*). However, Chee Keong anecdotally reported one blogger who had refused to carry an advertorial as requested by the client (*op. cit.*), and Jaymee said that she had turned down some advertorials because although the product being advertised was all right, "the way they want it to be done can be a bit, ah, weird [...] then I don't do it lah" (*op. cit.*).

An interesting result from the myBlogS survey is presented in Figure 7; when asked whether "Most bloggers would change their usual blog content/blogging style if they were paid to", more than 50% of the Monetisers agreed, and less than 20% disagreed. However, when asked the same question about themselves, these trends are almost directly reversed – suggesting Monetisers believe that other bloggers change their content or style to suit clients, but not that they do it themselves.



**Figure 7: Monetisers' attitudes towards influence on payment on content and style**

Haliza said that about 40 per cent of clients will ask for changes, but also implied that as she wrote more advertorials, she got better at writing in a style that fits the client. This 'advertorial style' is one that I found easier to spot as time went on; similarly to Commenter M in 'Saying it', who said that s/he "soon smelled a rat and realized it was an advertorial when [Shi Han] started to get obsessive over the Digi [i.e. the telco] thingie." Over time, a particular sub-genre, of the advertorial, seems to have developed: it takes the form of an anecdote with the product inserted into the tale, and it occurs in a fairly formulaic fashion that became recognisable. More evidence of this is that occasionally bloggers will write about something, and find it necessary to explicitly point out that they are *not* writing an advertorial. For example, Andy blogged about a pizza parlour once and at the end specified that it was not an advertorial, although he wished it was because he could then get free pizza.<sup>237</sup>

James's insistence that you cannot buy a blogger's opinion was therefore not reflected in a straightforward manner by the interviewees. From one aspect, Magdalene and Jaymee reported having difficulties rejecting advertorials because of personal loyalty to James; from another aspect, as James's quote that opened this section implies, bloggers prefer to say nothing rather than say something negative. Advertorials are paid content, and the clients retain full gate keeping rights over the final content, and in this manner channel the form and content of the advertorials in definite ways.

## 5 The comments

Moving into the second part of the 'Saying it' post, the comments area, there develops a dialogical debate about the meaning of the post that moves between the commenters, and with the blogger. The comments area is a key location for entanglement: there is evidence of emergent stabilised relations, non-host blogger-centric interactions, and while some readers criticise the blogger for

<sup>237</sup> Blog post, Andy, 3 June 2009: b00664

changing because of the advertorial money, others place it in the context of the blogger's right to blog as he wishes.

Clients want to be 'part of the conversations' happening in the blogs, and the comments are the most visible representation of that conversation. A few months before I interviewed her, Nicky had – unusually for a blogger – disabled the comments function because of negative comments that had started to affect her and, she explained, "all this writing is for myself, it's not for other people, so that's why I shut it down for a while, because, I didn't want my writing style to change."<sup>238</sup> However, since then she had taken the decision to quit her job and rely on her blogging income, this meant that advertorial revenue was more important and she said:

I'm a stronger blogger now [...] more thick skinned [...] if someone wrote something bad [...] I'm OK with it. [...] Secondly, I was thinking, this is important for my blog, because clients would ask, uh, 'She doesn't open her comments?', 'What about advertorials?' Things like that. And I thought, if I only open the comments during advertorials, seems a bit, like, strange isn't it? (*op. cit.*).

Thus the clients' preference, and the goal of a consistent authentic performance, combined in her decision to reopen the comments. The advertorial can be framed and determined to a large extent by the client, but the comments cannot be influenced to the same extent.<sup>239</sup> James explained that sometimes there could be competitors leaving comments, and said that "in fact, those ones the bloggers themselves delete, because like, you know it's just stupid, just saying for the sake of saying just because they can" (*op. cit.*). Haliza also noted that clients want to see comments, and she explained that she would censor comments "related to the advertorials, if they are compare[d] to other products, of course I have to, I will try not to delete it, but I will edit," for example, by blanking out the brand name with 'XXXX', (*op. cit.*). Although she said she 'had to', this was not what I gathered from the other bloggers – although most did mention needing to pay attention to that aspect. In an advertorial by Maango for a cosmetic facial cleaner, there are a few mentions of alternative brands and solutions in the comments, and she has not deleted them – but she either did not answer them, or was non-committal.<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> Interview with Nicky, 26 October 2010

<sup>239</sup> There is a practice of 'seeding' forums and blogs with comments about products, but this is not a preferred tactic, seen as being inauthentic and ineffective. There is also the possibility of paying for spam comments (*The Economist* 2009a), but this is mostly done in order to place links.

<sup>240</sup> Blog post, Maango, 16 February 2009: p00504

Andy, perhaps due to professional habits derived from his customer service role, would often engage with the comments in a style more reminiscent of customer service – for example, in the comments from an advertorial for a credit card company, he mediates on behalf of the client. A commenter said that he had cancelled a credit card from the same bank that was being advertised, because of a low credit card limit. Andy answers that maybe there were other beneficial features that balanced out the lower credit limit. It is also interesting to note that there was a comment that looked like a bald intervention from the client ('Anonymous') – it said that the credit card looks cool, asks if Andy will apply for one, and includes a link to credit card website.<sup>241</sup> Andy responds positively, but this type of intervention is very rare, though on occasion there are representatives of the client who respond to comments in an open manner.

### **5.1 *Comments and polyvocality***

In 'Saying it', an exchange demonstrates some of the dialogic dynamics of the comments, as well as the fact of the advertorial influencing the blogger's style. First, Commenter D taunts Shi Han by saying: "Her bf is much much more better than you [...] more handsome than you, and [...] a doctor [...] And who do you think you are? hahaha.. How pity.."

Shi Han responds placidly, but later a 'Defender' (Commenter E) asks why does he "bother to be nice towards spastic pieces of shit like [Commenter D]", and proceeds to crudely lambast him/her. Then, further down, Commenter F intervenes saying: "[Commenter E] shut the fuck up will ya? If you like to condemn people, then start a new blog yourself. Unless if you are [Shi Han] trying to two-face and be a moderator." Commenter F 'non' is expressing a common theme – 'if you don't like it, make your own blog' – but also raising the possibility of deception by implying that Shi Han could be making comments under a fake pseudonym. Again there is the tension of the anonymity affordance: of course, we don't know who Commenter F is – s/he could in fact be the same person as Commenter D, or even Commenter E, for that matter.

However, Shi Han reveals that he communicates via other means with Commenter E, saying to him/her:

I would have ripped him another one if this post isn't what it is. :) [i.e. an advertorial]

Like you [Commenter E] mentioned in an email, I know this self-censorship isn't me, but hey, it pays the bills.

Thanks for your support as always my friend. Cheers!

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<sup>241</sup> Blog post, Andy, 13 January 2009: p00277

and to Commenter F he retorts: “[Commenter E] is ALWAYS welcome on my blog. At least he stands up for me when I’m not around to reply comment.”

The comments area is a polyvocal space of asynchronous overlapping voices. The latter response by Shi Han reveals the relevance of the asynchronous affordance, in that Shi Han cannot monitor or respond to every comment immediately. In combination with the anonymity affordance, this results in a relatively disjointed conversation which may either be mediated by the blogger, who responds to comments at particular times, or sometimes individual commenters will become polar attractions themselves. Overall, it is clear that not only do the clients have the final say on the content of the advertorial, but that they also influence, indirectly at least, the moderation of the comments.

The social interactions in the advertorials’ comments area are approached more carefully by the bloggers, and with regular advertorials there may be an overall shift in the sociality of the hyperlocal assemblage. Another personal experience is worth noting – on one advertorial I saw a food blogger promoting processed cheese, something I personally abhor. I started to write a comment challenging his taste, but then realised that I may be ‘Breaking his rice bowl,’ a Malaysian expression that refers to negatively impacting on someone’s business. If commenters tend to value their parasocial relationship with the blogger, this may be a significant factor influencing them with regards to comments on advertorials. However, the blogger cannot be certain, particularly as regards the non-regular commenters who are less likely to be understanding.

## ***5.2 Negotiating the authentic advertorial in the comments***

[Commenter G says]

seriously, if a girl is not into a marriage, every guy is entitled to have a go( of course, fairly & gentlemanly) but clearly i think [Shi Han] did it for advertising purpose.

[Shi Han’s response]

I’ve been avoiding the A-word in my replies. It’s a harder than it looks. Heh!

It’s not a good advert when it sounds like an advertorial.

(‘Saying it’)

The strength of the advertorial from the client’s point of view is its relative invisibility; the blogger weaves the commercial message into the prosaic narrative that is the defining feature of personal and lifestyle blogs. The reactions in the comments section to this post indicate that Shi Han was successful, and indeed he expresses some pride in it. Referring to the fact that the ‘sell’ was not obvious, he says “Success! No one can ever accuse me of hard sell anymore...,” and continues,



saying “or, er, it just speaks more about my non-regular readers than my writing skillz. ;)” Here he is injecting a note of humility towards his regular readers, and recognising how some of them had clearly spotted the advertorial. Again, the regular readers and commenters feel a sense of shared experience and understanding, focused around the character of the blog and the blogger. People like me, who have been reading his blog for several years, and have seen him go through methamphetamine addiction, a suicide attempt, and more, are able to read through the lines occasionally. Some, however, challenge him, and Commenter H says “when we first read you, you were not 'slave' to any advertising.” Such a comment reveals a hankering for the imagined authentic Shi Han, one that does not take into account his subjectively changing life and sense of self – as suggested above when he says he has to “pay the bills.”

A similar exchange occurs on MyEats;<sup>242</sup> although the blog is about food, the advertorial (indicated by the tag ‘lunch money’) is about a prepaid mobile phone package – Commenter A says:

Oh, crap. Pandering to commercial interests. Yup, its your blog and you can do anything you want.

It was better when you just talked about food.

I’m outta here. Thanks for the memories.

[to which the blogger responds]

It’s a commercial break, after all it’s nice to have some side income to pay for hosting and domain name etc. Thanks :) <sup>243</sup>

Although Commenter A is not happy, another commenter compliments the blogger – saying “This is a great advertorial. :)”, and another seems to see the advertorial as a positive status symbol, saying: “Awesome laaaa, you get advertorials :( ” It’s worth noting that the latter commenter is part of the social circle of the BlogAdNetters – whereas Commenter A leaves no link, which is typical of critical comments.

Readers can always ‘vote with their clicks’ – i.e. if they don’t like a blog, they don’t go there. It is possible that Commenter A above did no longer read MyEats, but in any event, twelve months later it is still a popular blog. The advertorial itself can become a sign of taste and authority, and the proper crafting of it can satisfy the audience’s requirements for authenticity – but it also requires a development of new skills for the blogger.

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<sup>242</sup> A pseudonym

<sup>243</sup> Blog post, MyEats, 13 January 2009: p00267

In a few of Shi Han's responses in 'Saying it', he shows that he is learning writing genres – saying to Commenter I – “Yup, shows that I can do straight hard sell writing, humorous writing [references another advertorial] and tabloid style writing (this). ;)” He reveals aspects of the advertorial production process by telling Commenter J that the post was written in the previous month, and explaining to Mei Chan that he “can't show [his] draft to anyone except the client.” To Commenter K, he refers to a previous advertorial and says “I actually write much better when I'm given a free hand to write.” He is exposing the cloaked process of the advertorial that he was trying to avoid before, and by doing so maintaining his distance from the commercial intent of the advertorial.

Although there is a negotiation going on throughout the comments, there is rarely any conclusion. The lack of physical co-presence, the option of anonymity, and the frequent updating, means that discontinuation of conversation threads is more likely, and comments can be made without having to subsequently justify them. The final comment (Commenter L) in 'Saying it' recalls the financial relevance of controversial blog posts, saying “your uniques must have hit rocket high because of all the misunderstandings,” and Shi Han responds “Eh, didn't make the stock market move much. But still fun to do this ADV.”<sup>244</sup> The financial implications are downplayed, and the personal motivation is foregrounded.

As discussed above (Section 2.3; p208), in the myBlogS survey, 66% of the respondents agreed that “When bloggers start to make money from their blog, their blog becomes less personal.” It is interesting to note that the gap between Monetisers (59.6%) and Non-Monetisers (77.5%) was quite large (17.9%). A similar statement – “When a blog starts to have advertorials, it loses its originality” was agreed with by 48.1% overall, but had the largest difference – 20.6% – between Monetisers (36.6%) and Non-Monetisers (57.2%). Monetisers are thus less likely to believe that by generating an income from their blog, they are being less authentic, or personal.

Arguing that an advertorial is inauthentic, and a negation of the blog as extension of the self, is assuming a unitary self that can only be expressed in particular forms that are not connected to financial motivations. It also assumes that a paid post would be an example of self-alienation caused by market forces. However, personal bloggers will argue that as long as they write what they believe, it doesn't matter if they are paid or not. As a respondent to the myBlogS survey stated:

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<sup>244</sup> ADV: advertisement/advertorial

as a student, a few hundred ringgit is hard to pass when you're merely asked to sing praises about something on a blog that is read by a few hundred people. *It's not about selling out, it's about being true to myself [...]. You can STILL make the content as original as you want it to be. If you suck at it, then that's when people think you're being superficial* (emphasis added).<sup>245</sup>

From the standpoint that brands' qualifications derive from the consumption work of users who detach the brand and use it in their relations with others, but that the brand remains the legal property of the corporate owners, Foster argues that "the persons of both consumers and corporations are partible [...] contingent bundles of qualities or assemblages of properties" (2011: 14). As argued in chapter VI (Section 4.5; p160), the blog is a dialogical medium – an assemblage of particular machinic and expressive relations between the blogger, the blog, and the audience. The advertorial is usually explicitly detached through the use of disclosure, but the mark of a good advertorial is one that also recreates the relations between the blogger and the audience.

Thus an advertorial by Tommy elicited this comment: "That blog post was 100% pure awesome. I love how you listed it as an ADV at first too so I was expecting it to be an advertorial, but then had a great surprise ending. Bravo!"<sup>246</sup> – the reader is satisfied that the ending was in the trademark style of Tommy, involving slapstick humour and photo editing, but also appreciates the upfront disclosure of the intent of the post – as an advertorial.

## 6 Click fraud and internalising overflows

To end it,you readers better be clicking on my ads.I'm counting on you people for my first cheque from both company!

[Comments...]

[Commenter A] said...

I clicked all your ads already. It's your turn now!! We are helping each other.

2:18 PM

[Damnu] said...

Mr [Commenter A],

I scratch ur back...u scratch mine!

2:38 PM

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<sup>245</sup> Open ended comment, myBlogS survey, March-April 2009

<sup>246</sup> Blog post, Tommy, 16 March 2009: p00565

[Commenter C] said...

I too clicked ur ads! when are u clicking mine? =P

4:04 PM

[Damnu] said...

Miss [Commenter C],

I go do it NOW!!

4:36 PM

[Commenter D] said...

i scratch ur back u scratch my back =D

[...]

6:31 PM

[...]

[Commenter E] said...

woah you got rm4.70 and rm 5.86 in just couple days.how do you made it??.me no one click my ads..let we click ads each other please..

3:22 PM<sup>247</sup>

(Extract of blog post and comments)

An advantage of internet advertising is that clicks – direct expressions of interest in the good advertised – are easily quantifiable and remunerated. However, by measuring and paying for clicks, the possibility of fraudulent clicks, i.e. clicks that do not correspond to genuine interest, becomes a matter of concern. Social relations are recast and reconfigured in the light of the need to quantify the interested audience, but the different desires that animate those relations are not eliminated by monetisation, but recast as undesirable and therefore become overflows.

The above exchange demonstrates the issue. It occurred in the early days of BlogAdNet: the host blogger had done a brief review of BlogAdNet and AppAds, concluding that he will try them both and asking readers to click on his ads – at the time each click was worth 50 sen (USD0.22), a relatively high payout compared to Google AdSense and other alternatives. The response of the commenters is to click on his ads and ask for reciprocation. This is normal behaviour for bloggers, but this section will discuss how this activity has come to be reframed as ‘click fraud’ in the light of monetisation.

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<sup>247</sup> Blog post, Damnu, 24 July 2007: p00832

On the 29th September 2010, BlogAdNet sent an email to registered bloggers that showed a concern with increased click fraud.<sup>248</sup> There are four categories of click fraud outlined, two of which involve the blogger alone: registering a large number of blogs and clicking on them, and/or repeatedly changing the IP address in order to simulate being a different person. The other two relate to reciprocal actions: bloggers are told not to ask readers to click on their advertisements, and not to click “on other bloggers’ ads [...] leaving a comment behind asking/hinting to the owner to click on their ads back.”<sup>249</sup>

It is interesting to contrast this with an earlier statement by a co-founder in March 2007, where he suggested to readers on his blog: “When the ad runs, perhaps egg on your readers to check it out.”<sup>250</sup> A year later, when I attended a launch of a mobile phone marketing campaign as part of the BlogAdNet attendees, Andy (incidentally, this is when I spoke with him for the first time) explained to a group of bloggers that they should not click more than once a day on the advertisement in their own blog, but that it was fine to click on advertisements in friends’ blogs.<sup>251</sup>

Before blogs had advertisements, reciprocal exchanges of hyperlinks and attention were a means to develop further social ties and which stabilise the blogging assemblages; withholding visits and/or hyperlinks was a sign of disagreement or tension. With advertisements, a new element was introduced to this sociality, and initially BlogAdNet tacitly condoned the continuing of mutual self support that continued to be effectuated in the form of clicks on links, though these now translated into money. The previous mutual support resembled gifting, in which “the act of exchange is inseparably the reproduction of the social relationship in which it is embedded,” but BlogAdNet has to bring the bloggers to understand the clicking on advertisements as “a market transaction, reproduc[ing] no social roles other than that of buyer and seller” (Slater 2002c: 239).

The logic of mutual support runs counter to the needs of the clients, who only want to pay for real expressions of interest, which is what the CPC model is meant to provide. In the email mentioned above, billed as a “community message service,” BlogAdNet framed the dangers of click fraud as a threat to the community – by potentially reducing the frequency of ad campaigns – and asked the bloggers to refrain from it and educate others. They stated their willingness to ban those involved

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<sup>248</sup> This was not the first one, another one had been received on 4 April, 2008. It is a recurrent issue. I also discussed it with Andy during his interview in August 2009.

<sup>249</sup> Fieldnotes/email dated 29 September 2010

<sup>250</sup> Blog post, Tan, 16 March 2007: p00821

<sup>251</sup> Fieldnotes dated 8 April 2008

“so other members of the community are not affected by those who engage in click fraud.”<sup>252</sup> (Although the email can also be read as telling bloggers to avoid making it too obvious.) In this way, although a collective, stabilising, practice is being reframed, community is still being invoked as the reason for it. In a market economy, the transaction that is sealed by the exchange of money, based on a common ethical position formalised in a sales contract, needs to be alienable – “The idea that an event can be rendered a transactable thing is a prerequisite to its commoditisation and to the possibility of stable markets in these goods” (Slater 2002c: 110). As argued above, clients want a presence in the ‘online community’, but – as Callon would put it – they want to contain the ‘overflow’ and disentangle the actual reciprocal relations that have contributed to the existence of the blog assemblage.

The email from BlogAdNet notes “Our system is capable of tracking these actions mentioned above,” i.e. those that constitute click fraud. The technologies that quantify and measure audience, and which are the source of the commodifiable audience for the bloggers, are the same means that oversee their actions – “They are the object of technologies which isolate them *and their world* as strangers within a strategic relationship” (Slater 2002a: 240; original emphasis). This also recalls Deleuze’s argument regarding the use of technologies that substitute “for the individual or numerical body the code of a ‘dividual’ material to be controlled” (1992: 7) – the qualification of the bloggers as legitimate recipients of the payment for advertising services is done through digitised, quantified and contingent data.

However, Slater is careful to point out the specificity and contingency of this rationalised context – the boundaries of the relationship are always fuzzy, and in particular the longer term framing of the relationship is important. BlogAdNet emphasises the benefits to the ‘community’ of abiding by these rules – thus re-entangling the rationalised and depersonalised reciprocal clicking within a wider reciprocal framework that is the ‘community’. The coordination of reciprocal clicking is an ‘overflow’, or externality, in the terms laid out by Callon, which threatens to destabilise the market, and what the email presents is an attempt to internalise an externality (e.g. Strathern 2002). The benefits of community are being framed in terms of potential income, in a manner that was not present beforehand. Another way in which internalisation occurs is through reincorporating the subject apprehended as flows of data into the body of the community. I did see examples of bloggers complaining of having been banned for alleged click fraud, and therefore whether or not the

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<sup>252</sup> Fieldnotes/email dated 29 September 2010

bloggers internalise this version of community, they cannot openly defy it without losing the opportunity for income.

## 7 Blogmeets: market territorialisation

As argued in the last chapter, blogmeets are an important territorialising force of blogging assemblages and a location for some important socialities. In 2007, the number of blogmeets I am aware of were: two SoPo, two BlogAdNet, one AppAds, and some other blog-related events such as a business seminar and an academic seminar focused on blogs. However, throughout 2008 and 2009 there was normally the opportunity to attend a BlogAdNet meet at least once a month. I went to 16 BlogAdNet blogmeets in all, getting to know some people and extending those interactions online to some extent. If I had been able to enter all competitions and taken up all opportunities, I would have attended more.

Advertorials are mostly commissioned from the higher traffic – ‘A-list’ – bloggers, but this section will use a case study of a large blogmeet to show how lower traffic, ‘small’, bloggers such as myself are also enrolled via competitions, which normally require the production of blog posts too, and thus require skills similar to those deployed in producing advertorials.

In October 2009, BlogAdNet organised its biggest blogmeet ever – three days and two nights in Singapore, with 400 bloggers and guests from four countries. Modelled on the industry awards of Hollywood or MTV, the “Regional Blog Awards” were sponsored by the ‘Singaporean Travel Association’ (STA) and ‘Potatoes’.<sup>253</sup> 10,000 blogs were nominated and more than 250,000 online votes cast; the online votes and the decision of a panel of judges were combined to select the winning blogs in eleven categories.<sup>254</sup> The nominations is a very high figure; it probably reflects many self-nominations, as well as the dispersed and decentred network of bloggers, with many clusters having their own favourites. For the votes, each person could vote once a day, and many likely voted more than once: although the judges created a shortlist based on various criteria, in the end the winners were probably those with the most loyal readers – one of the winners explained how she had ‘bribed’ her readers to vote for her by promising to tell them the story of how she met her fiancé if she won.<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> Both pseudonyms, the second is a leading potato chips manufacturer

<sup>254</sup> Fieldnotes dated 23 October 2009. The categories were: Most Influential, Blog Shop, Geek Blog, Entertainment Blog, Celebrity Blog, Travel Blog, Parenting Blog, Fashion Blog, Food Blog, Original Blog Design, Hidden Gem, and Region’s Best Blog.

<sup>255</sup> Channel News Asia interview, 26 October 2009

## 7.1 *Preparing for the blogmeet*

As with all blogmeets, there is an interweaving of on- and offline interactions. A website was created, where descriptions of the event, information for media, bloggers and participants, and the voting page were placed. For those who would not be invited, there were 75 pairs of tickets to be won through a competition for which the requirements were by now familiar to me – to blog on a theme closely integrated into the sponsors’ branding messages. This format enables the sponsor to control the content of the blog posts – for Potatoes, the title of the blog was to be “Its [sic] Krrunch Time, Get Playful,” and the bloggers were to choose from three themes – work, school, or home, and “share how Krrunch-ing [Potatoes] crispy chips can ignite your playful spirits, such that you can turn a BORING situation into PLAYFUL one.”<sup>256</sup> In a press release, Potatoes’ Brand Manager explained how this coincided with the corporate brand message, saying “We expect bloggers to be key influencers in bringing alive our fun image and help consumers realise the unexpected fun in every can of [Potatoes].”<sup>257</sup> Whether or not a tube of shaped and flavoured reconstituted rice and potato flour can be said to contain “unexpected fun” is not the issue, but the important thing is that it is presented as such and this is echoed by the bloggers. In other words the good is being qualified through the personalised narratives of bloggers, in terms that resonate with the expressive components of the targeted demographic, the desired market segment, of which the bloggers are also seen to be indexical.

For the STA, the blog post had to say why the blogger would want to visit Singapore, plan an itinerary (the official website was proposed as a source for ideas), and to use the brand phrase “Indulge in the Uniquely Singapore experience” for the title and as a sign-off. In the press release, the Director of Brand Management said, “As bloggers are able to offer their personal perspectives, their blogs can be both informative and influential in attracting potential travellers from around the world.”<sup>258</sup> More than an observation, this is a self-fulfilling expectation: that is to say, the STA presents bloggers as autonomous agents in their public statements, but seeks to manage their “personal perspectives” in a manner closely circumscribed by the rules of the competition. They are creating a body of blog posts that are possibly “informative and influential in attracting potential travellers,” but these would not have existed otherwise.

Although by now I had a lot of experience in creating successful blog posts for such competitions, I had also come to appreciate the work and time that goes into them. Each one took me about ten to

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<sup>256</sup> Blog post, September 2009: p00753

<sup>257</sup> Press release. Details withheld to preserve anonymity.

<sup>258</sup> *ibid.*



twelve hours spread over a few days. Starting by a close read of the instructions – which resemble an advertising brief – and checking on what other bloggers have done, I then developed ideas for a casual narrative centred on pictures, the usual format for Personal/Lifestyle blog posts. Once I decided on the general outline, I took the necessary photos (helped by another person) – acting out different poses – which were then selected and edited. For example, with the Potatoes post, the story was of falling asleep over a complicated philosophy book, then by chance peering at the book through the Potatoes tube (looking for the last crumbs); a picture editor was used to produce a kaleidoscope effect, spinning the book's page into a whirl of colour, then back into another book about *The Simpsons* and philosophy. The final photo showed me in my garden, in a comfortable chair, with a beer and Potatoes tube by my side, and reading the new book.

Thus, doing a winning post involves all the skills of a lifestyle blogger – writing, photography, using photo editing software, anticipating the preferences of the audience (in this case, the client and BlogAdNet), reflexively articulating the personal blog genre, and creativity. Some of the competing posts were much more elaborate than mine, using video, stop animation, extensive editing with professional software, and so on. It is also relevant to note that the time spent on such a post diverts from time for 'normal' blogging – I often found myself spending most of my creative energy on such posts rather than the usual posts, and occasionally I noticed bloggers apologising for doing too many advertorials, mentioning a backlog of advertorials, or promising a 'return to usual blogging.'

## **7.2 Community & hierarchy**

Although the BlogAdNet blogmeets were normally presented as open to all and based on blogging competitions, it had become clear to me that some bloggers – the 'A-list' bloggers – did not have to meet the same requirements. This was no doubt due to their greater audience, and corresponding importance for the clients. These bloggers can therefore make some demands – talking about invitations to events in general, Jaymee said

I'm sorry to say, if it's not VIP, I'm not going. I'm not asking for fuss, I'm just asking for free food, beer, that's it... I've done my share of waiting in line at clubs, and all that stuff... (*op. cit.*).

The relevance of this dynamic was also confirmed in the build-up to the Regional Awards. In one instance, a blogger (coincidentally an interviewee, Thomas) blogged angrily about his perceived poor treatment by BlogAdNet. Writing that he had decided not to enter the competition because he lacked the time, and implying behind the scenes favouritism – "knowing how the people work in sending out invites to 'bloggers who are qualified'." However, BlogAdNet apparently wanted his

participation, and a few days later he received a call from them “‘offering’ me passes FOR 2 [...which] would be allocated automatically for me once i’ve done and submitted the 2 blog posts.”<sup>259</sup> In other words, he was invited, but asked to do the blog posts as a formality. However, he was angered by disagreements over conditions for inviting a second person, hence the angry blog post. That BlogAdNet do allocate places directly to some bloggers was also confirmed to me when, at the Regional Awards, a blogger close to BlogAdNet implied to me that his blog post had been a formality.<sup>260</sup>

As further evidence of these concerns, one week before the Awards the BlogAdNet had put out a call on Twitter for ‘any non-top bloggers’ who were going to the Regional Awards. It transpired that someone had tweeted<sup>261</sup> that BlogAdNet were biased and that “they only invite TOP bloggers.all non TOP bloggers r ignored.”<sup>262</sup> When I responded to BlogAdNet, I was asked to tweet – using the hashtag<sup>263</sup> of the awards – that I was a non-top blogger who was invited; I also noticed a few other bloggers doing the same.<sup>264</sup> In other words, BlogAdNet felt the need to respond to these accusations, which relate to tension between the ‘big’ and ‘small’ bloggers, and appearing to be honest brokers is important to them.

In the interview, Ibrahim (*op. cit.*) described a public relations event organised by BlogAdNet in August 2009 where some bloggers were paid to attend and write a post, and others did not receive any payment; because of this, BlogAdNet asked them not to disclose the advertorial so that this differential treatment was not revealed. These examples of preferential treatment can be directly linked to the calculation of the readership of the A-list blogs, and therefore their perceived earning power for BlogAdNet. As such, they are examples of the striation of the plane of personal blogging through the combined sociotechnical agencies of audience measurement instruments, online search algorithms and various company-specific calculations of ROI.

### **7.3 Sponsoring presence**

On the weekend of the Regional Blog Awards, bloggers gathered at the BlogAdNet offices to take chartered buses to Singapore. Leading up to it there were online discussions of preparations – what to wear, arrangements to meet up, and so on. Up until people actually meet up at the event, most of the preparation and socialising happens online. The trip went without a hitch and resembled any

<sup>259</sup> Blog post, Thomas, 25 October 2009: p00713

<sup>260</sup> Fieldnotes dated 23-5 October 2009

<sup>261</sup> To ‘tweet’ is to post a message on Twitter.com

<sup>262</sup> Fieldnotes dated 23-5 October 2009

<sup>263</sup> Twitter mechanism to publicly group all tweets relevant to a particular topic

<sup>264</sup> Fieldnotes dated 23-5 October 2009

tourist bus trip one can imagine. Some blogging details filtered through all the same: before departure, Chee Keong took advantage of some downtime to do a blog post, wirelessly connecting his laptop via his mobile phone, and photo taking was in evidence at each stop. Many of the A-list bloggers had recently been given Blackberries as part of a promotional campaign that was still in full swing; these mobile devices – visible evidence of rewards from blogging, and status symbols – were much in evidence.

Arriving at the hotel, there was a delay in booking in – something mentioned in a rare criticism of the weekend:

[BlogAdNet] has bad event planning skills [...] Great Gatsby, we had to wait for almost an hour and a half for our room key [...] I suppose cos it's free and all we shouldn't complain, but still. Constructive criticism, no?<sup>265</sup>

The penultimate line is revelatory – BlogAdNet's events and prizes are always 'free', and as such people are less likely to express unhappiness about them. Another rare critical voice hinted at this dynamic: "I really gotta give it to [BlogAdNet]. How amazing they are able to make people with blogs work for their 'invites' to the awards."<sup>266</sup> In effect, apart from the bus company, all of the public moments of the weekend were entangled with sponsors – the term 'sponsor' evoking benign support, rather than an 'advertiser' investing in public recognition – and it was barely possible to blog about any aspect of the weekend without mentioning them. In the blog posts, it was common to refer to the sponsors and thank them, and generally positive remarks were made. Although the sponsors have no doubt calculated that their investment will be paid for by the collective labour of the bloggers, the lack of a clear 'transactional relation' means that most bloggers respond by using a non-market frame and thus relations with the sponsors are actualised in terms of a reciprocal gift model, rather than a market economy model.

Interviewees tended to say that they would rather say nothing than say something negative about events and products. One said that this was because s/he did want to alienate the potential clients, and others mentioned personal ties such as those with James, who was a relatively prominent blogger himself before he started the company, or gratitude to BlogAdNet for bringing them considerable opportunities. Nicky (*op. cit.*) also mentioned personal ties to the founder of

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<sup>265</sup> Blog post, TenQ, 27 October, 2009: p00853

<sup>266</sup> Blog post, AyBeeCee, 29 October, 2009: p00854. This blogger is Singaporean, and not part of the Malaysian blogosphere as defined here; however, Singaporean and Malaysian bloggers share many traits.

BlogAdNet's major competitor as being a reason why she did not exclusively host BlogAdNet advertisements, something nearly all the other Lifestyle bloggers did. Sebastian also explained the way in which his PR agency sought to develop reciprocally beneficial relations with bloggers by providing them with products for review, invitations to events; he also emphasised the need to approach each blogger as individuals – thus the tech bloggers appreciate being on the mailing list for press releases, but the personal bloggers need to be treated differently (*op. cit.*).

An analysis of the posts after the Awards weekend shows that most follow the same narrative and have similar pictures; for example, barring the personal tastes mentioned, the photos and sequence of the food at the awards ceremony could often be overlaid almost perfectly. In some cases, the similarity may be due to the bloggers sharing tables and/or spending time together and posting about it – however, it also suggests a ritualistic facet to the posts, which points to other purposes. Replicating the offline consociation online brings both of these spaces together. To not mention someone online, after having socialised offline is not only risking a diminishment of the offline interaction, but is also denying them an opportunity for online exposure, and an incoming link. Thus, the content of the post may not be as important as mentioning other bloggers, and linking to them.

Photo opportunities – such as a red carpet, and a backdrop, complete with logos of the sponsors – were explicitly provided for at the Awards ceremony, guiding participants towards appropriate activities. There were also one or two official photographers, whose photos were made available online afterwards. These were stamped with the logo of the sponsoring camera manufacturer and there was a competition for Singaporeans which involved selecting favourite photos from amongst those provided, and people voting on them (see Plate 21). Apart from taking photos of each other, bloggers were also taking photos of the colourful new flavours of the sponsor's potato chips that are spread about, the flower arrangements, the crowds, the people, and so on.

Sitting down to eat, we introduced ourselves to our tablemates, and while chatting, comments were passed between my wife and the wife of another blogger present (Faizal) about a common experience whereby bloggers make other diners wait while they take photos of food (e.g. Plate 20 and Plate 21). This reflected how the effects of consociational practices expand beyond the bloggers alone.



Plate 20: Bloggers photographing food, Singapore. (Blog post, 27 October 2009: p00855)



Plate 21: Bloggers documenting their experience. Photo provided by the event sponsors. Singapore, October 2009

As discussed in Chapter VI (Section 6.1; p168), camwhoring is a key practice of the personal blogging sociality, and the above sections demonstrate how the organisers of the blogmeet provide opportunities for camwhoring that integrate the logos and goods of the sponsors. Not only are sponsors positioned as enabling the event – placing them in the plane of the blogging assemblage as

co-participants – but the logo, hyperlink, and references to the sponsors become distributed throughout the machinic assemblage of the interconnected blogs. These factors enable the sponsors to become potential rhizomatic nodes and entangle the brands into the relations of the bloggers and their audience.

There are of course many ways of re-presenting blogmeets online, but generally it is done in a manner that emphasises the positive aspects. An example of this is in Plate 23, which shows two pictures – one taken by me and one by a newspaper – where the importance of the timing and the positioning of the camera are evident. The attendance at that event was in fact relatively low, based on the forty or more unclaimed goodie bags that I saw lined up behind the registration desk;<sup>267</sup> in the top photo of Plate 23, one can see that most of the audience are taking photos for the re-presentation of the event online, but the photos that were used in blogs do not reveal this aspect of the event.

At an early event in April 2008, after the launch of a telco marketing campaign was over and a few bloggers stayed on to chat over a drink, Andy was explaining about upcoming events and cinema screenings and was asked whether the bloggers have to blog about the events they attend with BlogAdNet. He answered: “It’s advised” and suggested that if they didn’t like it, the bloggers should try to use ‘constructive criticism’.<sup>268</sup> Personally, I felt it important to blog about these events in a timely manner, so as to continue to be useful to BlogAdNet, and in conversations with other ‘smaller’ bloggers like myself, I noticed a similar attitude amongst others. My primary concern was to keep the opportunities for fieldwork flowing, but for other bloggers the free cinema tickets, parties, and so on, were incentives. For example, one blogger said she had only earned RM2 in a year, but implied that the reason she had signed up with BlogAdNet was to get free cinema tickets and blogged just as much as was required to get them.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> Fieldnotes dated 19 December 2009

<sup>268</sup> Fieldnotes dated 11 April 2008

<sup>269</sup> Fieldnotes dated 7 July, 2008



**Plate 22: BlogAdNet blogmeets often include free food and drinks. This coupon was part of the free offerings at one blogmeet.**

As time went by, I felt that the BlogAdNet meets I attended had a lot less emphasis on blogging; for example, in earlier blog meets it was more common to have an occasion for bloggers to introduce their blogs, or for selected ones to be presented.<sup>270</sup> It is also important to note that these sponsor-driven opportunities have the potential to territorialise other consociational practices simply by displacing them in terms of time and space. At the blogmeets organised by BlogAdNet, I noticed that they tended to become more closely structured around a series of opportunities for prize giving sessions led by local celebrities with multiple photo opportunities for the clients and bloggers. It seemed that sometimes this was because of the need to fit the planned event into the time available at the rented venue.

#### **7.4 Blogs meet**

At the Regional Awards ceremony, the cofounders gave some short opening speeches, followed by a video on the story of BlogAdNet, and short profiles of the employees of the different national offices. These presented BlogAdNet as emerging from, being integrated with, and contributing to blogging. When the winners were announced, short profiles of the nominated blogs were shown first. Seeing the précis of the blogs was educative: the more professional-looking Australian bloggers dominated some niche categories – Geek blog, Fashion, and Parenting blog. The Malaysian and Singaporean blogs tended to look a bit more amateurish, and subsequently more ‘personal’. The showcasing of these blogs was an opportunity for bloggers to meet across countries, and for cross-fertilisation of ideas, styles, techniques and variations on genres – widening a blogger’s interaction, interests and influences beyond the local. One Malaysian blogger noted: “Most of the awards are bagged by the Australians and Singaporeans. Gosh, Malaysians really need to buck up. :P”;<sup>271</sup> and another said how the winners had made her think that her blog was not up to scratch.<sup>272</sup>

<sup>270</sup> Fieldnotes dated 19 May 2007, 25 August 2007, 15 March 2008

<sup>271</sup> Blog post, kalibr8, 7 November 2009: p00856

<sup>272</sup> Blog post, Karina, 30 October 2009: p00857





**Plate 23: Two photos of the same even show the significance of framing the photo. The upper photo (*The Star*, December 2009) suggests a crowded house, the lower one shows fewer participants, nearly all of whom are in effect media producers.**

Australians and Filipinos were generally quite surprised at the size of the event, seen as evidence of the popularity of blogging in Malaysia and Singapore. An Australian blogger said about the biggest winner of the evening:

Unknown to me before the awards night, she has a massive following in Asia and can be considered an Internet celebrity of some sort [...] One thing to note is that she is a full-time blogger, even though her blog doesn't focus on any topic in particular.<sup>273</sup>

This is a fair description of the lifestyle blog, and his remarks reveal that it is a not a common genre in Australia. Another national difference in blogging was made clear to me the next day when I discussed with the President of the Filipino BlogAdNet branch. I realised that the Filipino contingent

<sup>273</sup> Blog post, 30 October 2009: p00858



were not almost exclusively bloggers as was the Malaysian one: there were some media representatives; potential business clients or partners; a media celebrity who did not have a blog but, I was told, “blogs on Facebook”<sup>274</sup> – the Filipino branch of BlogAdNet were hoping to help him to launch a blog; and two well-known cosplay<sup>275</sup> women. For the recently inaugurated Filipino BlogAdNet branch, the Singapore trip was an opportunity to promote blogging to these public figures. The President explained that although the bigger blogs tended to have more readers, there were less blogs in the Philippines, possibly because less people owned their own computers – thus some “evangelising” for blogs was needed.<sup>276</sup> The size of the event, the numbers, and the sponsors, all help to enrol them into the lifestyle blogging genre by demonstrating the viability and stability of the assemblage that brings together bloggers with opportunities for self-promotion and advertising.

These national differences are important indicators of how blogging is embedded in local sociocultural and economic contexts. As BlogAdNet spreads to other countries, it may also carry the lifestyle blog genre with it, as it encourages bloggers and companies to entangle. However, I was also told that Australian bloggers resist advertorials more.<sup>277</sup> One reason for more blogebrities in Malaysia/Singapore could be a combination of relatively high internet access for youth (e.g. as opposed to the Philippines) and the relatively fewer outlets for youth expression (e.g. as opposed to Australia). These are fertile areas for future research; the possibility for transnational assemblages is there,<sup>278</sup> but it is also important to note that the national structuring of markets means that advertisers want to ensure their budgets are spent in ways that will engage with their local markets.

## **7.5 Bloggers meet**

The above observations regarding the territorialisation of blogmeets by market-oriented practices can be complemented with data from the myBlogS survey. In the previous chapter, the data regarding the personal significance of on- and offline relations between bloggers was looked at with regards to bloggers as a whole, and here the differences between Monetisers and Non-Monetisers are explored.

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<sup>274</sup> Where he has 18,000 followers

<sup>275</sup> Cosplay: short for ‘costume play’; where enthusiasts dress up as Japanese anime cartoon characters

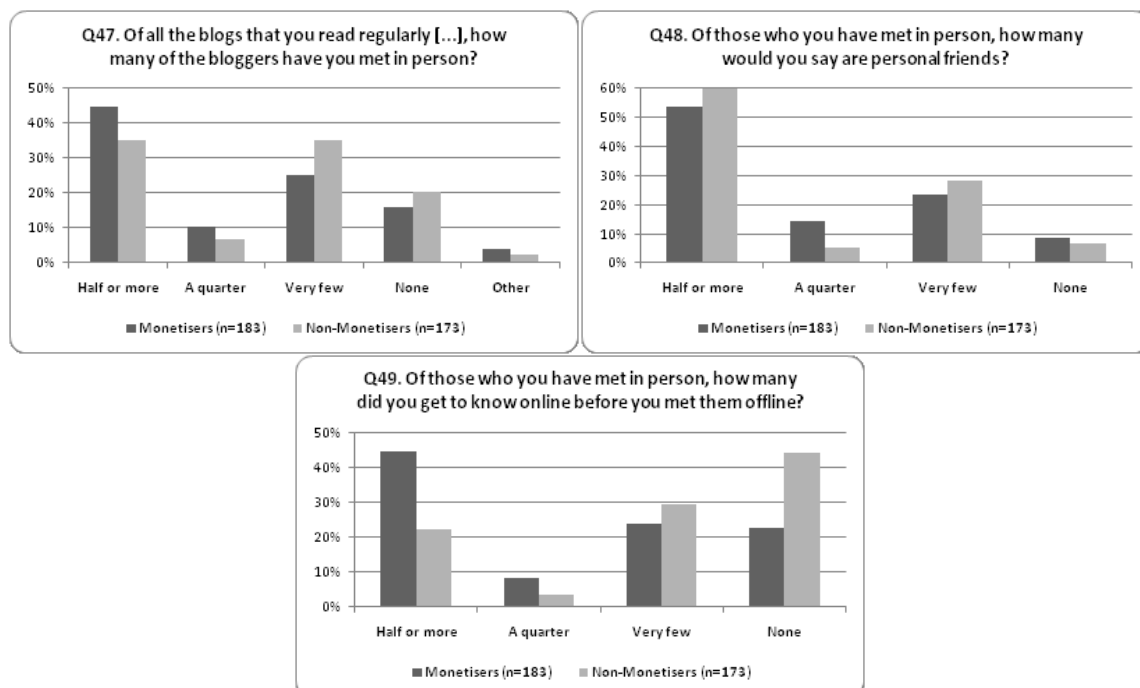
<sup>276</sup> Fieldnotes dated 24 October 2009

<sup>277</sup> Interview with Magdalene, 22 October 2009; Interview with Sebastian, 25 September 2009 (note that these opinions on Australian bloggers may come from the same original anecdotal source)

<sup>278</sup> Alvin said he was getting Filipino readers. Haliza mentioned Indonesian readers who had met up with her when she visited Jakarta. Nicky mentioned Filipino and Indonesian readers. Tommy mentioned readers worldwide offering accommodation and support. Chee Keong gets regular comments from American readers.

There was a general tendency for Monetisers to be more likely to have met their favourite bloggers in person: 45% of the Monetisers had met half or more of the bloggers they read regularly, compared to 35% of the Non-Monetisers; the trend continues with ‘a quarter’ and switches to more Non-Monetisers being likely to say ‘Very Few’ or ‘None’ (Figure 8: Q47).

When asked how many of those they met in person they considered as a personal friend, the differences are not so pronounced, but the trends are reversed to some extent: 60% of the Non-Monetisers considered ‘Half or more’ of the bloggers they had met in person to be personal friends, compared to 54% of the Monetisers. However, there were also more Non-Monetisers who considered ‘Very few’ to be personal friends (Figure 8: Q48).



**Figure 8: Comparisons of Monetisers and Non-Monetisers relations with other bloggers**

Regarding those that they met online before they met offline (Figure 8: Q49), a larger difference between the Monetisers and Non-Monetisers emerges: 45% of the Monetisers answered ‘half or more’, compared to 22% of the Non-Monetisers; and this difference is reversed for those who answered ‘None’, with 23% of the Monetisers choosing this compared to 44% of the Non-Monetisers.

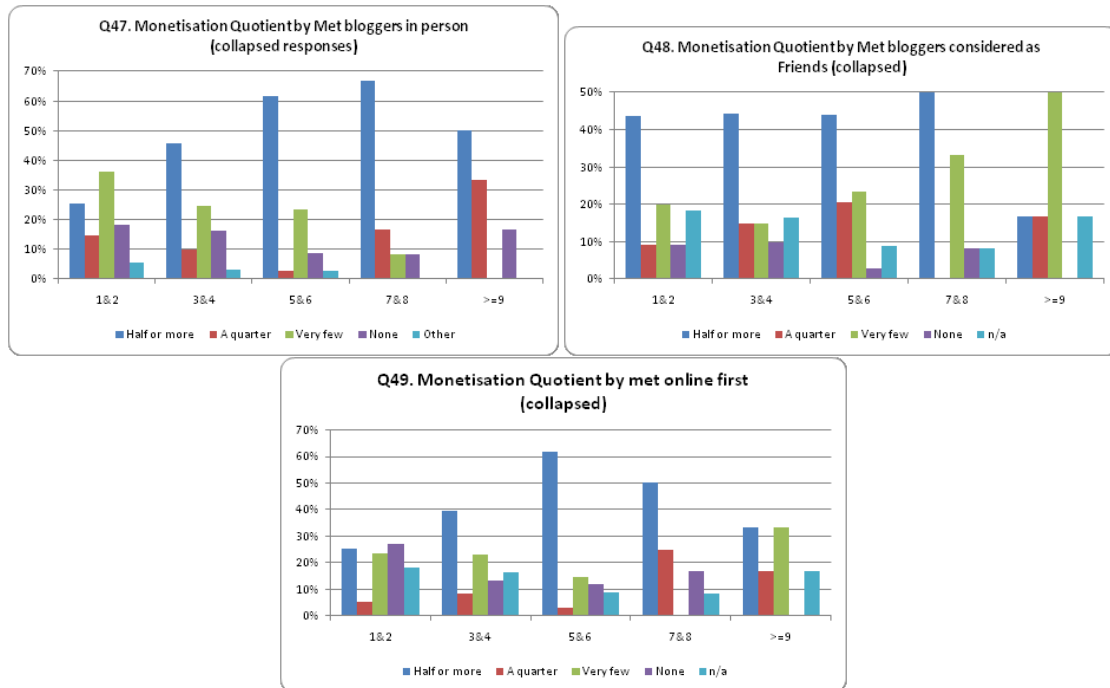
Overall, therefore, there seems to be a higher chance of Monetisers translating their online relations to offline relations, but not necessarily into more intimate relations. Considering that 90% of the

Non-Monetisers did not attend any blogmeet, and that 69% of the Monetisers are registered BlogAdNet bloggers, the most likely conclusion is that the blogmeets organised by BlogAdNet gave the opportunity for these offline encounters, and that those bloggers that Non-Monetisers read regularly are personal friends unrelated to blogging in the first instance.

These correlations relate to offline meets, but not necessarily relate to monetisation *per se*. As explained in the chapter on methodology, the myBlogS data is not suitable for tests of statistical significance, so as alternative way to verify the significance of the correlation I developed a 'Monetisation Quotient' (MQ) that graded respondents according to how many monetisation activities they engaged in: hosting advertisements, doing advertorials, selling links, receiving free cinema tickets or restaurant meals, and so on. For the trends regarding Monetisers and online relations noted above to correspond, the higher MQ should correspond to meeting more bloggers in person, meeting more bloggers online first, and generally being less likely to consider their favourite bloggers as personal friends. Using the MQ, those trends tended to be confirmed, suggesting a correlation between monetisation practices and offline meets. For example, in Q47 (Figure 9), there is a trend towards a positive relation between higher MQ and bloggers having met their favourite bloggers in person; however, for the highest MQ the figure drops off. This may be explained by the low number of bloggers (six) in that category, or by the fact that the MQ is more related to online activities than offline blogmeets. The latter point may also explain why those who met online first peaked at the mid-range of the MQ (Figure 9: Q49). As for those who consider the bloggers they met in person to be personal friends, there was a trend towards a higher MQ reflecting more who answered 'Very few', but for those who said 'Half or more' there was no significant trend (Figure 9: Q48).<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>279</sup> It should be noted that the greater proportion of the MQ depended on online practices (hosting different advertisements, paid posts, etc.) compared to monetisation-related offline practices such as receiving free cinema tickets, restaurant meals or being invited to events. Therefore, this demonstrates that the correlation between the MQ and the offline meets is not a function of the latter; that is, Monetisers are more likely to meet up offline, but their higher MQ is not based on the fact they meet offline but depends more on their online activities. Thus the trends outlined above reflect more than just the fact that they are able to meet offline at blogmeets organised by BlogAdNet.



**Figure 9: Comparison of inter-blogger relations and the Monetisation Quotient**

This data suggests that the BlogAdNet meets are significant in enabling bloggers to meet in person, meaning that those personal bloggers who meet in person are more likely to do so in the context of market-oriented activities. The conclusions regarding the closeness of relations are not clear, but it is logical to assume that the more bloggers one meets, the smaller the proportion who will be considered personal friends.

## 8 Conclusions

This chapter asks what particular relations are affected by monetisation, through what means are those changes effected, and how are they perceivable? It has looked at five particular areas of blogging: advertorials, disclosure, the comments, click fraud, and blogmeets. The analysis of advertorials showed how they represent a mutation of the consumer post, and are determined in the last instance by the client. Although not all bloggers agree to do all advertorials, they are the most lucrative form of monetising blogs and are a clear example of the internalisation of ‘voicy consumers’ in an attempt to stabilise the advertising market. Disclosure debates draw upon the underlying discourse of authenticity, and demonstrate the tensions caused by paid blog posts. The comments remain a powerful dialogical dynamic, and a constant reminder of the audience’s need to be acknowledged. There are frequent criticisms of the monetisation of blogs, but these remain a minority voice and tend to focus on the blogger, rather than the goods being advertised in the way

that Bruns has suggested happens with journalistic producers. The reframing of reciprocal linking and clicking as click fraud is a clear case of the influence of the calculative agencies and the need for BlogAdNet to discipline bloggers in the interests of guaranteeing the authenticity of interest in advertisements, in a shift from a focus on the authenticity of bloggers. Finally, the blogmeets represent perhaps the most powerful influence of BlogAdNet; they have increased these far beyond anything previously available and, given the importance of face-to-face contacts in the perception of 'community', have successfully stabilised an assemblage of bloggers around commercially oriented blogmeets.

These points address the ways in which monetisation introduces new causal relations to the blogging assemblage that was discussed in chapter VI. Chapter V discussed the relations between the blog and the blogger, concluding with a discussion on the dividual self. This was returned to in this chapter, which drew upon Wagner's fractal self to argue that the inclusion of paid components into a blog can be seen as an expression of the contingency of any person, and thus avoid a dichotomisation of in/authenticity. Deleuze's concept of the dividual self, wherein digital technologies enable the substitution "for the individual or numerical body the code of a 'dividual' material to be controlled" (1992: 7) helps us to understand the relevance of the modular affordance, actualised via the relative autonomy of blog posts, the use of tags and categories to effect disclosure, that channel flows of expression as facets of the dividual self.

Understanding the limitations of the authenticity model should not obscure the changes that have occurred as monetisation increases. The best way to understand this is in terms of genre – a new genre, the lifestyle blog, is one that reflects facets of the blogger's life that are relevant to a consumer lifestyle. A blog genre reflects an assemblage of technological, social and expressive components, and the deterritorialisation and destabilisation introduced by the monetisation of blogs, and in particular BlogAdNet's business strategy aimed at establishing a new market, has resulted in a line of flight that formed a new genre.

Slater argues that the important distinction of the market economy is the potential for specific, contingent, alienable relations. The type of relations afforded by the sociotechnical devices of the market mean that alienable transactions are possible; a sales contract clearly limits the obligations on each side. There is this possibility too afforded by the blog: within the same blog it is possible to flag different posts as having different meaning, enabling readers – who have an understanding of the blogger through extended parasocial relations – to evaluate how they want to interpret the

advertorial. In effect, they use the totality of their interactions with the blog to qualify the blogger and the good<sup>280</sup> presented in the advertorial.

Advertorials qualify a good for consumption by readers, but with regards to clients the good that is provided in lifestyle blogs is a qualifying service. The predominance of services has led to arguments that the internet has introduced a new form of immaterial economy, but Slater and others assert that the materiality of things has always been overstated – goods are stabilised as social materialities depending on contingent conditions and this applies equally to material objects and immaterial services. The ‘economy of qualities’ is one way of tracing objects and demonstrating how they achieve their status through a series of interactions within sociotechnical networks. The qualifying of products as ‘goods’ in the final stage before the end consumer, is achieved through the specific entangling of cultural relations with the product through advertising and marketing. At each stage there is a different entanglement and the ability to disentangle and re-entangle is important. Foster discusses how particular overflows can create undesirable entanglements, particularly when oppositional publics form around the issues. For monetised blogging, the service provided is advertising, and the objective is to entangle the brand name and goods with the audience of the bloggers – to create relational networks that become animated by desires focused on the goods.

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<sup>280</sup> Although usually ‘goods’ is always written in the plural, in economics it can also be written in the singular to refer to a single unit of particular goods, and Callon also uses it in this manner.

## VIII. Conclusions

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This chapter will reiterate the main arguments proposed in this thesis, discuss some limitations, and suggest possible avenues for future research. The driving question of this thesis has been to understand the effects of monetisation on personal blogs – that is to say, how has personal blogging been affected by the influx of advertising and other means to derive income from producing a blog. This option has been present for most Malaysian bloggers since at least 2003, but was significantly expanded by the creation of local blog advertising networks in 2007 – in particular BlogAdNet. Serendipitously, this also provided the opportunity for a sustained ethnographic investigation of a localised assemblage organised around monetising blogs.

The initial assumption was that there would be a collective negative reaction to the monetisation of blogs. This was based on a Bourdieuan field model, and the example of generations of artists who are replaced through a field dialectic that operates around a ‘fundamental law’ of disinterestedness that privileges ‘art for art’s sake’, as opposed to monetary gain. The principle of authenticity is important in blogging, and it is challenged by monetisation, and in particular the use of advertorials. However, this working hypothesis was not borne out. Although there are regular and scattered objections to monetisation, there is a more sustained and reliable participation in it. In effect, by 2011, coalescing around the advertorial and the stage-managed public branding events – respectively reconfigured versions of the consumer post and the blogmeet – BlogAdNet has attracted the attention, and influenced the blogging practices, of the largest visible proportion of personal bloggers.

In practice, it was found that authenticity is practiced in many different ways – as many ways as there are bloggers. In addition, the accessibility affordance that makes it very easy for any Web user to start their own blog, means that the authenticity principle is paralleled by the principle of independence, which upholds the prerogative of the personal blogger to blog as he wishes. This is supported objectively by the virtually unlimited resources for online blog production. This last condition was not present in Bourdieu’s analysis which was based on artists competing for limited spaces of visibility and channels of distribution for their work.

The difficulty of integrating observed practices and events into the field model (discussed above – Chapter II, Section 3.2; p15; and Chapter III, Section 4; p81) led to the adoption of the non-dialectical assemblage perspective, a model which emphasises rhizomatic multiplicities of causally related

components rather than relatively bounded dialectically driven spheres. The principle of the 'fundamental law' in Bourdieu's discussion of the cultural field is one that suggests a dialectical movement between generations of cultural producers, whereas the assemblage perspective is more suited to analysing the less restricted (in terms of accessibility), more permeable and more populated blogosphere. It also holds the added advantage of being able to consider the effects of technologies, persons, sociocultural and economic practices in interlocking multiplicities. The assemblage perspective is relativistic and thus different aspects emerge depending the chosen scale and focus. Thus, three main approaches were adopted: the blog as extension of the blogger; the collective of blogs and bloggers; and the overall interaction of these with BlogAdNet and the Malaysian advertising industry.

## **1 The dialogical medium & extended parasocial relations**

The internet and the Web have transformed the media panorama that characterised the twentieth century – from a centralised broadcasting model dominated centralised state and industrial mass media to a radical decentralisation. This ongoing change should not be overstated: nation states still have many options for controlling all media, and large corporations remain the primary source of news and media entertainment. It should also not be forgotten that the majority of the world still does not have access to the internet. Nonetheless, blogs are a primary example of the decentralising potential of the meta-medium of the internet, and as such are worthy of careful study.

This thesis has focused on the personal blog, an understudied phenomenon, and argued that it is a uniquely personal medium that not only offers many people the opportunity to publish material available to a global audience, but also various ways to interact directly with interested individual readers. The diaristic form of the personal blog allows readers to develop a sense of the blogger as a person, and the interactive affordance allows for the possibility of *extended parasocial relations*. This ease of use, the regular prosaic interactions, and the ability to express oneself through a variety of modes – each actualised through particular affordances – means that a personal blogger may find that their blog, and the extended parasocial relations, become intricately interwoven with their everyday life. It is in this sense that blogs are radically different from previous media – whereas all media, and art forms, allow for an extension of aspects of the self to non-located others, the ongoing blog is a dynamic, dialogic, folding and unfolding of shared affect and experience. Although each blog post can be experienced as a stand-alone text, the more significant consequence of the blog is that it traces a path alongside the ongoing life of any reader, paralleling and intersecting their own shifting experiences, ongoing relations and circumstances. In this, as has been noted in Chapter



II (Section 6.3; p47), there is a parallel with the increased popularity of reality TV programming, that purports to show real events and people as opposed to fiction.

Many of these aspects are not unique to blogs. For example, social networking sites offer the possibility of extended parasocial relations too. However, the difference with blogs is that it is not – in the first instance – about being ‘social’. Indeed, one of the first principles of personal blogging is that it is done ‘for oneself’; however, the size of the blogosphere means that what this means in practice is impossible to pin down. All bloggers I came across like to have an audience, but the type of audience sought can vary from a few personal friends and family, to thousands of strangers – the more the better.

A blog allows a person to add onto their social relations, but this does not necessarily subtract from other types of relations, which is what the fear of the ‘internet addict’ incapable of ‘real life’ interaction is based on.<sup>281</sup> Nonetheless, although variably meaningful interpersonal relations can take place online, the forms that they can take are shaped by the affordances of the medium. For blogs this means that a popular blogger will not be able to interact with all readers equally, and – for all participants – the asynchronous and disembodiment affordances means that they have to learn to manage their Goffmanian ‘front stage’ in ways that suit the blog environment.

## **2 Sociotechnology and affordances**

The way in which a blog can become an integral part of a person’s social and personal expression means that it is an interesting example with which to explore the ways in which technologies integrate with human life. Chapter II discussed the related debates around techno-determinism, and the concept of sociotechnology that emphasises the interrelated nature of technologies with social life was used to provide the theoretical perspective. The aim of including sociotechnical theory was best served by using a methodology based on actor-network theory that emphasises the potential agency of all actors and actants, human and non-human. In addition to following the methodological lead from ANT, this thesis also borrowed from precursors to ANT, Deleuze & Guattari, and in particular their arguments relating to assemblage. This offers a way to understand contingent collectives of machinic and expressive components that resonate and have emergent effects, which DeLanda also develops and applies to social sciences by arguing for the use of social assemblages defined in terms of their contingently emergent effects on constitutive components.

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<sup>281</sup> Instances of excessive and virtually exclusive online activity do exist, but they are better understood in the context of psychological pathologies such as eating disorders, sex addiction, shopaholics, etc.

An ANT approach demands an empirical tracing of causal relations, and a particular complication of sociotechnical analysis is in identifying specific effects of technologies. To address this, I have argued for the use of affordances which allows for the understanding of technological properties that are contingently actualised by agents. In particular, it also argues for limitations to technological potentials, thus allowing for an empirical mapping of the blog's potential in terms of interpersonal interaction. This thesis has proposed a set of blog affordances that are used in a diagrammatic manner, following Deleuze & Guattari, to discuss the immanent and actualised instances of blogging.

The blog affordances are what enable relations within the blogging assemblage(s), and also limit them. While the assemblage is inherently unstable, particularly in the heterarchical blogosphere, the affordances are limited and identifiable. Affordances may also expand their technical limitations when they become emergent, as they are realised in conjunction with an assemblage, but this is because the assemblage is not reducible to the affordances, rather than because the affordances are infinitely malleable. They are malleable to a limited extent, in that they are realised by and through their integration into social assemblages; in this manner, emergent affordances recursively enable the assemblage, both forming and being formed by it.

As argued above, blogs enable extended parasocial relations, as well as variable expressions of the self. Understanding the affordances allows us to trace the ways in which this happens, and therefore to provide a framework that explains the types of emergent practices and assemblages that can occur at different scales – from the blog as assemblage through to the blogger to the meshing of blogs and the advertising industry.

### **3 The relational self**

Understanding that the blog affordances enable self-expression required a discussion of the meaning of the self. This was done in chapter V by outlining the relevance of the relational self, and two approaches in particular. Deleuze's *dividual self* is a concept that allows for the disaggregation of the assemblage that is the self, and its conceptualisation as a number of flows: thus digital and electronic systems deployed by corporations and states substitute "for the individual or numerical body the code of a 'dividual' material to be controlled" (Deleuze 1992: 7). With regards to the blog, this helps to understand the role of the blog affordances in modulating flows of being that are accessed and redirected according to sociotechnical agencies and human choices – for example, the web analytics are used to translate a blog into terms meaningful for advertising clients by dividing audience figures into geographical locations or demographic segments. The blogger also realises that

different strategies, presentations of different material in blog posts, and the use of different modalities garner different responses and construct the blog as a subject in the extended parasocial relations that transpire through the interactivity affordance. The conversations that take place in the ‘commentosphere’ are important, but also modulated (e.g. through comment moderation) and often disjointed and fragmentary: some commenters are regular and consistent in their interactions; others deploy strategies to dissimulate their identity and may even replicate themselves as other voices.

Another strand of thought that relates to the relational self included Strathern’s *partible self*, and Wagner’s related *fractal self*. While these discussions are aimed at providing alternatives to Euro-American centred explanations for Melanesian personhood, I have also argued here that they suggest a way to understand how bloggers can detach aspects of themselves into their blog, without thinking of this process as inauthentic alienation (*cf.* Foster 2011: 15). For advertorials, the blogger is paid for consumption work as a way for the client to internalise overflows, and assembles a blog post that is offered as an authentic facet of her life experience. All bloggers strongly argued that they would only write what they believed in, but also indicated that they would normally avoid actively putting forward dissenting viewpoints – in that sense, as with the rest of their blog, the advertorial is an extension of their partible self. Wagner’s conception of the fractal self, which never forms a ‘whole number’ (2008: 162), also reflects this aspect of the blog that is always being added to, and can be described as Deleuze & Guattari describe the rhizome, as a multiplicity that is never complete (1987: 7).

A personal blog – like a person – is never complete, and this is one of its distinguishing features as a genre. Books, newscasts, movies, or songs are always completed and presented as a whole (although subjected to rhizomatic interpretations); a personal blog, however, meanders with no goal in sight. As Deleuze’s dividual self implies, it is a constantly recurring, fractional, flow.

This approach helps to explain the difficulties I had finding sustained reactions to the monetisation of blogs based on intimations of inauthenticity. For some, making money is entirely in line with their self-identity. For those who felt that being paid for blogging was perhaps akin to ‘selling out’, they justified it by arguing that they were in any case only saying what they thought, and that they also needed the money. Trying to establish an authentic correspondence between the blogger’s non-blogging life and the blog would require a modelling of the ‘true’ person, and the mapping of that onto his blog. The Euro-American notion of a person is defined as a unitary self, standing against an

abstract society, hence the anxiety caused by the potential detaching of the self from the body – which provides the symbolic unity of the person – that is enabled by disembodied web-based interactions. The idea of authenticity projects a unitary self onto the blogger, but once that is discarded and replaced by a relational self, it helps to understand that integrating monetised aspects into blogs is but an additional folding and unfolding of the self. Through the repeated acts of self-expression and reflexive re-presentation, bloggers are able to gain a greater awareness of themselves as dividual – that they can express particular facets of their lived experiences without detracting from a consistent sense of identity.

## 4 Marketing community

Chapters VI and VII address similar points from different angles, asking what role the blog affordances play in stabilising the blogging assemblage, and how these appear when enrolled by actors interested in monetising blogs. Chapter VI detailed ways in which the blog is assembled as a dialogical medium, and proposed a concept of *polycasting* that refers to the nomadic practices of bloggers who move across blogs, rhizomatically shifting between relative positions as producers, dialogical contributors, and consumers of blogs. Conceptualising the blog as a *dialogical medium* allows us to understand blogs as not being solely constituted by the blogger, but instead as part of a process constituted by the interaction of bloggers, commenters and readers which resonate in a plateau. This addressed one relational aspect of blogs, and the chapter also addressed the ways in which blogs and bloggers assemble as a social assemblage – which may be called the *blogging assemblage* as it is oriented around the use of blogs, although it does not exclusively depend on blogs for its movements of difference. The use of comments, hyperlinks, blogtals, and blogmeets are important for this, enabling consociation and the elaboration of certain stabilising socialities.

Since the blogging assemblage is enabled through the blog affordances, it is worth asking how these affordances are then actualised by actors interested in territorialising the assemblage in order to be able to realign the actors and actants with socioeconomic activities directed at extracting value for the advertising industry. Thus chapter VII detailed ways in which BlogAdNet has developed a blogtal, organises regular blogmeets, places advertisements on blogs and also recruits bloggers to write advertorials which include hyperlinks and multimodal expressivity, and are aimed at integrating their clients' economic aims with the extended parasocial relations that operate within the hyperlocal assemblage of the blog.

Probably the most significant affordance of blogs with regards to the organisation and distribution of advertising is the personalisation affordance; this means that each blog – with personalised and unpredictable content – has to be dealt with separately, and there is normally a lack of centralised institutional control. BlogAdNet provides this crucial service, but are only successful insofar as they are able to effectively manage the thousands of blogs. While they do focus on the A-list blogs, they also need to engage as many other bloggers as possible – this provides a broader platform to place banner advertisements, as well as a means to bolster their credibility for advertisers who are used to measuring media through calculations of audience reach. Thus the barrier for bloggers to be able to register with BlogAdNet is low (as is their median revenue). The use of techniques such as competitions and blogmeets are appropriate for entangling the lower-traffic bloggers whose revenue from advertising is minimal; they also show an understanding of the different affordances of the blogs, and move away from advertising and public relations models more appropriate to other forms of media.

Callon argues that calculative agencies are central sociotechnical components of the economy of qualities. The ability to produce detailed reports of the number of unique visitors, their geographical location, and other statistics regarding the audience of a blog are thus important aspects of the creation of a market for blog advertising. Knowing this, bloggers interested in monetising are more likely to gather and act upon such information, reshaping and recursively transforming their blogging practices.

This thesis has further argued that markets, and economic organisation, are not natural occurrences of abstract economic laws but instead instituted as part of sociotechnical processes. Following the lead of Slater & Tonkiss (Chapter II, Section 7; p52) I have argued that markets do not impose a certain social order, but are important parts *of* social order. This ‘cultural turn’ in the analysis of markets has relevance here in two important ways. First, it was argued that ‘community’ is best understood as a discursive term that is most useful in terms of recognising which actors are interested in the territorialisation of the social assemblage (Chapter V, Section 2.1; p148). Evidence for this is proposed in the way in which the strongest sign of ‘community’ was in the activities of BlogAdNet, who also deploy the term to reterritorialise activities such as reciprocal clicking on links in order to redirect bloggers towards acceptable monetisation practices based on the calculation of genuine interest through clicks. Secondly, the relevance of branding is developed by drawing from Foster (Chapter VII, Section 2.1; p191) who notes how a brand’s value is mostly created by the consumption work of consumers, of which the ‘consumer post’ – where personal bloggers share

experiences of consuming products – is a good example. For the companies that own the brand, the position of these webpages as quasi-permanent online representations of their goods, qualifying them in a medium that is more attuned to a desired demographic, means that they are a deterritorialising influence on the existing assemblage built mostly around the mainstream media. This is the key reason for using blogs in advertising, and in particular the advertorial which is a directly controlled *ersatz* of the consumer post.

As argued in chapter II (Section 7; p52), the current post-Fordist economic model is one that has moved away from an emphasis on the use value of commodities, and indeed the ‘commoditisation’ of a product – understood as its valuation purely in terms of cost to the consumer – is seen as something to be avoided. The highest profit margins are obtained from goods that are highly qualified through marketing that foregrounds design and association with desired lifestyles, and the brand is central to this process. As Foster argues, the value of brands comes from the relational work that consumers invest in the consumption and display of these goods – they are situated as nodes in rhizomatic assemblages, and depend on flows of desire through causal relations. Lifestyle blogs are thus well situated to mesh with a corporate preference for lifestyle marketing and informational strategies that deploy databases to target and define and enable a “flexible response to culturally differentiated, rather than massed, consumers [and] ‘niche marketing’” (Slater & Tonkiss 2001: 179).

## **5 The lifestyle blog genre**

This thesis has centred on the personal blog genre, which focuses on the life of the blogger, as opposed to any particular specialised topic (Chapter II, Section 6; p39). This definition is based on the absence of an outward focus, reflecting the principle of ‘I blog for me’. Chapter VII showed that an effect of monetisation has been the emergence of the lifestyle blog (Section 3.2; p210) – this continues to be about the daily experiences of the blogger, but is assembled around consumption and market-oriented events.

The model proposed for analysing blog genres sees them as sociotechnical assemblages that are territorialised through the repeated use of particular forms of communication, and the gathering of people around prototypical examples typically foregrounded due to their relative and relational centrality in networks. The lifestyle blogger needs to gather a significant audience online, but also needs to have an effective offline network that enables access to public relations events, parties, and advertisers – which is provided by BlogAdNet to a large extent. The first successful lifestyle

bloggers had no particular models to follow, but as my fieldwork progressed I noticed that newer bloggers were influenced by ‘first generation’ prototypical models, would also seek to develop contacts in order to get press invites, and would blog in a style that suited public relations events even if they were not attending them – supporting the argument by Lüders *et al.* regarding the emergence of genre in personal media (Chapter II, Section 6.3; p45).

A lifestyle blog could in some ways be seen as an adaptation, or an outsourcing, of the corporate blog (Chapter II, Section 6.1; p43-4). The lifestyle blog also focuses on life of the blogger, but becomes more focused (e.g. around fashion, or sports) and is less likely to include intimately emotional thoughts and ranting outbursts. In more extreme cases, the ‘personal’ posts may become fillers in between the lifestyle posts – i.e. advertorials or public relations-related posts that serve to demonstrate the suitability of the blogger as a lifestyle advocate of brands.

Marketing discourse describes a brand as a subject with a character, personality, and values – however, this needs to be projected through various expressive and symbolic means, including the use of celebrity endorsement. The latter is the most conventional method for ensuring some high-visibility consumption work and depends heavily on the unitary individual, whose projected stable qualities are held to be representational of the brand. This is most obvious when the public image of the endorser changes – for example when the golfing star Tiger Woods publicly demonstrated non-wholesomeness, the brands that wished to project that image (or rather the corporate executives whose jobs depend on projecting the benefits of a stable, defined, representational model of a brand) suspended his services (*The Economist* 2009b). A successful marketing campaign will enable a brand to territorialise social assemblages, creating the subjects it claims to be the image of, and who extend the consumption work. Sometimes, the consumption work is more spontaneous, drawing a brand in an unexpected direction, and the marketing strategists will appropriate the work and represent it to the consumers.<sup>282</sup> In each case, when the calculative demonstration of effectiveness – i.e. profit – fails, marketing professionals are always ready to rebrand, to disassemble and reassemble the putatively essential character of the brand – thus demonstrating a practical understanding of the machinery of representation. Thus, stability is essential for a brand which operates on a representational logic, and the lifestyle blog is a stabilisation of the personal blog in a manner suitable for advertising purposes.

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<sup>282</sup> For example, in 2003 *The Independent* reported that cognac had received a boost in status and sales thanks to its becoming “a staple subject for rap lyrics and titles,” an unexpected turn of events that was welcomed by representatives of the cognac industry (Lichfield 2003: n.p.).

## 6 Limitations & considerations for future research

This section shall discuss some limitations and outline some further questions that provide avenues for future research.

### 6.1 *Participant observation, perspective & scale*

An important point to note with regards to the effects of monetisation on the blogging assemblage is that this thesis has only addressed a small portion of Malaysian bloggers: in effect, for this thesis, the most traceable core is BlogAdNet and thus the blogging assemblage I refer to could also be called the 'BlogAdNet assemblage'. Nonetheless, each blogger operates within a certain network of relations that are relatively stabilised and unique – this is what I have referred to as the hyperlocal assemblage, and it highlights the individualism that is central to blogging. As we shift perspective to analyse each scale of assemblage, it is useful to consider the concept of entanglement, not only in the sense that it has been used here, but also in the sense that it is used in quantum physics, wherein different events may be linked together in ways that mean that one cannot be fully described without describing the other, and which also suggests that a relationship exists regardless of the distance between the objects (Trigg *et al.* 2004: 411). Therefore, while the assemblages are conceptually fixed for the purpose of analysis, and differentiated based on the potential and actual types of relations (as in the alienable relationship for the market assemblage), these should be not be understood as objective structures, but instead, as Deleuze & Guattari propose, as plateaus resonating at particular intensities, stabilised by the sociotechnical devices and affordances that enable entangled causal relations and the exchange of flows of energy. Each component interacts with others, and in a plateau these interactions become regularised to a degree that enables a harmonic emergence of effects particular to that assemblage. Although the components and the effects of their interactions are empirically observable, the assemblage is not replicable in an objective or positivistic sense – it is contingent upon the unpredictable ways in which the many discrete components interact and affect each other.

One result of a focus on monetisation is that other causal factors are investigated less. Thus, interviewees also mentioned increased audiences and changes in life circumstances (e.g. from student to working life) as affecting the way they blog – in particular with relation to sharing personal or intimate revelations. The increase in audience that is a corollary of successful monetisation is particularly difficult to tease out from monetisation because each implies the other – i.e. they are entangled.



Participant observation is by necessity limited in scope, and my results mostly address the experience of bloggers who actively participated in the BlogAdNet activities – there are many thousands who do not. I am confident that I was able to observe and experience much of what that smaller group of dedicated ‘BlogAdNetters’ did in the period of my fieldwork, but even as I stopped participating so much in order to be able to devote time to writing up, I could see new patterns and practices emerging. In particular, Twitter became widespread, and bloggers also integrated their blog with Facebook pages; BlogAdNet is also extending itself into those areas. The constant iteration of affordances, and the need to keep up with changes, means that a considerable amount of energy needs to be devoted to learning to use and exploit such new opportunities.

## **6.2 *Malaysian context***

The data collected and analysed here are all part of the Malaysian sociocultural context. A central argument in this thesis has been that the on- and offline are inherently interrelated, and therefore the Malaysian context can be assumed to be a proximate cause for some of the phenomena observed. In this example, we have seen a particular company making a difference. I am not aware of a similar business model being applied elsewhere, although BlogAdNet itself has opened offices in the Philippines, Australia and has interests in Vietnam and Hong Kong. However, without comparative research, definite conclusions with regards to the uniqueness of this model cannot be drawn.

In future, as more such research is undertaken, expanding beyond the Euro-American focus of most research on blogs, this thesis will hopefully be able to contribute to comparative analysis. Such research needs to be qualitative as well as quantitative, in particular because the latter is fraught with difficulties with regards to different methodologies and access to reliable data. Questions that may raise the most pertinent issues would revolve around the advertorial and means of disclosure; reactions to monetisation in the form of publics; and the ways in which collective spaces online (blogtals) and offline (blogmeets) are organised – by whom and how often. Personal blogging is also very likely to be strongly reflective of cultural differences, more so than other genres – in this regard, it would be worth comparing the conclusions here with regards to the relational self, and asking if other sociocultural milieus construct them in the same way.

Indeed, because Malaysia is a multicultural country, there is much potential for an ethnically-based analysis of blogging. An extensive mapping and analysis of the Malaysian blogosphere could start by using social network analysis to map and identify clusters of blogs that are likely to reflect linguistic and ethnic groupings, but also particular interests such as politics, lifestyle, and so on. Targeted

qualitative and quantitative surveys of these groups would draw out patterns, which could then be recast to develop working hypotheses to address the whole of the Malaysian blogosphere. Finally, surveys of non-blogging readers, and offline samples of the population, would complete a picture of blogging in Malaysia.

Considering the relation between local and global instantiations of the internet is another fertile area for research. There are two dynamics with regards to globalisation that take place with regards to the monetisation of blogs. One of them resembles the core/periphery dynamic, wherein relative lower costs of living in Malaysia mean that nominally low returns in US dollars on blog advertising are more advantageous. For example, at one point during my fieldwork I was able to make up to 100USD a month by selling links from my two blogs – enough to cover basic groceries for a month. The other dynamic is one that turns inwards, in a process of “glocalisation” (Daniel Miller & Slater 2000: 103); this refers to how transnational or global commodities can get assimilated into local contexts, but can also be used to refer to ways in which a globalised media form such as a blog takes on a local character. In this situation, in order to be able to attract Malaysian advertisers, the blogger must attract a Malaysian audience, demonstrable via the geolocation analytics. For this, the blogger must have topics that appeal to Malaysians; politics and food spring to mind, but otherwise the personal blog is suitable as, by definition, it talks about matters relevant to a Malaysian. This is an example of what may be the future of the Web, being localised and turning in on national, cultural or linguistic spaces rather than creating global spaces.

### **6.3 Gift economies?**

As discussed in chapter II (Section 7; p48), there have been studies that draw parallels between online activities and anthropological studies of gift economies. For these studies, it seems that the significance of the ‘disinterested gift’ is that it is seen as proof of a choice that is possible outside of a system that is posited on the naturalised self-interested rational *homo economicus*. This may be why the advocates of ‘online gift economies’ are so interested in this approach, as it reinforces their arguments of a separate online sphere (e.g. Raymond 1998b). Ironically, the very use of ‘economy’ in their concepts (reputation economy, attention economy, gift economy), and the questioning of why – for example – open source programmers provide labour ‘for free’, only highlights their dependency on the *homo economicus* paradigm.

These arguments about gift economies were often based on a partial understanding of anthropological debates (e.g. Kelty 2002), and failed to take into account what has come to be accepted by anthropologists, which is that we are always engaged in a multitude of complex

exchange relations (Slater 2002a: 237). In addition, Strathern has argued that the casting of Melanesian non-monetary exchange activities in terms of gifts is a result of a mistaken parallel being drawn with Western gift-giving because of similarities in terms of the exchange being related to kinship and friendship. She argues that Melanesian exchange is opposed to the values of altruism and voluntarism that characterise Western gift giving, and instead is more explainable in terms of coercion and relationship building (1991: 589).

Nonetheless, with regards to blogging, this debate may provide fertile ground for future research. Although they provide entertainment for free, personal bloggers are not gifting in the sense that they are not (normally) directing their creative output at any particular person; however, it is disinterested to the extent that they cannot demand any return, or be sure of any interest. Therein lies the kernel of the statement 'I blog for myself'. However, the blog is inherently dialogical, and if an audience manifests itself, there come to exist relations that are based on non-monetary exchange, paralleling Strathern's model of Western gifting. When monetisation occurs, BlogAdNet and the advertising clients offer money for blog content, or the use of space on the blog, and distribute gifts in the form of review goods, and social events with additional perks. By doing so, they initiate relations with bloggers who reciprocate by including the brands in their social relations. Thus, there is apparently a shift to a model more akin to the Melanesian exchange as described by Strathern (*op. cit.*), in that aspects of the blogger's dividual self are detached, embodied in brands and placed in a circulation that creates relations between otherwise autonomous actors (*cf.* Foster 2011). With regards to the audience, readers are asked for their continued support in reading the blog, with the blogger arguing that she deserves compensation for her work and promising to continue to provide authentic content. This process does not result in a permanent condition, and each blog post is a reterritorialisation of the hyperlocal assemblage, achieved by actualising the affordances that enable the reassembling of the diverse causal relations that are its becoming.

## **7 Final thoughts**

The internet, and the Web, will without a doubt be one of the most – if not the most – defining sociotechnical developments of the 21st century. All the current research is on first generation users, and the consequences of the intricate and extensive interconnections of on- and offline aspects are difficult to predict. Nonetheless, with regards to blogging, I will venture to say that blogs provide a vision into what will become a commonplace feature of the future, a permanent, personally controlled, online space that will become necessary for all members of societies. Currently, a presence online is fast becoming a necessity for professional, middle-class citizens

worldwide, but the main means to do so is through privately owned corporations such as Facebook, or Google. Such more restricted spaces, perhaps run by governments who have a great interest in creating means to have verifiable online identities, may become the default. However, I hope that an alternative will develop, one that allows all people to have a private, self-owned online space, which they can choose to connect with other online bodies in ways that they control. Not as replicants of their offline life, but as a complement, and a path to developing human socialities in new ways that enhance the inherent social, creative and innovative potential in all humans.

Developing and writing up this research has taken me on a path that wound through anthropology, science and technology studies, communication studies, psychology, philosophy and economics. This is explained both because it is a feature of anthropology that it draws upon various disciplines in an effort to reach a modicum of holism, that understanding the internet requires drawing upon a range of sources from all disciplines, and also because the nascent academic field of internet studies has yet to carve out its own academic fief. Interdisciplinary research, whilst often lauded, also often suffers from being considered a Jack of all trades. However, I would argue that the way in which the internet draws together so many aspects of human and social life offers an opportunity for the social sciences to cut across disciplinary boundaries and recognise again how these are most often the result of institutionally driven imperatives rather than reflective of the dynamic assemblages of human and non-human components that constitute our world. I hope that this thesis can contribute in some measure to that goal, by drawing a line between media studies, social anthropology and economics.

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# 1 Appendix A

## myBlogS survey results

Q8. Updates: A blog should be updated _____			
	Bloggers	Non-bloggers	All (n=553)
Every day	11.8%	29.4%	18.1%
2-3 times a week	37.4%	38.6%	37.8%
Once a week	27.8%	17.8%	24.2%
Once a month	2.5%	3.6%	2.9%
Not important	17.1%	7.1%	13.6%
Other	3.4%	3.6%	3.4%
Total	100.0%	100.1%	100.0%

Q11. How many active blogs do you have? ('active' means you have posted at least once in the last three months)		
	Response Percent	Response Count
1	67.4%	240
2	20.5%	73
3	6.5%	23
More than 3	5.6%	20
answered question		356
skipped question		0

Q12. Please indicate below why you have more than one active blog (select as many as apply)		
	Response Percent	Response Count
One of my blogs is a private blog (i.e. with password access only)	30.2%	35
One of my blogs is to make money only	18.1%	21
One of my blogs is for a specific hobby or interest	72.4%	84
Other (please specify)	31.9%	37
answered question		116
skipped question		240

<b>Q14. Why do you have a blog? Using the scale provided ('Very unimportant' to 'Very important'), please indicate how important the following reasons are to you</b>		
All Bloggers (n=356)		
	Three most important reasons for blogging	
	"Because I like writing"	76.7%
	"To keep a track of things I want to remember"	73.0%
	"For my hobby/hobbies"	70.5%
	Three least important reasons for blogging	
	"To make money"	54.8%
	"To influence Malaysian politics"	53.7%
	"For my job / professional purposes"	50.6%
Monetisers (n=183)		
	Three most important reasons for blogging	
	"To keep a track of things I want to remember"	77.6%
	"For my hobby/hobbies"	74.3%
	"Because I like writing"	73.8%
	Least important reasons for blogging	
	"To influence Malaysian politics"	55.2%
	(no others were more than 50%)	
Non-Monetisers (n=173)		
	Three most important reasons for blogging	
	"Because I like writing"	79.8%
	"To help me understand more about myself"	70.5%
	"To keep a track of things I want to remember"	68.2%
	Three least important reasons for blogging	
	"To make money"	80.9%
	"For my job / professional purposes"	58.9%
	"To influence Malaysian politics"	52.1%
* NB: the figures here group together the 'Somewhat un/important' and 'Very un/important' response categories.		

<b>Q16. Things you are more likely to blog about (Tick all that apply)</b>		
All Bloggers (n=356)	Three things most likely to blog about	
	Friends	59.8%
	Events	59.3%
	Travel	50.6%
	Three things least likely to blog about	
	Problogging	4.2%
	Sex	10.1%
	Beauty	12.6%
Monetisers (n=183)	Three things most likely to blog about	
	Friends	62.8%
	Events	61.7%
	Food / Travel (equal proportion)	57.9%
	Three things least likely to blog about	
	Problogging	6.6%
	Sex	9.3%
	Clothes	15.3%
Non-Monetisers (n=173)	Three things most likely to blog about	
	Friends / Events (equal proportion)	56.6%
	Family	47.4%
	Hobby	45.1%
	Three things least likely to blog about	
	Problogging	1.7%
	Advertising	7.5%
	Celebrities	8.1%

<b>Q21. Do you have a statistics counter on your blog?</b>		
	<b>Monetisers (n=183)</b>	<b>Non-Monetisers (n=173)</b>
Yes	79.2%	49.7%
No	18.6%	43.9%
I'm not sure	2.2%	6.4%
	100.0%	100.0%
* Comment: not surprising. Also to note that anyone with BlogAdNet has a stat counter, though not technically 'on' the blog.		



**Q22. How many unique visitors do you have per day (on average)?**

	<b>Monetisers (n=183)</b>	<b>Non-Monetisers (n=173)</b>	<b>All Bloggers</b>
<10	14.8%	31.2%	22.8%
11 to 50	26.2%	17.9%	22.2%
51-100	16.9%	6.9%	12.1%
101-500	20.8%	6.4%	13.8%
501-1000	3.8%	2.3%	3.1%
1001-5000	3.8%	0.0%	2.0%
>5000	1.6%	0.0%	0.8%
DK	12.0%	35.3%	23.3%
	99.9%	100.0%	100.0%
* Comment: seeing as 43.9% of NM don't have stat counters, the DK figure should be higher. Overall, M have more readers.			
* One M who says doesn't have a stat counter, also says has more than 5K uniques. Says gets RM500-999 per month from AdSense (implied). Could know about visits from AdSense			

**Q24. Apart from 'spam', do you (or would you) ever censor comments – if so, why? (Tick all that apply)**

	<b>Bloggers (n=356)</b>	
I never censor comments	39.0%	139
I censor offensive language	32.9%	117
I censor racially sensitive comments	35.7%	127
I censor comments that make personal attacks on people	42.1%	150
I censor comments that refer to my family	19.9%	71
I censor anonymous comments	5.6%	20
I censor comments I don't agree with	7.3%	26
Other	7.0%	25

**Q25. Do you answer the comments?**

	<b>Monetisers (n=183)</b>	<b>Non-Monetisers (n=173)</b>
Always	43.4%	26.3%
Always for my friends, but not necessarily for others	8.8%	7.2%
Only when I have something useful to add	31.9%	38.3%
Only when I feel like it	14.3%	22.2%
Never	0.5%	3.6%
Other (please specify)	1.1%	2.4%
	100.0%	100.0%

<b>Q28. What is your average income from blogging? (Remember, this survey is anonymous)</b>		
	<b>Monetising bloggers (n=93)</b>	
Less than RM100 per month	66.7%	62
Between RM101 and 499 a month	14.0%	13
RM500-999 per month	3.2%	3
RM 1,000 – 2,000 per month	6.5%	6
More than 2,000 per month	2.2%	2
Other (please specify)	7.5%	7
	100.0%	93

<b>Q26: "I have changed the type of content based on what I think the readers want more of."</b>		
	<b>Monetisers (n=183)</b>	<b>Non-Monetisers (n=173)</b>
Strongly disagree	22.4%	39.9%
Somewhat disagree	27.9%	30.1%
Neutral	27.9%	18.5%
Somewhat agree	19.7%	8.7%
Strongly agree	2.2%	2.9%
Total	100.1%	100.1%
Altogether Disagree	50.3%	70.0%
Altogether Agree	21.9%	11.6%

<b>Q26. Monetisers and Non-Monetisers attitudes to audience compared</b>						
	Monetisers (n=183)			Non-Monetisers (n=173)		
	Altogether Disagree	Neutral	Altogether Agree	Altogether Disagree	Neutral	Altogether Agree
"The comments are good for finding out what the readers like."	3.3%	9.8%	86.9%	8.7%	22.0%	69.4%
"I regularly check my visitor statistics and try to improve the number of visitors."	15.3%	26.2%	58.5%	54.9%	26.6%	18.5%
"I regularly check the keywords readers use to find my blog, and use more of those keywords to get more readers."	41.0%	31.7%	27.3%	61.8%	30.6%	7.6%
"I post as often as I can in order to keep my readers coming back."	17.0%	24.6%	58.5%	47.4%	26.0%	26.6%
"I have changed the type of content based on what I think the readers want more of."	50.3%	27.9%	21.9%	70.0%	18.5%	11.6%
"I don't care what the readers want, I will blog about whatever I want."	9.8%	19.1%	71.0%	10.4%	11.0%	78.6%

<b>Q51. Do you leave comments when you read a post?</b>				
	Bloggers (n=356)		Readers (n=197)	
Always	2.8%	10	1.5%	3
Always for my friends, but not necessarily for others	5.9%	21	1.0%	2
Only when I have something relevant or useful to add	56.5%	201	33.5%	66
Only when I feel like it	30.3%	108	35.5%	70
Never	4.5%	16	27.4%	54
Other	0.0%	0	1.0%	2
	100.0%	356	100.0%	197

<b>Q52. Do you respond to other commenters' comments?</b>		
	Bloggers (n=340)	Readers (n=143)
Always	8.8%	0.7%
Only when I have something relevant or useful to add	50.6%	30.1%
Only when I feel like it	28.8%	34.3%
Never	11.5%	32.2%
Other	0.3%	2.8%
	100.0%	100.0%

<b>Q26. Bloggers and readers attitudes to commercialisation</b>				
	All responses (n=553)			
	Altogether Disagree	Neutral	Altogether Agree	Not applicable to me
"If a blogger has a blog only in order to make money, it's not a real blog"	25.0%	20.1%	53.5%	1.4%
"When bloggers start to make money from their blog, their blog becomes less personal"	19.2%	13.6%	66.0%	1.3%
"Blogs are too commercialised nowadays"	18.8%	28.2%	50.1%	2.9%
"Bloggers should be required to always clearly mark advertorials as such"	4.2%	25.9%	63.7%	6.3%
"I have stopped reading a blog (or some blogs) which became too commercialised"	20.4%	20.8%	45.9%	12.8%
"Making money from a blog may change it a bit, but not enough to make the change important"	16.6%	32.9%	46.5%	4.0%
"Blogs have become more superficial ever since bloggers started to make money from blogging"	17.9%	28.4%	51.5%	2.2%
"When a blog starts to have advertorials, it loses its originality"	21.0%	28.2%	48.1%	2.7%
"If I had to stop blogging tomorrow, I wouldn't mind at all"	35.8%	21.0%	25.7%	17.5%
"Anyone can do what they like with their own blog"	10.7%	8.0%	74.0%	7.4%

Q26. Monetisers and Non-Monetisers attitudes to commercialisation compared								
	Monetisers (n=183)				Non-Monetisers (n=173)			
	Altogether Disagree	Neutral	Altogether Agree	Not applicable to me	Altogether Disagree	Neutral	Altogether Agree	Not applicable to me
"If a blogger has a blog only in order to make money, it's not a real blog"	27.3%	17.5%	54.1%	1.1%	19.7%	19.1%	59.5%	1.7%
"When bloggers start to make money from their blog, their blog becomes less personal"	24.0%	15.3%	59.6%	1.1%	12.7%	8.1%	77.5%	1.7%
"Blogs are too commercialised nowadays"	16.4%	26.8%	54.6%	2.2%	15.0%	24.3%	56.6%	4.0%
"Bloggers should be required to always clearly mark advertorials as such"	5.5%	29.0%	61.2%	4.4%	4.6%	20.8%	64.2%	10.4% §
"I have stopped reading a blog (or some blogs) which became too commercialised"	25.7%	20.8%	47.0%	6.6%	15.0%	19.7%	52.6%	12.7% *
"Making money from a blog may change it a bit, but not enough to make the change important"	11.5%	39.3%	47.0%	2.2%	24.3%	32.4%	38.7%	4.6%
"Blogs have become more superficial ever since bloggers started to make money from blogging"	19.7%	26.8%	52.5%	1.1%	13.9%	24.3%	59.5%	2.3%
"When a blog starts to have advertorials, it loses its originality"	29.0%	32.2%	36.6%	2.2%	15.6%	22.5%	57.2%	4.6%
"If I had to stop blogging tomorrow, I wouldn't mind at all"	59.0%	18.0%	20.8%	2.2%	43.9%	19.1%	35.3%	1.7%
"Anyone can do what they like with their own blog"	8.2%	6.6%	77.6%	7.7%	6.4%	7.5%	79.2%	6.9%
* This can be interpreted as a 'Disagree': i.e. the respondent had not thought about or actively stopped reading a blog because of increased commercialisation.								
§ This probably mostly reflects respondents who did not have a blog.								

## 2 Appendix B

### Questions for interviews

#### Blogs

1. What is a blog?
  - a. (compare to home page)
  - b. (probe for technical/structural features)
2. What is a good blog?
  - a. (number of readers/hits, content, short/long posts, design,...)
  - b. Probe re content – revealing or not, fictional or not?
  - c. (e.g. If you were to advise someone, what would you say to them?)
3. What categories of blog are there?
4. Do you think blogs are important?
  - a. To society, to people,...
5. Is the option to comment in blogs important to you?
  - a. Do you often comment, and what makes you leave a comment?
  - b. When are you more likely to leave a comment?
  - c. Do you read all the comments e.g. in [Tommy] where there are lots of comments?
  - d. If there is the choice, do you prefer to use the chat box or the comments? Why?
  - e. Categories of commenters?
6. Is there a blogging community?
  - a. Who is part of it?
  - b. What is it based on (i.e. type of blog, persons, interest, hometown, ...)?
  - c. Do you think a blogger is influenced by other bloggers?

#### Your blog

1. Why do you have a blog?
  - a. How long have you had a blog?
  - b. Do you have more than one blog? If so, why?
2. How do you choose what to blog about?
  - a. Do you sometimes find yourself looking for something to blog about – is it difficult to find subjects?
  - b. Have you ever regretted something you blogged about? Have you ever deleted something you blogged about?
3. Anonymity/pseudonymity
  - a. What makes you choose to be anonymous/pseudonymous or not?
  - b. Who do you choose to tell about your blog – family, friends, work?
4. Comments – do you respond to all comments?
5. What would make you stop blogging?

#### Blog and offline

1. Does blogging affect other areas in your life?
2. How does it feel when you meet someone face-to-face who knows about you because of what you've written on your blog, but you've never met them – how does that make you feel?
  - a. Do you feel what they know from your blog is the 'real' you?
  - b. If not, does that mean you're not being 'honest' in your blog? Do you feel any obligation to your audience to be 'real'?
  - c. Everything you get on a blog, is what you get face-to-face? What are the limits?
  - d. (Is it possible to be 'real'?...)
3. How much information do you reveal: profile, photo, email,...
  - a. What are the limits? Should people reveal details about themselves? Which details?

#### Problogging

- Do you sometimes get some money, or get free gifts due to your blogging?

##### Questions for those who do some problogging

1. How do you make money or get free gifts from blogging?
  - a. (Advertising, paid reviews, direct sales, 'leveraging')
2. What's your preferred method, why?
3. How important is the income from your blogging to your financial situation?
  - a. Can you give me a rough idea of how much income you make?
4. How long have you been generating an income/receiving free gifts by blogging?
5. Has making money or receiving gifts by blogging affected the way you blog?
  - a. Writing about different things, blogging

##### Questions for those who do **not** do any problogging

1. If you don't make money or get free gifts due to your blogging, have you ever thought about it?
  - a. Why don't you try?
  - b. What would encourage you to try?
2. Do you think making money or receiving free gifts affects the way a person blogs?
3. How much income do you think a blogger can make from their blog?
4. Can a person stay anonymous, and still subscribe to e.g. [BlogAdNet], Adsense?

<p>more or less...</p> <p>b. Thinking about the reaction of the audience?</p> <p>6. What's your limit for writing about something for money</p> <p>a. e.g. ... porn, tobacco, ...</p> <p>7. Can a person stay anonymous, and still subscribe to e.g. [BlogAdNet], AdSense?</p> <p>8. Would you call yourself a 'probblogger'?</p> <p>a. What is problogging?</p> <p>b. What would you call someone making money from their blog?</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I have to do 'participant observation' – do you have any advice on how to have a successful blog?</li> <li>• My research is looking at how commercialisation may be affecting blogs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Do you think it is?</li> <li>▪ Does it/will it affect bloggers as a whole?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you have anything else you want to say? Any advice for me, feedback on the interview...?</li> </ul>	

### 3 Appendix C: Studies of blogs worldwide

What follows is non-exhaustive, but demonstrates the wide interest in blogs worldwide: Canada (Braaten 2005); China (de Vries 2009); Nigeria (Ifukor 2010); Korea (Kim 2007; Park & Jankowski 2006; Park & Kluver 2007a, 2007b); Iceland (Bjarnason *et al.* 2010); Iran (Alavi 2005; Doostdar 2004; Esmaili *et al.* 2006; Kelly & Etling 2008; Khiabany & Sreberny 2007; Loewenstein 2008); Israel (Vaisman 2009); the broader Arabic region (Etling *et al.* 2009, 2010; Loewenstein 2008); Japan (Miura & Yamashita 2007); Germany (Schmidt *et al.* 2006; Schmidt 2007b); Norway (Lüders *et al.* 2010); Poland (Trammell & Keshelashvili 2005; Trammell *et al.* 2006); Sweden (Lövheim 2010); the UK (Brake 2007, 2009; Pedersen & Macafee 2007; Reed 2005, 2008). The most notable Malaysian studies on blogs by Jun-E Tan and Ibrahim Zawawi (2008).

## 4 Appendix D: Blog genres in Malaysia

Type	Description	Comments
Personal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focuses on personal events, thoughts, etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Most common type</li> <li>Closely related to the Lifestyle blog</li> </ul>
Lifestyle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focuses on personal activities, but of a more social nature (parties, travelling...)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Closely related to the Personal blog, but not so likely to include rants, intimate thoughts, etc.</li> </ul>
SoPo (Social-Political)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focuses on social and political commentary</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emphasises the discourse of free speech, etc.</li> <li>The 'Fifth estate'</li> </ul>
Tech	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus on 'geek' topics: software, gadgets, etc.</li> </ul>	
Food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus on making and eating food</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Restaurant reviews, recipes, etc.</li> </ul>
Blogshop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Using a blog as a way to sell goods online</li> </ul>	
Problog	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus on ways of making money online</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Often using the multi-level marketing (MLM) model</li> <li>Affiliate schemes, ebooks</li> </ul>
Professional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The blog complements a person's offline professional activity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some politicians' blogs can come under this category</li> <li>Corporate blogs</li> </ul>
Niche blogs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus on a narrow interest: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hobbies</li> <li>Religion</li> <li>Comic</li> <li>Parenting</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Food, Tech are also Niche blogs</li> </ul>



## 5 Appendix E

### Blog headers



# LiewCF.com

Tech, Web, How to, Reviews, Tips, Downloads, and Make Money Online

## CHAT8BLOG

GOSSIPS! GOSSIPS! GOSSIPS! ANYTHING AND EVERYTHING! FROM CELEBRITIES TO POLITICS, KEEP UP WITH THE LATEST GOSSIPS!



## 6 Appendix F

### Blog sidebar buttons

BLOGGERS UNITED

5TH OF JULY DINNER AT BLOG HOUSE

ALL BLOGS

100

ONE HUNDRED DAYS

FREE PETRA NOW!

SIGN THIS PETITION TO ABOLISH ISA!

WHERE ARE HIS BASIC RIGHTS? GREENATNOW

WHERE'S THE PROPER PROCEDURE?

SAY NO TO INTIMIDATION

Let's read the

QURAN

SAVE OUR TIGERS!

In the Year of the Tiger, don't let their numbers diminish!

MYBLOGLOG

Recent Noobs

You! Join Our Community

vcheewei

weilingchong

Aiay

electronicfly

Rexx

Snapshots

Melissa T

MissyCheerio

cheeChinq

View Reader Community Join this Community (provided by MyBlogLog)

STALK ME

618

BY FEEDBURNER

1081 Followers

twittercounter.com

N.U.R.I.N ALERT

NINI, or Sharlinie Mohd Nasyar, 5 yrs old, 3ft 2in. Missing since 9 Jan 2008.

AWARDS

THE 2005 WEBLOG AWARDS Best Asian Blog

xiaoxue best asian weblog 2005 weblog awards

2004 Winner BEST ASIAN BLOG

ASIABLOG AWARDS BEST SINGAPORE BLOG 2003

Asia-Pacific Blog Awards WINNER

REGION'S BEST BLOG

UNIQUELY Singapore

Asia-Pacific Blog Awards WINNER

MOST INFLUENTIAL BLOG

UNIQUELY Singapore

Asia-Pacific Blog Awards WINNER

BEST ORIGINAL BLOG DESIGN

UNIQUELY Singapore

Site Statistics

sitemeter 20,610,535

NEWS & BLOG PORTALS

MALAYSIANKINI

MALAYSIA-TODAY

MALAYSIAPOST

BAKAO

PETALINGSTREET

SOPO-CENTRAL

THE SUN DAILY

LOWYAT.NET

OTHER MALAYSIA

MYCEN NEWS

METRO BLOGGING

SARA WHO?

## **7 Appendix G**

### **Exceptions to anonymity**

The exceptions to the anonymising are as follows: two well-known political bloggers (Jeff Ooi and Raja Petra Kamaruddin), Sabri Zain, and one columnist (Oon Yeoh) are presented with their real names – they are public figures, and were not involved in this research in any direct way. For blogging organisations, three are mentioned by name: Bloggers Universe Malaysia (BUM), Blog House, and Muslim Bloggers' Alliance (MBA) – these are also social-political (SoPo) organisation with explicitly public agendas. Five other bloggers, Absolutely Fuzzy, Paul Tan, Liew CF, Fatboybakes and John Chow are also mentioned – they were not interviewed and are only presented once as examples of particular types of bloggers. Finally, the 'blogtal' Project Petaling Street is mentioned by name – it is widely known and explicitly public too.; another blogtal called Blotanical is briefly mentioned too. All other bloggers and organisations are given pseudonyms, and if asked, I will neither confirm nor deny any speculations as to their true identity.

## Glossary

Term	Explanation
ANT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>actor-network theory</li> </ul>
blodgebrity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A term coined from 'blogger' and 'celebrity' to describe the most popular bloggers. Also known as 'S-list' bloggers.</li> </ul>
blogosphere	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In this thesis – defined as all the blogs and bloggers on the internet.</li> <li>The Malaysian blogosphere is all the blogs and bloggers who are either Malaysian, based in Malaysia or with a sustained interest in Malaysian matters.</li> </ul>
blogroll	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A list of hyperlinks of recommended blogs in the sidebar.</li> </ul>
BM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Bahasa Malaysia</i>, the national language of Malaysia, also sometimes referred to as <i>Bahasa Melayu</i>.</li> </ul>
bots	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A truncated form of 'robot'. Often refers to automated code that performs simple functions – such as crawling and indexing websites.</li> </ul>
BUM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bloggers United Malaysia / Bloggers Universe Malaysia. The latter name replaced the former after the first meeting.</li> </ul>
camwhore/camwhoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Repeatedly posing for the camera</li> </ul>
click through rate / CTR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The ratio of visits to a website compared to the clicks on an advertisement. Used for calculating the effectiveness of advertisements that incorporate a hyperlink.</li> </ul>
client(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In the advertising industry, the client is the company that commissions the advertisement. Advertising agencies, PR agencies and BlogAdNet all simultaneously, in series, or separately mediate between the client and the blogger – for a fee. The client may also deal directly with the blogger.</li> </ul>
cookie	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Small text files that store information about a website user, and make that information available to the same website in future. Typically used to track visitors (through being able to recognise the return visit), and to store information relating to registration details.</li> </ul>
cosplay	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Short for 'costume play'; where enthusiasts dress up as Japanese anime cartoon characters or other fictional characters.</li> </ul>
CPC / cost per click	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A payment model for Web advertisements whereby a set fee is paid for each click on the advertisement.</li> </ul>
emo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Short for 'emotional' – refers to someone, or a blog post, being heavily introspective.</li> </ul>
filler post	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A blog post that takes little effort, done in order to keep up the rhythm of posts, but when the blogger is short on time.</li> </ul>
hashtag	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Twitter mechanism to publicly group all tweets relevant to a particular topic</li> </ul>
ICT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>information communication technologies</li> </ul>
IM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Instant messaging: software that enables one-to-one or group synchronous text-based communication. The most commonly used are: Microsoft Messenger and Yahoo! Messenger.</li> </ul>
internet meme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>An idea, picture or practice that spreads on the internet. For example, a list of questions about oneself that one answers, and then the questions are forwarded to other bloggers.</li> </ul>

IP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Internet Protocol: the set of instructions that enable communication between nodes in the internet.</li> </ul>
IP address	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Internet Protocol: a number assigned to every device that uses Internet Protocol.</li> </ul>
lah	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Malaysian word, usually used at the end of a sentence to punctuate, to emphasise, or to soften a demand.</li> </ul>
LMAO/lmao	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'Laughing my ass off' – expressing great mirth.</li> </ul>
LOL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Acronym for 'laughing out loud'. Used to indicate mirth.</li> </ul>
lurking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Observing internet group activity without participating. For example, reading all the posts on a forum without posting.</li> </ul>
Manglish	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'Malaysian English' – the commonly used phrase to describe the Malaysian vernacular version of English which includes words from Malay, Chinese dialects, and idiomatic formulations and expressions. The most obvious of these is the word 'lah', which can be tagged onto any sentence as a way of softening the tone, or punctuating a pause.</li> </ul>
MMORPG	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Massively multiplayer online role-playing game</li> </ul>
MSN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Microsoft Network – an instant messaging program</li> </ul>
n.p.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'no page': used when there is no page number in the referenced document.</li> </ul>
newbie	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Someone who is new to blogging (or another context); aka 'noob', 'n00b'</li> </ul>
OMG/omg	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Acronym: 'Oh my god'</li> </ul>
permalink	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The static individual URL of each blog post. It means that each post can be linked to, and also makes search engine indexing more efficient.</li> </ul>
PR / Page Rank	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Page Rank: a ranking by Google that affects the chance of appearing higher in search results. Usually expressed as 'PR'.</li> </ul>
RSS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'Really Simple Syndication': a way of automatically getting new posts from a blog sent to an email account, or to a service such as Google Reader.</li> </ul>
SEO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Search Engine Optimisation – i.e. a combination of techniques that use key words, strategically develop incoming and outgoing links, and other means in order to maximise search engine visibility.</li> </ul>
sidebar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One or two columns to the right or left of the central space used for the blog post. Displayed on every page.</li> </ul>
SoPo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'Social-Political': a term used in Malaysia to refer to blogs that are primarily concerned with issues of social and political concern. Usually consisting of comments on current issues reported in the mainstream media, and occasionally being a source of material for the mainstream media.</li> </ul>
splog	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A 'spam blog': a blog that gathers content automatically and reproduces it. Its aim is to attract traffic for advertising revenue and/or to reproduce links for SEO.</li> </ul>
sticky post	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A blog post that does not scroll down when a subsequent post is published. It stays at the top of the blog until the blogger disables the 'sticky' function.</li> </ul>
subheading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The area in beneath the header in a blog, typically used to provide some more detailed information about the nature or content of the blog.</li> </ul>

template, blog	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A blog template is a preset collection of instructions that dictate the appearance of the blog. Blogging platforms have a number of templates available to suit different tastes in terms of visual design such as colours, fonts, or layout.</li> </ul>
trackbacks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An automated service that notifies a blogger whenever a link to a blog post is made. The notification usually also appears underneath the blog post, with a link to the source of the incoming link.</li> </ul>
tweet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To 'tweet' is to post a message on Twitter.com</li> </ul>
URL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Uniform Resource Locator' – i.e. the web address, such as <a href="http://www.julianhopkins.net">http://www.julianhopkins.net</a>.</li> </ul>
widget	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An autonomous piece of code that performs a limited function such as displaying pictures from a photo album, showing weather updates, identifying incoming visitors from their IP address, and much more. They are typically displayed in the sidebar.</li> </ul>