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Author	Julian Hopkins
Title & Position	PhD Candidate
Institution	Monash University, Sunway Campus

*PRINCIPAL CONVERNER:*  
**Malaysian Social Science Association (PSSM)**

*CO-CONVERNER & HOST:*  
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Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS)**

*CO-CONVERNER:*  
**Institute of Malaysian & International Studies (IKMAS)  
Institute of Occidental Studies (IKON)  
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)**

## Blogwars – authenticity and value in the blogosphere.

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### **Abstract**

A case study of a ‘blogwar’ centred on a short-lived ‘hateblog’ that occurred mostly in the Singaporean blogosphere, with some input from Malaysia. In this case, the renown of the protagonists, and the viciousness of the attack, combined to make the hateblog a ‘productive’ temporary locus of online discursive activity.

Theoretically, the approach taken shall draw upon Bourdieu’s concepts of field, social capital and practice; Bakhtin’s concept of dialogics; Appadurai’s concept of “commodity candidacy”, and discussions of value and authenticity. Miller & Slater, as well as Latour, are important in shaping the ethnographic approach to the internet, rooting online practices in offline contexts.

It is argued that through the posts and comments of those who condemn, support, or merely wish to be entertained by, the blogwar, it is possible to explore the underlying practices and norms of blogging.

Methodologically, the short timeframe enabled the gathering of most – possibly all – related blog posts and comments. These were subjected to content analysis, and the results analysed statistically and with social network analysis tools.

Keywords: blogs, social network analysis, content analysis, authenticity

## Introduction

What follows is a case study of a ‘blogwar’ that occurred mostly in the Singaporean blogosphere<sup>1</sup>, with some input from Malaysia; it was centred around a ‘hateblog’ called “The Young Perky bitches VS The Saggy old skank” (hereafter referred to as the ‘hateblog’) that was created on the 9<sup>th</sup> of January 2006, but had all its content deleted at some point soon after the 12<sup>th</sup>. It was a short-lived blog, but it attracted attention because it attacked a prominent blogger – IronLady<sup>2</sup> – and was apparently created by AntiBlogQueen, an anonymous blogger known for creating a blog dedicated to criticising BlogQueen. BlogQueen was the most well known blogger – garnering 15-20,000 visitors a day to her blog and receiving attention in the mainstream media (MSM) too. She was known for a fiery style of writing that pulled no punches, and had recently been the target of various criticisms revolving around polemical posts relating to an experience visiting Kuala Lumpur, the use of disabled toilets, and foreign workers in Singapore. The events unfolded when AntiBlogQueen discovered the blog and told IronLady – they both posted about it, and rapidly accused BlogQueen, as well as SS and SC (two other relatively prominent bloggers, they played only a minor role in this event though) of creating it and masquerading as AntiBlogQueen; there were various forms of evidence presented that addressed the style of writing, privileged knowledge, and technical issues. Although BlogQueen never responded, new posts appeared on the hateblog addressing some of the issues debated online. After four days, all the material from the hateblog was deleted, and the issue died off as bloggers moved to newer matters.

As a specific form of computer-mediated conflict, falling within the genealogy of studies of ‘flame wars’ (see e.g. Lea *et al.* 1992), a blogwar happens in the blogosphere – the imagined collective space populated by blogs and bloggers. Bloggers attack others by publishing ‘posts’ (relatively short written articles, displayed in reverse chronology and frequently supplemented by pictures), and readers can participate by leaving comments which are displayed under the post. Hateblogs may also be used – these are blogs created exclusively to attack another blogger, and are characterised by personalised and offensive attacks; they are normally anonymous, allowing the author deniability and leading others to speculate about the author. The warring parties may also use other media such as email, instant messaging,

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<sup>1</sup> One may argue that there is no such thing as a ‘Singaporean blogosphere’, as the online content does not equal to the offline geographical localisation. However, one of the themes of this paper is that online content is intrinsically connected to the offline context of the blog producers.

<sup>2</sup> All names and online pseudonyms have been changed in order to maintain anonymity.

etc. to communicate with each other, but this is not known to the audience (some of whom also participate directly) unless it is mentioned in a blog. An interesting feature of this blogwar is that the protagonists (except for AntiBlogQueen) also met offline, and the simmering online and offline disputes carried on until one hostile offline meeting that seemed to have sparked the creation of the hateblog which was then used as a basis for more online attacks.

It will be argued below that the key difference of blogs with forms of online websites is the comments section; the blogger will be conceptualised as an 'authentic' artist producing an online discursive medium where matters relevant to any area of on- and offline life are negotiated by interested parties. In this case, the renown of the protagonists, and the viciousness of the attack, combined to make the hateblog a temporary locus of online productive discursive activity. Developing the concept of "commodity candidacy" as suggested by Appadurai (1986:13), it is argued that through the posts and comments of those who condemn, support, or merely wish to be entertained by, the hateblog, it is possible to explore the underlying practices of blogging, and gain insight into the criteria by which bloggers and other online participants judge each other's blogs and related activity.

Theoretically, the approach taken shall draw upon Bourdieu's concepts of social capital and practice (1993), Bakhtin's concept of dialogics, prosaics and social change (in Morson & Emerson 1990), as well as Appadurai and others' discussion of value and authenticity (1986). Miller & Slater (2000), who root online practices in offline context, are important in shaping the ethnographic approach to the internet, and combine well Latour's Actor-Network theory which helps us to bridge the false dichotomy of 'virtual' and 'real' life (2005). Inspiration is drawn from Laclau (1990) in visualising the internet as a rhizomatic network with a clustering of discursive practices around 'nodal points' that act as articulatory nodes, or "privileged points of intersection" (Foucault 1980:127); blogs and bloggers are seen as such nodal points in this case.

Methodologically, a distinct advantage of this case study was the short life of the hateblog; this enabled a complete analysis of all the comments and blogs involved. A difficulty of all anthropological research is where and when to impose inevitably arbitrary boundaries on fluid and changing situations. In studying the blogosphere, this is compounded by the

millions of blogs in existence; in this case, a ‘natural boundary’ was created by the deletion of the hateblog, and the cut-off for data collection was on the 31<sup>st</sup> January 2006, when all blog posts linked to the hateblog were compiled by using the Technorati search engine. All of the relevant blog posts and comments pages were saved to my hard drive, and used for analysis.

In the interest of observing “the mechanisms and hierarchies from which norms originate within a particular online group.” (Denegri-Knott & Taylor 2005:101), and taking a cue from Joinson & Dietz-Uhler who point to the “value of identifying cases of virtual communities as they react to potentially community-threatening events.” (2002:286), the basic research question was: how do the interactive practices of the participants (bloggers, commenters and readers) reveal the underlying assumptions that discursively imagine an ‘authentic’ blog?

The direction of the investigation was also informed by the guiding hypothesis that blogs provide a reliable, personalised, guide in the chaotic environment of the internet – an environment which reflects the greater social complexity evolving in the offline world too.

Another question which requires a somewhat different direction than this study has taken, but is touched upon, is looking at the possible relationship between the hyperlinks (in the ‘blogroll’, in the comments section, etc.) and the respective participants’ allegiances in the blogwar?

### **Sociotechnology, agency and affordances**

The debate of technological determinism has been fought out in other arenas, and will not be rehashed here: in relation to the internet, Castells argues that “the dilemma of technological determinism is probably a false problem, since technology *is* society” (2000:5), and a useful approach has been offered by Pfaffenberger who 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.” (Pfaffenberger 1992:497).

An example of this has been developed by Miller & Slater who refuse to “treat the Internet independently of its embeddedness” (2000:8) and use Latour’s concept of the *actant* to

support their approach to “new genres such as ecommerce and the norms of Trinidadian Internet chat... as examples of... a hybrid that is irreducible to either its human or material agents.” (*ibid.*:8). Latour argues 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.” (Latour 2005:71); it is a term that he uses to “break away from the influence of what could be called ‘figurative sociology’” (*ibid.*:54) or the “knee-jerk reactions of ‘social explanation’” (*ibid.*:53); in addition, he reminds us of the importance of not trying to “sort in advance the ‘true’ agencies from the ‘false’ ones” (*ibid.*:55). This allows us to consider non-human actants on the same level as human actors, without subtracting from the ability of humans to have their own agency.

One of the ways to move away from the techno-determinist argument is to emphasise the *potential* of technologies to affect social practices, which also allows us to consider the issue of agency and incorporate practice into the sociotechnical process. Latour suggests that the notion of ‘affordance’ is useful here (2005:Footnote 83, p72; see also Wellman *et al.* 2003). Affordance refers to the potential actions that can be taken by any actor in any environment, these will be limited by certain material conditions – a person cannot fly to the moon in a car – but otherwise they are fluid, subject to contingent actions and subjective understanding. By outlining the affordances of internet technologies, one can gain a better idea of the potential impact of the different actants and embed them in context. For example, while disembodied interaction online means that potentially people can take on any gender or ethnicity they like, studies have shown that users tend to replicate their offline identity online (e.g. Nakamura 2002); even in the more contentious area of online sexual predators, it has been shown that only 5% of predators usually misrepresent themselves as teenagers when seeking sex with minors (Wolak *et al.* 2008:112-13).

In terms of affordances, there is not much that separates a blog from its ancestor, the personal homepage; while the launch of Blogger in 1999 (cf. Blood 2002) simplified the creation and maintenance of a blog significantly, and was important in popularising the format, there were similarly easy ways to create a homepage available also. There are three significant differences that gave the blog both a practical function and a greater sense of immediacy and personality. The initial function of blogs (‘web logs’) was to act as a filter of the internet, giving readers a personalised selection of links along with a short explanation and comment;

Lovink argues that “The rise of ‘weblogs’ is one way of dealing with issues of information overload and moderation.” (2002:10). As opposed to the personal homepage, blogs have a chronological element, with older posts slowly disappearing from view ; and the ability to make comments soon became widespread – previously a ‘Guestbook’ offered the opportunity to leave a comment, but it was not displayed together with the respective post.

Reed’s study of bloggers in London (2008) describes an interesting shift from the original intention of the ‘web log’ – i.e. to create a record of one’s daily surfs on the ocean of information that is the Web – to blogging about one’s own offline activities too:

“Instead of being exclusively a log of the Internet, a record of the marks left upon Rachel as a surfer in that world apart, the weblog developed into a journal of her life as a single woman living and working in the city. To varying degrees, the same kind of transition is described by all the early directory bloggers I met.” (Reed 2008:396)

It seems that as Web users became more able to find navigate the Web themselves and more efficient tools (such as the search engine Google) became available, some of the initial *raison d’être* for blogs disappeared. However, as Dibbell notes – they did not “politely shrivel up and blow away ... [but] ... evolved... towards an unexpected maturity as a form.” (1992:72). As blogging became easier, and the circle of bloggers expanded, it would be more accurate to say now that blogs have developed into a number of forms with an imbrication of bloggers into a variety of loose groups clustered around particular interests such as journalism (Rosenberg 1999), politics (e.g. Adamic & Glance 2005), or practices (e.g. knitting , *cf.* Wei 2004). Although blogs with political and journalistic content get the most attention, the great majority are in fact ‘personal’ blogs, resembling the conventional ‘diarist’ genre (McNeill 2003) which feature personal anecdotes and thoughts and usually address a small audience (e.g. Herring *et al.* 2005). However, a small minority of these personal blogs gather a significant audience (often termed ‘A-list’ blogs), and the two main protagonists (BlogQueen and IronLady) in this paper have such blogs.

### **Computer-mediated communication & flaming**

The blogwar that is the subject of this paper can be placed in the context of studies of flaming and trolls in computer-mediated communication (CMC), instances of which have been noted

as far back as 1981 (*cf.* Emmett 1981 cited in Lea *et al.* 1992). Vrooman defines flaming as “the use of invective and/or verbal aggressiveness in computer-mediated communication (CMC)” (Vrooman 2002:52), this would typically involve ‘off-topic’ hostile interpersonal behaviour, aggressive name calling and *ad hominem* insults. As a performance, flaming may include the ‘rant’, which can be of two types a “long parody or satire. [where] A scene is created and a long conceit is played out,” and “the adjective-rant” (*ibid*:59), which is a sustained monologue using multiple uncomplimentary descriptive invectives. The hateblog can be seen as an example of the first type, and includes the second. However, the different medium being used – the blog as opposed to a discussion list – means that there are limited parallels between studies of flaming and the blogwar.

In popular discourse, and in academic research, much emphasis has been placed on the anti-normative affordances of CMC, i.e. anti-social flaming, hacking, sexual predation, distribution of pornography, promotion of paedophilia and racism, abuse of anonymity, etc. However, a study by Lea *et al.* demonstrated that flaming was a relatively uncommon practice, and was mostly related to the offline computing subculture, whose “norms and values ... promote flaming” (1992:94); Herring also notes that “users overwhelmingly choose to forgo the anonymity option by signing their messages” (1996:116). These studies mitigate against suggestions of a causal relationship between CMC and deviant behaviour, a form of techno-determinism that Vrooman calls “media determinism” (2002:53).

Denegri-Knott & Taylor (2005) and Birchmeier, Joinson & Dietz-Uhler (2005) discuss the difficulties of determining deviance in ‘cyberculture’ environments, viewing it as a “yet-to-be-normalized social domain” (Denegri-Knott & Taylor 2005:97). In this context, norms can be developed ‘on the fly’ so to speak – i.e. “group members must first negotiate norms of behavior before determining if deviance has occurred.” (Joinson & Dietz-Uhler 2005:109), this can happen via “*inductive categorisation*... [where] group norms are inferred from the aggregate qualities of all members” and individuals identify “a modal or prototypical member whose reaction may provide clues about a how a member of the group “ought” to act (Turner, 1982)” (*ibid.*).

One key feature of the hateblog was that there was deception involved – i.e.

AntiBlogQueen’s pseudonym was used to create the hateblog. Although anonymity is



common in blogs, and it is acceptable for a blogger not to reveal their offline identity, the online pseudonym is not seen in the same light. Noting that “reputation of any kind is impossible in a purely anonymous environment” (1996:21), Donath describes how pseudonymous identities are built up over time, anchored by various methods and “though [they] may be untraceable to a real-world person, [they] may have a well-established reputation in the virtual domain” (1996:21). In the decorporealised medium of the Usenet forums which Donath was commenting on, where social cues were only available in a textual format, identity is crucial to establishing open lines of communication, especially when the forums are based around the provision of information for which the credibility may depend on the accumulated status of the person/identity. Thus, in this context, trolls who exploit the anonymity of the medium by impersonating others and causing conflict are also threatening a fundamental structural basis of the medium.

However, there are different types of trolls – some more humorous and some more maliciously disruptive – and there are different levels of tolerance of trolls which may relate to offline or online contexts. In a study of a sustained deception in a discussion group, Joinson & Dietz-Uhler note differing reactions drawing upon norms derived from on and offline contexts – for example one participant said: “it’s the internet, stuff like this is to be expected. Congrats on a hoax well done, shame on you for toying with people’s emotions, but either way, it shouldn’t be a big deal.” (cited in Joinson & Dietz-Uhler 2002:280). They conclude that “the reaction of the community was based on both local and Internet-wide norms and the effect of the deception on members’ real life emotions.” (*ibid*:286). Only one similar blog-related event turns up in the literature, that of a woman who created the blog of ‘Kaycee Nicole’, a teenager purportedly suffering from terminal leukaemia. She continued a sustained interaction with many bloggers and readers, until she announced the death of ‘Kaycee’, subsequent to which her subterfuge was uncovered. The hostile reactions also centred on the emotional distress caused to readers, and the acceptance of gifts intended for Kaycee (Geitgey 2002).

However, these deceptions did not involve using another real user’s online identity. In relation to ‘The Palace’, a graphical ‘habitat’ where people represent themselves via avatars, Suler tells us that “Stealing someone’s avatar, wearing it, and also using that person’s name (or a variation of it) is a real no-no. *You are abducting their entire identity.*” (2005, emphasis

added). Donath demonstrates how, in spite of arguments that online environments promote ‘anti-social’ behaviour, they have in fact “evolved an intricate system of signals and behaviors that aid in establishing identity and in controlling identity deception.” (1996:21), interestingly, she also noted then that homepages were being increasingly used to provide a grounding for a more reliable and stable identity, providing “depth and nuance not found in the ephemeral Usenet environment ...[and]a very enlightening context for understanding his or her postings.” (*ibid*:11). I believe that blogs have come to perform this function for many Web users, and the identity performance is enhanced by the temporal aspect and comment feature.

Deviance is relative to the norms of any particular group: Burnett & Buerkle (2004) note how two ostensibly similar online groups (i.e. self-help groups related to health issues) have significantly different levels of flaming, and Herring (1996) notes gender differences in approaches to online interaction – with men more likely to tolerate flaming than women. She argues that in the Usenet, the largest group of discussion forums at the time, “masculine norms of interaction constitute the default” (136) and that there was a possibility of flaming becoming a norm and the development of “a proflaming netiquette [that] implicitly sanctions the domination of Net discourse by a minority of men” (137). Similarly, Denegri-Knott & Taylor note that “in hindsight... for [some of] these online groups, flaming was welcomed and, hence, could have constituted the norm rather than the exception.” (102).

In the blogwar, we see a similar ambivalence. Some people condemned the hateblog, and some were indifferent or actively looking forward to the entertainment. There are important differences between the discussion-list and the blog environment: with blogs there is no formal or semi-formal group, and there is not a assumed common purpose of the group (as in a discussion list); instead, a blog stands on its own, and although it may have regular readers who also link to and read each other’s blogs, there is not the same group dynamic. In addition, outside of the relatively closed environment of a discussion list or chat room, one is not forced to see the flaming and the usual business is not necessarily disrupted: this was implied by the author of the hateblog, who addressed the readers saying “we never publicised the site... It is just a simple webpage for personal bitching. Remember, you guys are the ones who made it a hatesite.” (B1). This attitude also reflects the explicit individualistic ethos of

blogging<sup>3</sup>, expressed in the frequently noted statement – ‘It’s my blog, and if you don’t like it – don’t read it’.

Many of the studies assume that the more a person identifies with the group, the more they will react to perceived deviants and attempt to impose an emerging or pre-existing norm (e.g. Birchmeier, Joinson & Dietz-Uhler 2005:109). In the blogosphere, the identification with and the unity of the 'group' is much more tenuous. Appeals may be made to 'the blogosphere', or the 'Singaporean bloggers', but these are ephemeral. Perhaps identification is stronger with the individual A-list bloggers who are probably enrolled as the “modal or prototypical member[s]” mentioned above (*ibid*:109); in relation to the rhizomatic approach, they are nodes articulating the collective values and practices of bloggers. Therefore, the threat to the authenticity, the pseudonym, of the blogger may be reacted to as a threat to the clustering group as a whole.

### **Authenticity**

I do not intend to argue for the existence of an essential authenticity, but rather to examine how it is enrolled as an actant in the discursive practices of bloggers. While reading the posts and comments, I noted a recurring theme of whether a blog reflected the ‘real’ offline blogger or not – for example:

“you have shown that your blog is as ‘real’ as possible to the real you. And I’m very sure by this fact alone has won you a lot of readers and respect.” ([a commenter speaking to IronLady] C27)<sup>4</sup>

“[BlogQueen] was a fake. she blogged for the sake of blogging and created this ‘cyber-image’ for herself which is totally unlike who she really is” (a commenter speaking about BlogQueen in one of IronLady’s posts; C28)

The objections to the hateblog seemed to often revolve around this concept, and further analysis was done in order to see how far this hunch could take me.

In “My Blog is Me” Reed provides some support for identifying ‘authenticity’ as a central value of bloggers. With, with careful observation and participation both on and offline, he

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<sup>3</sup> Similar to the “anarchic/agonistic” values discussed by Herring 1996.

<sup>4</sup> In order to preserve anonymity, the commenters and bloggers pseudonyms are coded

describes blogs as an online identity: “weblogs are structured around ‘I’ narratives. They present the life of a sovereign subject who has a continuous identity and a coherent history” (*ibid*:226) and he notes how his interviewees “commonly assert that ‘my blog is me’.” (*ibid*:227). The blogs he writes about are mostly of the ‘personal diary’ type, and he notes how the rise of ‘blog celebrities’ led to accusations of bloggers “of using strategies cynically conceived to attract traffic” (*ibid*:237) and deviating from “the conventional ethos of journal blogging (‘I blog for me’)” (*ibid*.; see also Schmidt 2007, Blood 2002, Lenhart 2005).

### ***Blog as medium or genre?***

The conventional approach to blogs is to classify them as a genre (with sub-genres) that operate within the medium of the internet (e.g. Teachout (2005); Miller & Shepherd (2004); Herring (2004)); the personal blog has been compared to the diary genre (McNeill 2003), comparisons of mainstream journalistic genres with journalistic blogs have been made (e.g. Matheson 2004), and Doostdar (2004) analyses it in terms of Bakhtin’s ‘speech genre’.

I would like to follow the lead of danah boyd<sup>5</sup> in her excellent paper on defining blogs (2006). She considers McLuhan’s characterisation of media as an extension of humans, and takes in Reed’s (2003) characterisation of blogs as an extension of a person’s identity online. She argues that blogging should be conceptualised “as a diverse set of practices that result in the production of diverse content on top of a medium that we call blogs” (2006, para 1), and concludes that “blogs are not a genre of communication, but a medium through which communication occurs.” (2006, para 58). She draws this conclusion by pointing to various features of blogs: bloggers themselves define a blog in terms of the *practice of blogging* itself and “blogs are the bi-product of expression and the medium itself.” (2006, para 31)<sup>6</sup>. Within this medium, there are various genres: the personal blog, the social-political (‘SoPo’) blog, the tech blog, the problog, and so forth.

### ***Blogs as dialogical medium***

An aspect that is frequently overlooked but, as boyd argues, “is essential to the practice of most bloggers.” (boyd 2006, para 25), is the comments. It is a smaller part of the audience that manifests itself via the comments but bloggers usually interact directly with them, and

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<sup>5</sup> She chooses to spell her name in lower case

<sup>6</sup> See also Reed (2005) “Individuals acknowledge the craft of their work and therefore the appearance of what Gell would term an artist or authorial agent; the subject position of the blogger shifts.” (230)

they may influence what is on the site. A blog without the comments enabled is very rare, and bloggers take their comments very seriously – frequently responding to each one in turn when there are not too many. In addition, readers of blogs frequently spend as much time reading the comments, and perhaps contributing to them and interacting with other commenters, as they do reading the blog post itself. If a person leaves a comment, they are also highly likely to return to read any responses to their comments.

The ‘right to reply’ – embodied in the comments function – is a strong discursive aspect of blogging. Bloggers who impose moderation, edit comments or otherwise are seen as tampering with the comments may be vituperatively condemned; however, the blogger may respond by inviting the unhappy reader to take their attentions elsewhere. Although the value of free speech is generally upheld by bloggers, it is usually accepted that commenters should stay ‘on topic’, and avoid personal attacks and offensive language – rules that reflect those evolved in other online forums and email lists (Lea *et al.* 1992). The blogger who does censor comments will usually indicate the reason, or indicate that the comment has been altered; in extreme cases, a commenter may be blocked from further commenting by blocking their IP address. The fact that anyone can start their own blog means that denying a voice in one blog can be justified by pointing out that the dissenter can start his/her own blog and express themselves as they want – thus the space for public expression is not perceived as a limited good. Ultimately, this probably leads to people commenting in blogs where they are less likely to be censored, and like assembling with like.

Commenting is also an important introduction ritual and means of initiating reciprocal exchanges and visits. Typically blogger A will read blogger B’s post, leave a comment and blogger B will do a polite return visit and leave a comment also; they may also announce that they have put permanent links in the blogroll<sup>7</sup>, a symbolic gesture that may display affinities with particular blogs, and also has practical importance in terms of increasing the likelihood of the linked blog being found in search engines.

Audience studies (e.g. Ross & Nightingale 2003) highlight the construction of the audience and the limited effect it has on media production. However, for Web-based media, the

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<sup>7</sup> A permanent list of links in the sidebar; the reciprocal exchange is sometimes referred as ‘Spread[ing] the link love’

possibility of empirically tracking the audience's presence has changed dramatically. First, there is a wealth of detailed information easily available to any blogger: the quantity of the audience can be accurately measured in terms of visits to the sites; what link (if any) they clicked on to get to the blog ('referral link'); the key search terms used, if they come via a search engine; where the visitor is based in the world ('geo-location'); how long they stayed and which pages they looked at; and more. This amount of detail is one of the key selling points of online advertising, and most bloggers will check these details occasionally; for problogging (blogging practices aimed at monetising blogs), these statistics are crucial, and there are many theories on how to interpret them and subsequently adapt the blog to bring in more of the favoured visitors.

Apart from commercial concerns, the significance of this aspect of the audience is varied. Some bloggers<sup>8</sup> will explicitly not have a statistics counter, but this is rare; most will have one and may mark events such as the first 10,000 visitors or – for those who make it – the first million. Discussing the rise of 'blog celebrities', Reed says that "individuals suspect each other of caring too much about these figures" (2005:238) – this attitude will be returned to below, as it underlines a key discursive practice of blogging, that of 'blogging for blog's sake'.

Due to the factors mentioned above, and possibly the greater flexibility an individual has as opposed to an institution, the potential influence of the audience on blogs is sharpened. Commenters are able to directly influence the producer, and interact with other commenters via email, via their respective blogs, or in the comments of the third-party blog itself. Nardi *et al.* argue "blogs create the audience, but the audience also creates the blog" (2004:224); the relationship between the blogger and the audience may be embraced or uneasy (e.g. Boyd 2006 para 51) but this paper will argue that it underlies the *dialogical nature of the blog*. Blogs depend intrinsically on direct interactive feedback from their audience who contribute to the content of the blog, or at least the imagined character of an audience that manifests itself through visitor statistics.

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<sup>8</sup> A blogger told me that he chose not to have a statistics counter because he didn't want to worry about the audience – writing for one or for thousands was not the point, he was writing for himself first.

Bakhtin's concept of dialogics helps us to combine the socialised aspect of technology with the interactive aspect of blogs: according to Morson & Emerson, Bakhtin's concept of dialogue is not "a synonym for interaction, or verbal interaction in general" (1990:49). One cannot 'enter into' a dialogue, for the dialogue itself is what creates the very condition that is being considered (*ibid.* 50); 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. Considering Bakhtin's argument that "To be means to communicate" (cited in *ibid.* 50), we can argue that the 'being' of the blog is the communicative practice of the blog. This communicative practice is performed by both bloggers and readers/commenters, and clusters around the centripetal influence of the stabilised, authentic, blog. Therefore, we can say that the collective virtual being of the bloggers and commenters (i.e. the blog itself) is a contingent and dialogical entity.

## Value

Thus we have a blog as a dialogical entity. The interactants necessarily need to have some common understanding of what practices are suitable – as suggested above these will partly come from taking the lead from leading figures, but they will also derive from collective practice. To understand this, we can explore Bourdieu's concept of the 'field' as a relational concept describing particular clusters of contingent practices and goals of agents; thus "in any given field, agents occupying the diverse available positions... engage in competition for control of the interests or resources which are specific to the field in question" (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 capital 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.

Considering the blogosphere as a field, one of the key sources of capital is assumed to be the authenticity which develops as a result of the dialogic activity described above, and is accumulated as cultural capital by bloggers. To develop this, we have to consider *what is being exchanged* in a blog. When two parties voluntarily enter into an exchange, they will do so with an explicit or implicit understanding of achieving parity in terms of what they exchange – this parity is by definition a relative *value*. This has not been studied yet in terms of the blogosphere, but in relation to the internet, there exist some influential commentaries on the Free/Libre Open Source Software (FLOSS) movement<sup>9</sup>.

### ***FLOSS, the ‘Internet economy’, and the blogosphere***

Ghosh (1998) derives an ‘internet economy’ from the exchange of valued things (ideas) and, somewhat tautologically, states “in a knowledge economy, every exchange of knowledge in any form is an act of trade”. Having established an economy, he uses the model of the rational person maximising self-interest to explore why people contribute time and effort ‘for nothing’, eventually establishing that people engage in non-paid participative activities in order to maximise *reputation* which “is, like money... a proxy” – in this case for ideas, the basic goods of the internet; “Reputation, similarly, is a measure of the value placed upon certain producer-consumers – and their products – by others.” He likens the internet economy, where “Life... is like a perpetual auction with ideas instead of money”, to a communal cooking pot which is constantly being added to by all, and from which anyone can take what they want. The latter point relates to the abundance economy which Raymond argues lays the basis for the online ‘gift economy’.

Another example of this discourse is seen in Bambury, who contrasts “Transplanted Real World Business Models... business models or activities which exist in the real-world and have been transplanted into the Internet environment.” with “Native Internet Business Models” (1998). The latter is characterised by an abundance of the main resource – information – and transactions that usually do not involve money, but rather “securing free products or ... obtaining some product or service by barter” and, citing Ghosh, “may involve the accumulation of ‘reputation capital’”. Lysloff developed a similar concept following a detailed ethnography of an online music community whose members produce and exchange musical compositions (‘mods’) in a digital format; he calls this exchange system a “prestige

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<sup>9</sup> They develop software collectively and make the end-product available for use by all without charge.



economy” (Lysloff 2003:236) where “status is entirely dependent on name recognition” (*ibid*:243). In “Homesteading the Noosphere” (1998b), Raymond notes that in “gift cultures, social status is determined not by what you control but by what you give away”, and argues that in the internet economy reputation is established through giving computer code that “just works” – this means that there cannot be blunt power politics or manipulation of symbolic codes.

There are two central dichotomies that operate in this debate – virtual vs. ‘real’, and money vs. ‘free’. It is important to avoid these binaries: with the former, the solution is to consider on and offline actions as equally representative of human action; with the latter, we can follow Latour’s lead (2005:29-30) by using the most general word possible, to allow for all types of understanding. Therefore ‘exchange’ seems sensible: it describes a process whereby people voluntarily engage (or at least acquiesce) in swapping something for something – be it money, time, entertainment, or anything. They agree upon a *relative* value, and trying to impose an objective measure of that value (‘reputation’, ‘money’,...) is leading us away from the subjective understanding that lies behind the individual’s actions. As Renfrew states, “value is a property... [that] cannot be measured outside a social context.” (1986:158).

Kelty (2002) provides a critique of these so-called ‘indigenous’ theories, arguing that rather than being incentivised by ‘reputation’, “[t]he incentive, such as it is, can only be the *expectation* of what reputation will bring” (emphasis added). In terms of blogging, this would lead us into a discussion of the motivations of the bloggers themselves – this can only be uncovered by communicating with the bloggers themselves; speculatively, one can think of motivations such as enhancing social connections amongst peers, fame/celebrity (which can be a goal for a number of psycho-social reasons), money from advertising, or personal catharsis.

Using Mauss’ seminal work on the gift to understand the nature of the reciprocal ties within the FLOSS community, Kelty points to the central constitutive role of the software licence. Basically, this grants the right to use and change the software, but the obligation to acknowledge the previous contributors and to redistribute it if called upon – the licence is therefore what makes the community possible. In his analysis, it is not reputation, but the licence itself that is being exchanged; he likens it to the *taonga* “animated by this thing called

a *hau*”<sup>10</sup>, which I would see as the ‘sociality’ of the taonga/thing. Through the exchange and perpetuation of the rules inherent in *hau*, the interactants recognise the importance of the community, thus: “People write free software, then, because they recognize some-thing of inalienable value to the community in an age when the community is the whole world.” (*ibid*)

So what I am looking for in a sense, is the *hau* of the blogosphere, the ‘mojo’ of a blogger; what in the FLOSS community is referred to as “code-fu” (Kelty 2002). For the above examples, there is a central focus of exchange – the licence, or the taonga – but what performs this role in the blogosphere? The blog is a site of exchange, and a common ‘currency’ is links – with bloggers linking to each other reciprocally being a typical introductory ritual – it also is a clear example of social capital; the number of ‘hits’ or visits are seen as a defining sign of a successful blog and accumulated cultural capital. However, bloggers who are seen as too assiduously chasing hits may be disparaged as a “hitslut” (Clark 2002), ‘publicity whore’, or some such similar term; and ‘link farms’ are disparaged as an artificial way of boosting incoming links. This kind of criticism points us to what may be the answer, the ‘authenticity’ of the blogger as an artist in the way that Bourdieu describes.

Bourdieu talks of the “*fundamental* law of the [writing] field, i.e. the theory of art for art’s sake” (1993:62), 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” (*ibid*:63) who has made “heroic sacrifices” (*ibid.*) is “constructed against the ‘bourgeoisie’... and against institutions... state bureaucracies, academies, salons, etc.” (*ibid.*); 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) etc. He points out, however, that these ‘sacrifices’ are a lot easier to make for someone already receiving an independent income – who does not have to depend on writing to make a living and therefore doesn’t have to ‘sell out’ to “‘industrial literature” (*ibid.* 68). He also argues that the relative ease of publishing that came with industrial techniques of production led to an increase in the number of writers in France in the 1800’s. There are parallels with blogging in the last two points: most bloggers blog in their free time, and are relatively prosperous; and the ease of publishing has led to a rapid increase of blogs over the last 9 years.

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<sup>10</sup> As discussed in Mauss (1990).

The essentialising of the blogger-artist means that the *hau*/value is seen by interactants as being ‘in’ the blog but, as outlined in the discussion of dialogics above, I would argue that it is better understood as being a result of the interaction between the blogger and commenters, feeding off and constructing each other. One empirical example of this would be when a blogger is criticised for deleting or censoring comments, meaning that the commenters claim the right to comment, and have those comments remain unaltered. Conversely, a blogger may be complimented for leaving in comments that criticise him/her. By keeping the verbal interchange ‘raw’, the authenticity of the blog is upheld.

### ***Authenticity as commodity***

Appadurai defines a commodity as “*any thing intended for exchange*” (1986:9), and similar to the sociotechnological argument of Pfaffenberger, and the way in which Miller & Slater avoid the dichotomising of on- and offline conditions, Appadurai seeks to avoid dichotomising the commodity and non-commodity by approaching “commodities as things in a certain situation... This means looking at the commodity potential of all things rather than searching fruitlessly for the magic distinction between commodities and other sorts of things.” (Appadurai 1986:13).

An authentic blog develops through the dialogic exchange of different forms of capital, and the life of the hateblog can be seen as developing through what Appadurai calls the “commodity candidacy of things ... the standards and criteria (symbolic, classificatory, and moral) that define the exchangeability of things in any particular social context.” (13-14). In the comments of the hateblog, and even more so in the other linked blogs, the dialogue that takes place is a discursive process that defines the ‘right to exist’ of the blog. In the event, it quickly disappeared, meaning that it was ‘denied’ that right<sup>11</sup>. Thus, by studying ‘conversations’ that take place amongst the linked blogs, and the comments therein, we can understand on what basis this denial took place, and more about what constitutes an authentic blog.

### **Description of the hateblog – ‘The Young Perky bitches VS The Saggy old skank’**

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<sup>11</sup> However we cannot overlook the agency of the producer here, who could certainly keep it in existence if desired. The likelihood is that BlogQueen saw it as a having a potentially negative impact upon her own main blog

A few lines describing the hateblog are necessary for background information. The first post appeared on the 9<sup>th</sup> January, and the final post on the 12<sup>th</sup> of January; soon after that they were all deleted, but fortunately I had archived them all on my computer before that.

As the title of the blog suggests, a major theme of this hateblog are insults based on gender stereotypes. ‘IronLady’ is not referred to directly, instead a closely resembling name is used (e.g. ‘IronLass’); she is also referred to repeatedly as “Labiawoman”, in a derogatory reference to her genitals (B2).

The first post on the 9/01 was a poem deriding her looks and so forth, as well as scorning her inability to get in on a VIP pass to a popular Singaporean nightclub. The second post appeared the next day, and introduces the writer as ‘AntiBlogQueen’; this post justifies the attack by stating various offensive actions that IronLady was alleged to have done both before and after a photoshoot that both BlogQueen and IronLady attended for a magazine.

“Labia didn't want to be associated with the three girls and [she said] how cheap [BQ] and [SS] are because they both took bikini shots before and how Labia, being pure and old, persisted on not baring her body.

WE ALL KNOW THE TRUE REASON OF COURSE.

SHE IS FUCKING OLD CAN.” (B2)

It also included a picture of IronLady and her brother, with insulting comments about both of them. Finally, it related an incident outside a bar where IronLady and BlogQueen met and exchanged verbal hostilities.

The third post (also on 10/01) is a crude drawing of legs with female genitalia that reach the floor; suggesting that you can attach cloths to the labia to make it into a mop it says “[IL] 's all-purpose labia. Can even clean the house.” (B3). The fourth post (11/01) is titled ‘[AntiBlogQueen] here’: it repeats that the writer is AntiBlogQueen and (somewhat illogically) makes various disparaging remarks about AntiBlogQueen (such as implying he

has no readers except for those that BlogQueen attracted first). It also states that BlogQueen is not the writer and that by claiming so people are “defaming her” (B4).

The final post was made on the 12/01. Titled “Hate site?” it ‘reveals’ that AntiBlogQueen was not the author of the blog. As noted above, the audience is blamed for making the site into a ‘hatesite’ and it is also stated:

“Notice how throughout the site there is no mention of [IronLady]’s real moniker? Even if anyone wanted to search for her there will be nothing for her to search about. Too bad, someone was vain enough to search for his own nickname [i.e. AntiBlogQueen], and found this page.” (B5)

### **Method**

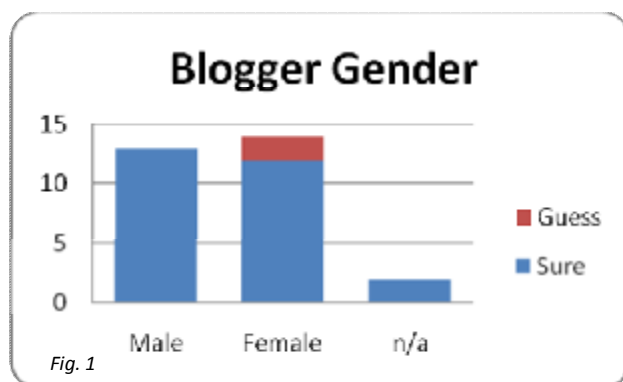
On the 13<sup>th</sup> of January, four days after the first post on Monday 9<sup>th</sup>, a Technorati search revealed 19 links to the blog called “The Young Perky bitches VS The Saggy old skank”. After two days there were 33 links; on the 17<sup>th</sup> there were 40 links; on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of January there were 60 links (of which 22 were duplicates); finally, at the end of January a total of 44 linked pages were collected, consisting of 32 bloggers in all. Three of these posts, by the same blogger, were in Chinese which I do not understand, and were eliminated. Each one of the linked posts was archived to a hard drive, information about the bloggers was extracted, and the posts categorised subjectively in terms of content (Appendix A & B).

The initial coding of demographic details was done by three coders, but inter-rater reliability was not checked for. The coding of the more subjective stances and arguments was done by myself only, without a specific list of key words, coding methodology or specialised software. While all attempts were made to be consistent, and it was done twice, this inevitably remains open to criticism on empirical grounds. On the other hand, the purpose of the content analysis was not to provide empirical proof of what is a subjective and shifting world of social relations and individual agency with dynamic and shifting constellations of behaviour, but to provide signposts for further ethnographic research.

### **The blogs**

From the 32 blogs noted above, IronLady's and AntiBlogQueen's blogs were not analysed, and nor was the Chinese language one, leaving 29 blogs. They were classified according to their type, loosely following Herring *et al.*'s four main classifications: Personal journal, Filter, K-Log, Mixed and Other (2004:6) based on the purpose of the blog. All of the blogs were of the 'Personal journal' type, which corresponds to the majority in Herring *et al.*'s study too. The personal journal type has mostly content about the blogger's life, as well as occasional comments on other events – particularly, as in this case study, issues related to other bloggers.

As far as was possible, demographic data was extracted from the blogs. Although it is recognised that one can never be sure of the 'person behind the blog', for this study whatever information provided was taken at face value; when it was not provided, but could be confidently gleaned from the content (e.g. via a photo, or clues in the text – e.g. "See? I'm a peace-loving girl. I prefer to indulge in sappy korean drama serial than to make a stand. :D" (kim)), the demographic detail was noted, but classified as 'Guess'. Overall, there were slightly more females - fourteen sure and probable compared to twelve males, one group blog and one unknown (*Fig.1*).



Location can be surmised from the Profile section in Blogger (the service which hosted most of the blogs) which has a 'Location' category to fill in; also, frequently bloggers will make reference to a local landmark, practice, or entertainment venue. Seventeen bloggers were located in Singapore, and another four were probably in Singapore; one was in Malaysia, and otherwise there is a smattering of overseas locations. Those in other locations are most likely students overseas, reflecting the ability of a person to remain in contact with Singaporeans even whilst physically distant. The location is not always an accurate guide to nationality, although nationality was a lot more difficult to ascertain, the majority were probably

Singaporean but at least one person located in Singapore was a Malaysian, as well as one in Australia.

Determining ethnicity was fraught with difficulties – names, language and photos are all subject to interpretation, and therefore these statistics are to be viewed with caution. Occasionally the ethnicity of the blogger is stated – either in the profile/self-description, or else peripherally in the posts themselves. A name can be a good indicator, especially for Chinese and Indian names, but Malay/Muslim names can be less easy to pin down, for example ‘Nadia’ or ‘Ahmad’ could be from a range of ethnicities – as can generalised ‘Western’ names.

All (except one) of the blogs were primarily in English, but hybrid language (‘Singlish’ or ‘Manglish’) use is a feature of Singaporean and Malaysian blogs. The use of Chinese characters can be a reliable indicator of Chinese identity, but English may be interspersed with Chinese, Malay, and the occasional Tamil words. Sometimes one is also able to find culture-specific references such as fasting during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, celebrating Chinese New Year, etc. Photos, where available, may help but are not reliable. With these caveats in mind, just over half were identified as surely or probably Chinese, three were surely or probably Malay, and the ethnicity of eleven (37.9%) was unknown.

As for age, almost half (44.8%) were unknown, 20.7% were more than 25, 27.6% were between 18-25, and 6.9% were younger than 18. The general impression of all blogs was of people in their late teens and earlier twenties. Overall, the general profile would probably correspond to educated Singaporean youth.

### **The commenters**

Whereas the bloggers were relatively easy to mine demographic data from, the commenters were more complicated, mostly because half of them did not link to a blog or profile.

The comments on the hateblog were ignored: there were very few, apparently because they had been deleted, and the comments were eventually disabled. In all there were 525 comments. 40 (7.6%) of these were the blogger responding to comments in their own comment area: this makes them a significant voice engaging in the ongoing conversation, but

they were removed from further analysis because of the likelihood of increasing bias towards the stance and arguments of the post, which left 485 comments. Most posts had comments (68%), but the great majority were on posts by the two main bloggers: 45.6% comments (223) were on the IronLady posts; 28.3% (137) were on the AntiBlogQueen posts. One can see the clear dominance and centripetal attraction of the ‘A-list’ blogs here.

14.9% (72) of the comments were anonymous (i.e. the commenter did not use a pseudonym or have a link), and 36.5% (177) had no link to a blog, a link to a blank profile, or a non-viable link – implying a wish to remain untraceable. This would suggest that most commenters choose to operate under a pseudonym at least – however, it was not possible to post anonymous comments on IronLady’s blog at the time, so this figure is probably distorted. If a commenter wanted to hide their identity and/or their pseudonymous identity on IronLady’s blog, they had to create a new profile on Blogger, which would have probably discouraged any less motivated commenter.

In all, there were 285 unique commenters: on two occasions, it was possible to recognise different anonymous posts as being of the same person by the thread of conversation, but overall this figure includes 69 anonymous commenters, some of whom were probably the same person. As with the blogs, we attempted to extract demographic data from these commenters, but given that only 110 (38.6%) of them had links to a blog, overall demographic information was unknown in proportions of 60 to 90% – rendering the exercise somewhat meaningless.

#### *Core commenters*

The 110 that did link to a blog can perhaps be assumed to be more dedicated members of the blogosphere, and have dispositions and practices related to the blogosphere field – they are willing to associate their blog with their comment, and can be assumed to be aware of the possible impact on their social capital. There are difficulties with this assumption, as a blogger may choose to comment anonymously in order not to attract negative attention to his/her blog.

Demographic details were extracted by following the link to the core commenters’ blogs and examining them. Overall, there were no significant differences with the bloggers who had made the linked posts: Singapore-based, Chinese college/university students predominated,



with a roughly equal mix of male and female. Occupation, nationality, and ethnicity had the least certain results.

### **The invisible audience**

The great majority of readers do not leave comments and, as discussed above, may only influence the blogs indirectly. Although the total number of visitors to a site is often displayed, and an average number could be calculated, this number is subject to manipulation. From my own experience, for an average of 75 visits a day, I may get one or two comments; BlogQueen claims 15-20,000 visits a day, and usually gets between 150-300 comments per post: this would mean that between 1-2% of readers leave a comment. This is clearly likely to fluctuate depending on the relationship between the blogger and the readers, the type of blog, the subject of the post, and so on.

Based on the above very crude guesstimate, readers are likely to have made about 30-40,000 visits to the blogs linked to the hateblog. Many of these will be repeat visitors over the period, but it still represents a substantial amount of people who, it can be assumed, tend to conform to the same demographic pattern observed in the blogs and core commenters.

### **Content Analysis**

Having established who was involved, the actors in the blogwar were then analysed in order to reveal patterns, practices, and values expressed. A pre-determined formal content analysis scheme was not used, but instead, as Herring suggests, “coding categories are allowed to emerge from data” (2007:4); these were based on previous experience and observation, and examination of the specific data collected here. Two overall categories were used: the first was the ‘Stance’ – this noted how the actors placed themselves in relation to the central issue – whether or not the hateblog was justifiable. As seen in Table 1 (See Appendix A for examples), this was subdivided into those who ‘Engaged’ (i.e. who took a position) or not, and some were only applicable to comments. These categories were all exclusive, meaning that only one code could be applied to each blog post or comment.

<b>Stance</b>			
		<b>Category</b>	<b>Description</b>
☐	For blogs	Anti	Condemn the hateblog, usually assuming BlogQueen was

	and comments		the author
		Neutral	Sit on the fence or adopt ‘a plague on all their houses’ stance
		Pro	Either attacked IronLady or AntiBlogQueen, or argued that BlogQueen was not the author of the hateblog.
Do not engage	For comments only	Follower	No active engagement, limited to expressing support or repeating the arguments of the blogger.
		n/a	Comments not related to the issue, or incomprehensible. Mostly bantering and small talk between commenters.
		Troll	No active engagement, apart from insults. Typically anonymous
		Free Riders	Links to own blog with no further comment
		Own	Comments by the blogger in response to comments

Table 1

The second category of coding was done in relation to ‘Arguments’ expressed (see Table 2, and Appendix B for examples), with some of the categories again being for comments only. The codes were not exclusive: in order to capture some of the ambiguity and multiple discourses being used, each post or comment may be included in several categories depending on the type of arguments used.

Arguments		
	Category	Explanation
For blogs and comments	Authenticity	Criticising the use of ABQ’s pseudonym, discussing anonymity, asserting the authentic expression of the blogger in his/her blog
	Style	When the style of writing is addressed
	Publicity	When references are made to publicity seeking – e.g. in the form of seeking more hits to a blog
	Comments	Regarding comments, e.g. when comments are censored, or someone directly discusses commenting
	Money	When income generation matters are addressed
	Offline	When offline events are referred to in relation to online issues
	Values	i.e. Values that do not relate specifically to online affordances
For comments only	Entertainment	When the blogwar is treated as entertainment
	Technical	When issues relating to manipulating technical aspects of blogs are referred to

Table 2

The three categories of Authenticity, Style, and Publicity are also considered to be potentially grouped together, on the assumption that they are more ‘blogocentric’ values. In relation to Style, Lea notes that “Communication styles are used to form impression of others in CMC and are quickly recognized and associated with particular individual so that they overcome

any intended anonymity.” (Lea *et al.* 1992:101), and the negative perception of publicity-seeking has been noted above.

### **The blog posts**

Again, the blog posts of IronLady and AntiBlogQueen were taken out of this analysis, as well as two posts in Chinese – this left 35 linked posts for 29 blogs. For the stance, the linked blog posts were equally divided between ‘Anti’ and ‘Neutral’ (17 each), and one was ‘Pro’; when coding the individual blogs, there was slight majority of ‘Neutral’, meaning that when a blogger did more than one post – one may have been definitely Anti, but another may have been more ambivalent.

### ***Blogrolls***

An initial assumption was that most of those taking the time to comment and link to the hateblog would also have one or more of the main protagonists on their blogroll, as a visible symbol of their association with these leaders in the blogosphere. However, this assumption was wrong, as only 9 (31%) of the linked blogs had any of the three main protagonists on their blogroll, the proportion of links to IronLady and BlogQueen were approximately equal (BlogQueen had one more); the majority (17), did not have a blogroll link to any of the protagonists, and two did not have any blogroll at all. There was no link between the stance and the blogroll link either.

### ***Arguments***

For the linked posts, the most frequently mentioned arguments were ‘Authenticity’, followed closely by ‘Values’ (*Fig.2*). This tends to support the argument that that a blog must reflect the ‘authentic’ creator-blogger; if we look at the ‘Trio’ of Authenticity, Publicity, and Style, then an even greater preponderance of arguments go in that direction. However, the generalised Values are almost as important as Authenticity. This reminds us that the blogosphere does not operate in a vacuum, and most people operating online will be informed by offline cultural practices and discourses.

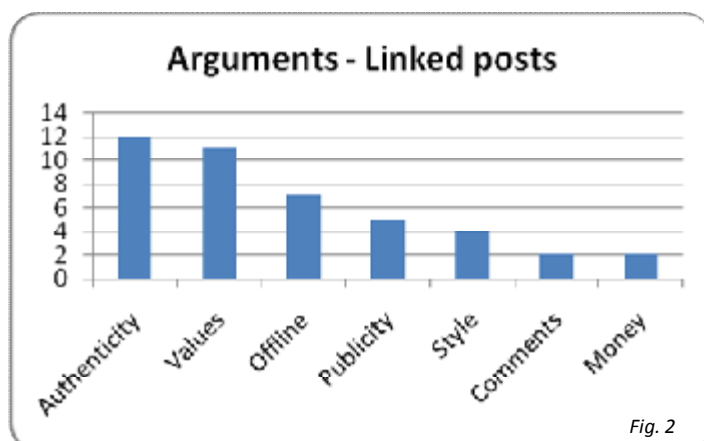


Fig. 2

### The comments

Because the categories for Arguments were not exclusive, there was a total of 548 arguments coded for 485 comments. As such, the following statistics are based on the total comments, and not on individual commenters – this introduces a bias in favour of the more prolific commenters.

### Stance

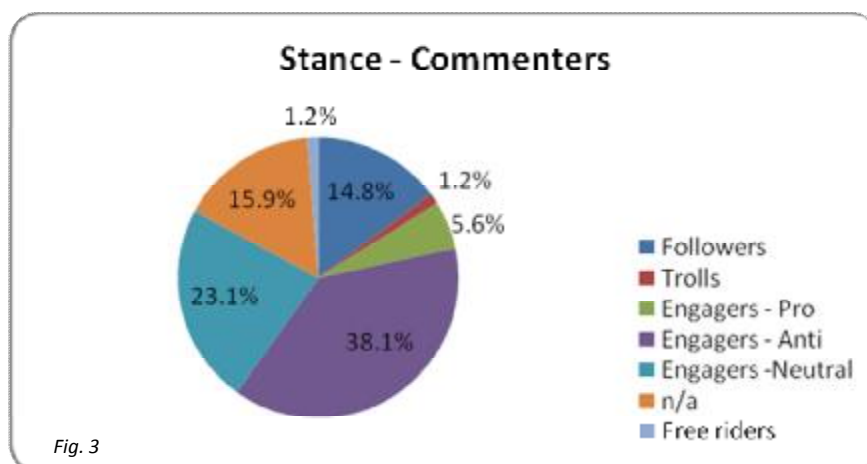
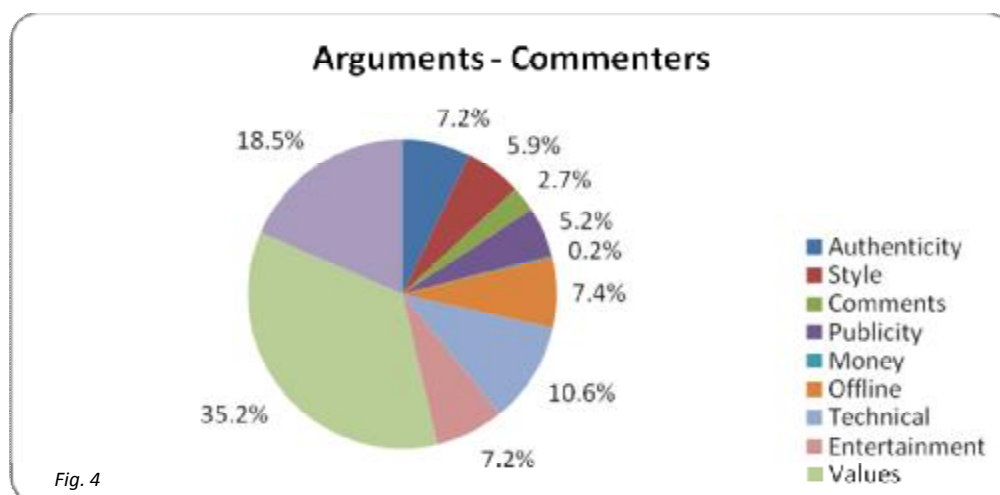


Fig. 3

In Fig.3 we can see that most commenters (66.8%) engage in some manner: they reflect the blog posts' stance in that the Pro's are in the minority, but there is a greater proportion of Anti than Neutral; there are also many Followers – these would presumably mostly fall into the Anti or Neutral camp, depending on the blog post. Overall, there is very little support for the hateblog. There is a substantial proportion of 'n/a' (15.9%), suggesting that the comments area is used in ways that do not necessarily reflect the content of the blog post.

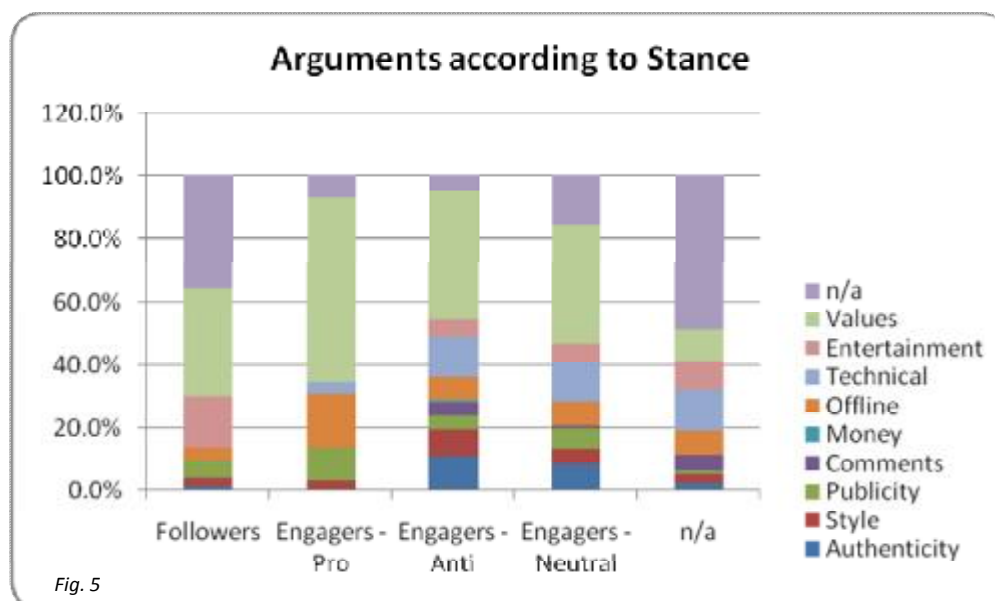
### Arguments



In Fig.4, the generalised offline ‘Values’ has the highest proportion (35.2%), reinforcing the observation made above about the integration of on and offline practices and discourses. Authenticity scores a lot lower than in the blog posts, and the trio of ‘blogocentric’ arguments at 18.3% is just behind n/a at 18.5%. From this we can note that, although the stance of the commenters tends to follow the posts, the arguments used do not.

### *Relating the different aspects*

Seeing as the hateblog was generally understood to involve deceptive appropriation of AntiBlogQueen’s pseudonym, one could assume that the arguments used to support it would rely less on Authenticity. As can be seen in Fig.5, the Pro engagers do not use that argument at all; instead, they have the largest proportion of ‘Values’ (58.6%) and ‘Offline’ (17.2%); an example of these combined would be “Then why swear at [BlogQueen] in public? To prove you have absolutely no manners?” (C1).

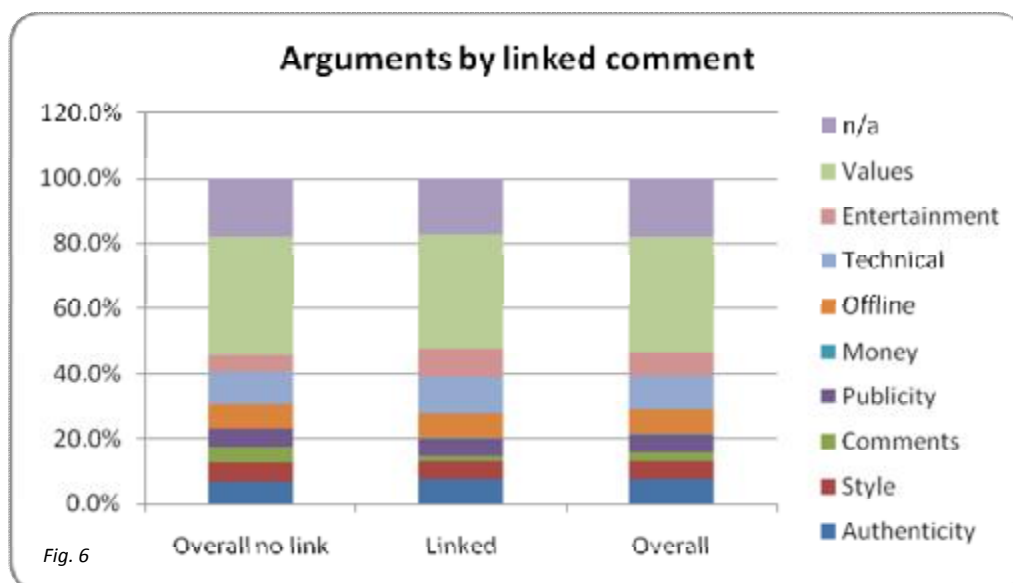


Authenticity appears only in any significant amount in the Anti and Neutral comments (10.9% and 8.7% respectively), and not at all for the Pro. For the trio of Authenticity, Style and Publicity, the Anti have the largest proportion (23.9%) with the Neutral at 19.8% and the Pro have 13.8% of Style and Publicity; the Pro have the highest proportion of Publicity, however, probably reflecting the accusation that IronLady and AntiBlogQueen are trying to leach off BlogQueen's popularity.

### ***Linking***

It could be assumed that those who left more comments are more 'blogocentric', and would therefore also be more likely to have a blog and leave a link to it in order to claim status and perhaps receive some traffic. Out of 46 commenters who left a comment in more than one post, 78.3% (36) had a link to a blog or a viable profile; in comparison, 40.6% of those who left one comment only had a similar link. However, given that it is not known how many of the anonymous commenters were also doing multiple comments, this information is not very reliable.

Due to the multiple coding of arguments in comments, it was not possible to directly compare Arguments and whether or not a commenter linked to their blog, so instead the relationship of Arguments and linked comments (as opposed to commenter) was tabulated (*Fig. 6*).



However, there was little difference noted, with a lowest standard deviation of 0.1% (for Money), and a highest of 1.9% (Entertainment). When the Stance of linked comments was compared to non-linked comments, there was also no significant difference with standard deviations ranging from 0.1% to 0.8%.

Only when IronLady's comments were looked at alone, was there an exception to this pattern. 20.3% (36) of IronLady's comments did not link to a viable blog, and although not all were 'Pro' comments, there was a higher proportion than overall in the comments (22.2% compared to 5.5%). This suggests that the cloak of anonymity may have been used to express negative comments to the blogger, but the number was too small to be statistically reliable.

### ***'Core' commenters***

Although there were no apparent differences between the Stance and Arguments of the linked comments, there were two points to note in relation to the core commenters. These 110 commenters (38.5% of the unique commenters) were responsible for a disproportionate amount of comments (46.8%). As can be seen from Tables 3-4 most of them commented in one post, and left one comment only; however, a significant proportion left more comments, and commented in more than one post. This would indicate a more than passing interest in the subject matter.

Number of comments		
No. of Comments	No. of commenters	
One	70	63.6%

Two	16	14.5%
Three	9	8.2%
> Three	15	13.6%
Total	110	100.0%

Table 3

No. of posts commented in	No. of commenters	32
One	79	71.8%
Two	20	18.2%
Three	7	6.4%
> Three	4	3.6%
Total	110	100.0%

Table 4

### *Blogrolls*

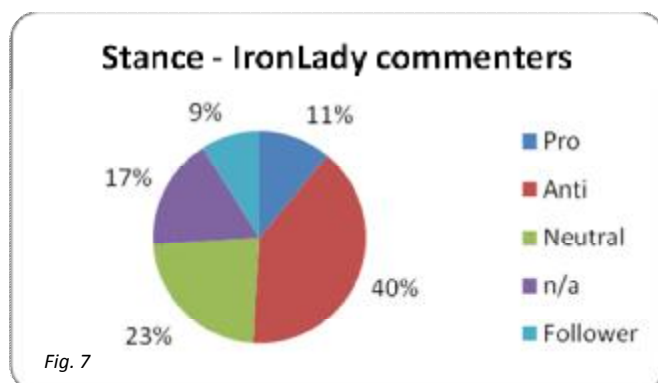
In comparison to the blog posts, there is a definite preponderance of blogroll links to IronLady compared to the other protagonists – sixteen (14.5%) of the core commenters have a blogroll link to her alone, and the other protagonists muster just over 6% between them. However, the greatest proportion of the commenters (40%) have no links to any of the protagonists, and 37 (33.6%) have no blogroll link at all. Although this suggests again that blogroll links are relatively meaningless as predictors, the high proportion of IronLady links may have some significance – perhaps they represent a loyal core of IronLady commenters, whereas many of the others might have been motivated to comment because of the excitement around the hateblog.

### **Dialogics and Social Network Analysis**

Social Network Analysis (SNA) is the use of data to statistically analyse relational data (Hanneman 2005). It is used to analyse relative positions of actors in network based on the ties between them and has been used to examine networks of blogs connected by blogrolls (e.g. Park 2003, Herring *et al.* 2005, Adamic & Glance 2005) – typically, these studies have revealed a small number of highly connected blogs, and clustering around common political or social interests. This clustering has led some to describe the blogosphere as an ‘echo chamber’, where people reinforce each other’s views, but others have emphasised the potential for a new global public sphere where public debate will produce more effective democracy (Wallsten). For this study, SNA was used in a limited experiment to analyse the dialogues taking place in the comments in the three IronLady posts, where there were the most comments. This micro approach to blog conversations has not, to my knowledge, been done before (although Efimova & de Moor (2005) have done something similar).

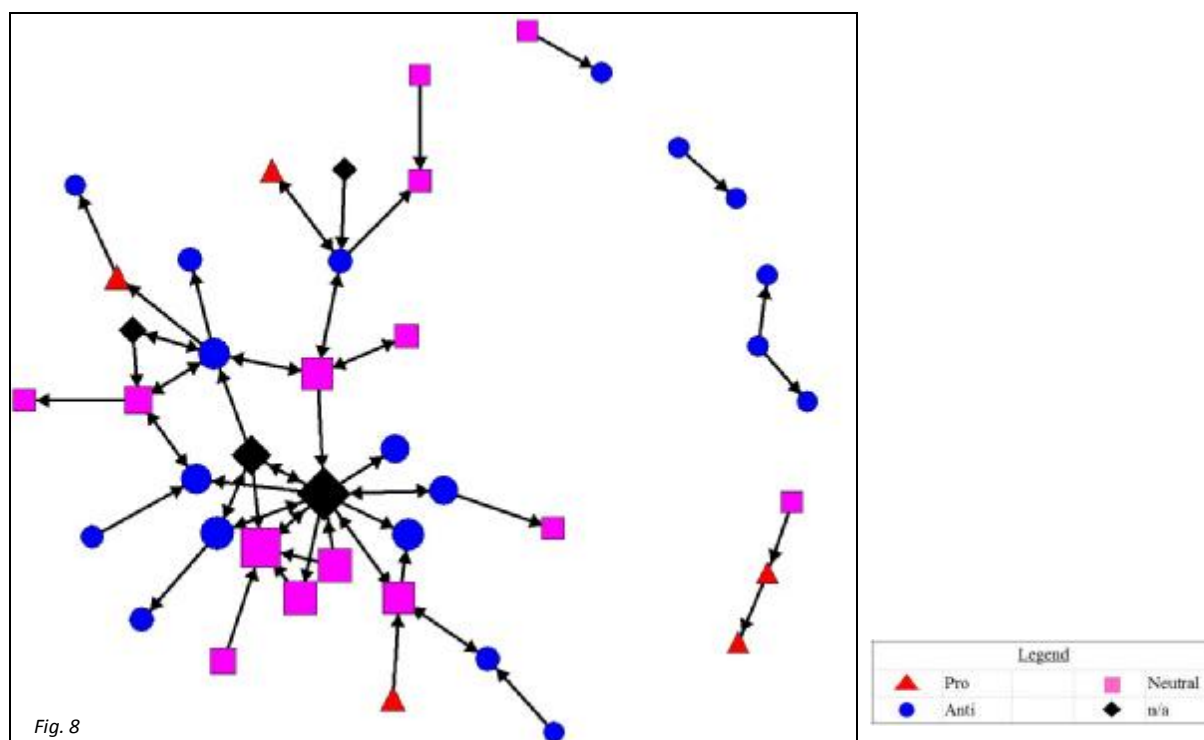


The stances of the commenters in IronLady were similar to the overall comments (*Fig 7.*), though there more Pro (11% compared to 5.6%) and less Followers (9% compared to 14.8%). However, these figures were not directly comparable as, for the purpose of the SNA, multiple commenters' stance was coded according to the predominant stance – for instance, a commenter who had made five comments, of which three were Anti and two were n/a, was coded as Anti.



The comments were coded according to their stance, and according to who the comments was explicitly addressed to: out of 116 comments the greater proportion (54.8%) addressed their comment to IronLady, and a minority (29.6%) did not explicitly address their comment to another commenter or IronLady. Thus we had 15.6% of commenters who talk amongst themselves.

The explicitly directed comments were plotted in a square array matrix, and laid out in a visual layout with node repulsion and equal edge length bias. The stance attribute was added to each node, and represented visually by a different coloured shape (see Legend, *Fig. 8*). Isolates (i.e. commenters who did not address anyone specifically) were removed because they were not engaging in the conversation directly; and IronLady was removed in order to visualise the dialogue taking place solely between the commenters. Finally, the 'Centrality' value was calculated, using the undirected Eigenvector calculation, and the results are seen in *Fig. 8*.



Each node represents a commenter, and the arrowhead represents the direction of the comment addressed to another. Both n/a and Neutral nodes appear as the most central, though there are more of the latter; overall, both n/a and Neutral represent the closest cluster. Therefore, although proportionately the Anti's are the largest, we find that the n/a's and Neutrals talk more amongst each other, and may represent the core of the 'dialogic blog'.

### *Uses & limitations of SNA for blog analysis*

While SNA can help us to quantify and visualise the relations between actors, it gives little qualitative information with which to contextualise that information. Content analysis has been used above to some effect to provide qualitative data, but by its nature it also reduces polysemic conversations to binary oppositions. For example, the node with the largest 'Closeness' value has the 'n/a' Stance: that incorporated a total of 17 comments of which the largest proportion of comments was 'n/a', but other stances were taken too. In practice, the 'n/a' comments were mostly commenters talking casually amongst each other – this reflects the social and dialogical nature of blogs. This experiment has shown that using SNA may be useful in analysing blogs, but in order to be effective, automated data collection and longitudinal analysis would be needed, possibly using multi-modal networks.

### **Discussion of findings & limitations**

The data revealed a wide range of positions and attitudes amongst the commenters and bloggers, the hateblog was mostly condemned, and there was a relatively high proportion of arguments relating to authenticity. However, we also see that arguments were mostly expressed in relation to values practiced in the offline sphere.

There were some definite limitations to the statistical analysis in this study. Statistical significance was not calculated because the sample was not random, but in effect self-selected; however, in view of the lack of any reliable overview of total blogs, a truly random sample is impossible. This data did present the advantage of having a ‘natural’ boundary, resulting from the short life of the hateblog; however, even then the comments on the hateblog itself were censored, and the main protagonist – BlogQueen – never blogged about it, which meant that her many loyal readers were not enrolled directly into the debate. Thus the arguments recorded were probably skewed towards IronLady and AntiBlogQueen’s position.

Another limitation is the inability to track all commenters: anyone can appear under multiple pseudonyms, or repeatedly as ‘Anonymous’, and it is very difficult to empirically control for this<sup>12</sup>. Commenters can use this tactically, making strategic use of pseudonyms and anonymity. This is recognised by all, and assumed to happen – for example, on commenter says in response to a comment by ‘Anonymous’:

“Anonymous: you really get around hor. Every freaking blog I've read about this.. er.. little event, you're there!!! And always saying the same thing... defending [BlogQueen], then accusing others of trying to get attention and fame from this whole sad affair. Are you telling us that we can't blog or write about it? Cus if we did, we're only attention whores or trying to drive traffic to our site?” (C2)

As we noted, in IronLady’s blog it was possible that anonymity was being used to express hostile remarks, but overall there was no apparent link between anonymity and opinions. Burnett has noted that “the content on the net is less confrontational than is popularly believed: conversations are more helpful and social than competitive.” (2000; see also Lea *et*

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<sup>12</sup> The only way would be to have access to the IP addresses of commenters, but even those can change over time. It may also infringe the blogger’s and or commenter’s privacy.

*al.*). In this case study, we also saw that lots of comments were 'neutral', i.e. being conciliatory and possibly seeking solutions.

The relative lack of blogrolls in blogs overall was also noted by Schmidt (2007) and Herring (2007:9). This leads Schmidt to question the use of blogrolls in analysing blogs, a conclusion that I would agree with. On the other hand, blogrolls may have a symbolic importance in terms of affiliation with a particular blogger, as suggested by the relatively high proportion of the core commenters having a link to IronLady; and they are often noted as a means for bloggers to reciprocate links to each other (*ibid.*), functioning as an introduction ritual but not reflecting a blogger's daily habits – much like exchanging business cards, perhaps. I would argue that this leads us back to comments as being a key resource for analysing normative trends in blogging.

## **Conclusions**

The 'chaotic' nature of the internet, with multidirectional links and clustering around particular sites, can also be seen as a rhizomatic network. This 'organic' conceptualisation is also apt as each blog is productive of its own environment: bloggers and their audience cluster around those blogs that articulate their values and aspirations through shared discursive practices such as subject matter, language, response to comments and design. The centrality of the comments and interactive nature of blogs means that there is an ongoing creation and recreation of discursive practices. In the rhizomatic digital mindscape of the internet, the blog acts as an articulatory node because it sits at the intersection of discursive practices: the disposition of these practices varies according to a variety of influences – both on and off-line – and available technologies.

The analysis reveals that concerns of authenticity are important to bloggers. Authenticity in the blogging field has two main components: a stable pseudonym embodied in a blog, and a rhetorical style that incorporates language, multimedia use and visual design. These are enhanced by the practice of answering commenters in the comment space and/or in adjusting to commenters by adapting aspects of the blog or posts. In addition, photographs and the profile (a short 'About Me' section) will provide other clues to the person behind the blog – the profile can be blank, include a few details such as location, age or gender, or have a detailed biography. Revealing explicit offline aspects is assumed to enhance the performative stability of the online authentic identity.

There was a significant minority of commenters who use the comment space to talk with each other about issues not related to the bloggers post. This lends support to the idea of the blog as a dialogical entity, wherein the commenters engage in multiple dialogues and act relatively autonomously. However, overall most commenters either address themselves directly to the blogger, or to no one in particular; this does not exclude the possibility of dialogue but suggests that the blogger is a centripetal influence in the dialogue. Taking the different directions of the commenters' dialogue, and the overarching influence of the blogger, one can argue that the blog is not defined by the blogger or any one discursive theme, but instead is a meeting place where the potential of "polyvocality" (Clifford 1986:15) is ever present.

In an increasingly mediatised world, replete with representations upon representations, each of which creates its own meaning and channels discursive activity, it is increasingly incumbent upon anthropologists to understand the meaning and consequence of the integration of new media technologies into social life. It is hoped that this study will add to that understanding of this particular new medium.

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## Appendix A: Definitions and examples of ‘Stance’ coding

Stance			
Category	%	Description	Example
Follower	13.9%	No active engagement, limited to expressing support or repeating the arguments of the blogger.	“u is so damn cool...” (C3)
Troll	1.1%	No active engagement, apart from insults. Typically anonymous	“fuck [BlogQueen] KNNCBLJ [acronyms for Chinese vulgarities].. fuck her to the max.>!!!!” (C4)
Anti	35.2%	Condemn the hateblog, usually assuming BlogQueen was the author	“she created a hate site to flame people but got herself flamed instead.” (C5)
Neutral	21.3%	Sit on the fence or adopt ‘a plague on all their houses’ stance	“Two self-important bloggers ... I have read both blogs... I think they deserve each other.” (C6)
Pro	5.1%	Either attacked IronLady or AntiBlogQueen, or argued that BlogQueen was not the author of the hateblog.	“Just think since she [BlogQueen] is already so popular, does she need to stood low? Anyway i dun believe the shit you both are saying.” (C7)
Free Riders	1.1%	Links to own blogs with no further comment	“I have posted about this issue now <a href="#">HERE</a> .” (C8; [the word ‘HERE’ is a link to the commenter’s own blog])
Own	6.9%	Comments by the blogger in response to comments	“You know what I would really do to market my blog? Suck up to the prominent bloggers, go to their site leave comments in their favour...” (B7)
n/a	15.2%	Comments not related to the issue, or incomprehensible. Mostly bantering and small talk between commenters.	“since when did you start reading my blog? You've never commented.” (C9 [responding to another commenter]) “7t8oityoir6” (C10)
(numbers do not add up to 100% exactly due to rounding of figures)			

## Appendix B: Definitions and examples of 'Arguments' coding

Arguments			
	Category	Explanation	Examples
Coded for both linked posts and comments	Authenticity	Criticising the use of ABQ's pseudonym, discussing anonymity, asserting the authentic expression of the blogger in his/her blog	<p>"Many fail to realise that [IronLady] is not hiding the fact that she swears, acts uncouth when drunk etc. But [BlogQueen] is trying to portray this 'nice' image of her on her own blog. And when she want to flame someone badly, she do it under another name. Not a new name. Another Blogger's name (AntiBlogQueen). This, to me, is just shit." (C11)</p> <p>"you know, after all you are anonymous urself, so what's the deal wif ppl trying to impersonate you?" (C12 [addressed to AntiBlogQueen])</p>
	Style	When the style of writing is addressed	<p>"her blog is full of grammatical errors, it's horrifying &amp; painful to read." (C13)</p> <p>"if you read carefully, it sounds like [BlogQueen] writing to deny that she is the one writing." (C14)</p>
	Comments	Regarding comments, e.g. when comments are censored, or someone directly discusses commenting	<p>"She put all comments on moderation. Thats why you see all the 'positive' comments on her blog. Ask her to remove moderation, and she will have to admit how many haters she really have..." (C15)</p> <p>"And [AntiBlogQueen], why are you start behaving like [BlogQueen] now? Moderating comments too?" (C16)</p>
	Publicity	When references are made to publicity seeking – e.g. in the form of seeking more hits to a blog	<p>"[BlogQueen] has always been the attn-seeker. Well good for her, now she's got ALOT of attn indeed." (C17)</p> <p>"Oh, give me the epitome of an advertising whore." (B6 [referring to AntiBlogQueen])</p>
	Money	When income generation matters are addressed	<p>"if this blow up big enough, it'll hit her where it hurt most... she'll loose sponsorship..." (C18)</p>

	Offline	When offline events are referred to in relation to online issues	<p>“Bearing in mind that she doesn't have to queue up at MOS [a nightclub] unlike a certain someone, and is also way more popular.” (C19)</p> <p>“i know [BQ] personally as a fren and yeah, in real life, she still talks about such crap and comes up with the most illogical reasons.” (C20)</p>
	Values	i.e. Values that do not relate specifically to online affordances	<p>“I think the moral of the whole story is.. Be humble, modest, sincere and couteous, people will be forgiving and lend you a helping hand when you fall. When you get too proud and arrogant of yourself, people can't wait to see you fall!” (C21)</p> <p>“How is she ever going to face everybody anybody?! Family; relatives; friends; neighbours; colleagues; strangers would all remember her as the wicked girl whom tried to frame another by impersonating him” (C22)</p>
Coded for comments only	Entertainment	When the blogwar is treated as entertainment	<p>“we should awards for these catfights updated every 6 months or so LOL... “best comeback line”, “best whoop-ass statement”, or “best insult”, stuff like that ;)” (C23)</p> <p>“hey dear, pass me some popcorn please.” (C24)</p>
	Technical	When issues relating to manipulating technical aspects of blogs are referred to	<p>“even if you changed your User ID, it's still tagged to the account as long as the User ID does not already exist. When you post an entry, it captures your entry, the User ID, and Display Name.” (C25)</p> <p>“after i diao [BlogQueen] in the hate site, i cannot access the blog any more. i got blocked or so fast close shop oredi?” (C26)</p>