# Blogwars – authenticity and value in the blogosphere

JULIAN HOPKINS
PHD CANDIDATE
MONASH UNIVERSITY SUNWAY CAMPUS

THE 6TH INTERNATIONAL MALAYSIAN STUDIES CONFERENCE (MSC6)
ENGAGING MALAYSIAN MODERNITY: 50 YEARS AND BEYOND

5-7 AUGUST 2008
CROWNE PLAZA HOTEL
KUCHING, SARAWAK, MALAYSIA

© Julian Hopkins 2008

## Summary

- What is a blog?
- Hateblog & Blogwar
- Anonymity & Pseudonymity
- The articulation of On- & Offline
- Blogwar – The protagonists
- Hateblog
- Methodology & Content analysis
- Findings & Conclusions

© Julian Hopkins 2008

## What is a blog?

- Three main features
1. Usually run by a single person
2. The posts are in reverse chronological order
- Reed: blogs "present the life of a sovereign subject who has a continuous identity and a coherent history" (226)
3. Comments are enabled
   - Blog is built by blogger and audience (Nardi *et al.*; boyd)

A blog is a dialogical medium: constituted by the interaction of bloggers, commenters and readers who form a generative site of social meanings and practices

© Julian Hopkins 2008

## Hateblog & Blogwar

- Hateblog
  - Usually anonymous
  - Uses offensive language or images
  - Purpose: to insult or slander a blogger or other person
- Blogwar
  - Series of attacks and counter-attacks between bloggers
  - May involve the use of a hateblog as a 'dirty weapon'
- "Perhaps only when faced with [community-threatening] threats does the true nature of a virtual community reveal itself." (Joinson & Dietz-Uhler 286)
- By analysing the blogwar I hope to be able to find out more about what bloggers and blog readers value in a blog

© Julian Hopkins 2008

## Anonymity & Pseudonymity

- Donath: "reputation of any kind is impossible in a purely anonymous environment" (21)
  - In 1996: homepages being used to provide "depth and nuance not found in the ephemeral Usenet environment" (*ibid*:11)
- Slater: trust difficulties managed in IRC (online chat) group by "progressive embodiment" (114) through further contact by voice, video or mail, or "object constancy" (115)
- Sustained interpersonal interaction online is rendered possible by the existence of stable pseudonyms
  - Blogs are believed to reflect the authentic personality of the blogger

## The articulation of On- & Offline

- Miller & Slater refuse to "treat the Internet independently of its embeddedness" (2000:8)
  - Following Latour, they affirm the internet as an 'actant' (*ibid.*)
- We can talk of the blogosphere as a 'field' (re. Bourdieu), with practices that derive from technological affordances
  - But it intersects with other overlapping fields: MSM, Social-Political, gender, entertainment industry, etc.
  - Capital (social, cultural) accumulated in one field can be transferred to others

There is no 'virtual world' and 'real world' dichotomy: only one world of interlocking fields, practices and habituses

© Julian Hopkins 2008

## Blogwar – The protagonists

**BlogQueen**
Lifestyle blogger
Age: early 20s
15-20K visits/day

Minor role: SC

Minor role: SS

**IronLady**
Personal blogger
Age: apprx. 30
Female

**AntiBlogQueen**
Arch-enemy of BlogQueen
Anonymous
Probably male

© Julian Hopkins 2008

## Blogwar – the history

- In the second half of 2005, BlogQueen posted some controversial posts on:
  - Visiting KL
  - Using disabled toilets
  - Bangladeshi/foreign workers harassing women
- Many accused her of being racist and intolerant
- A semi-formal online campaign targeting advertisers on BlogQueen's blog was initiated
  - IronLady and AntiBlogQueen supported this campaign

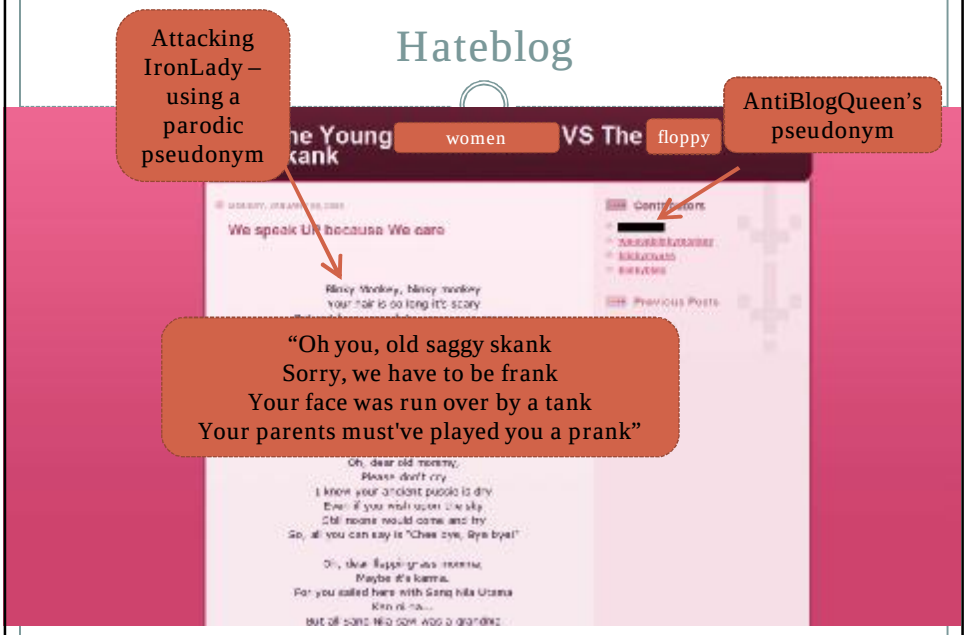
© Julian Hopkins 2008

## Blogwar – the history

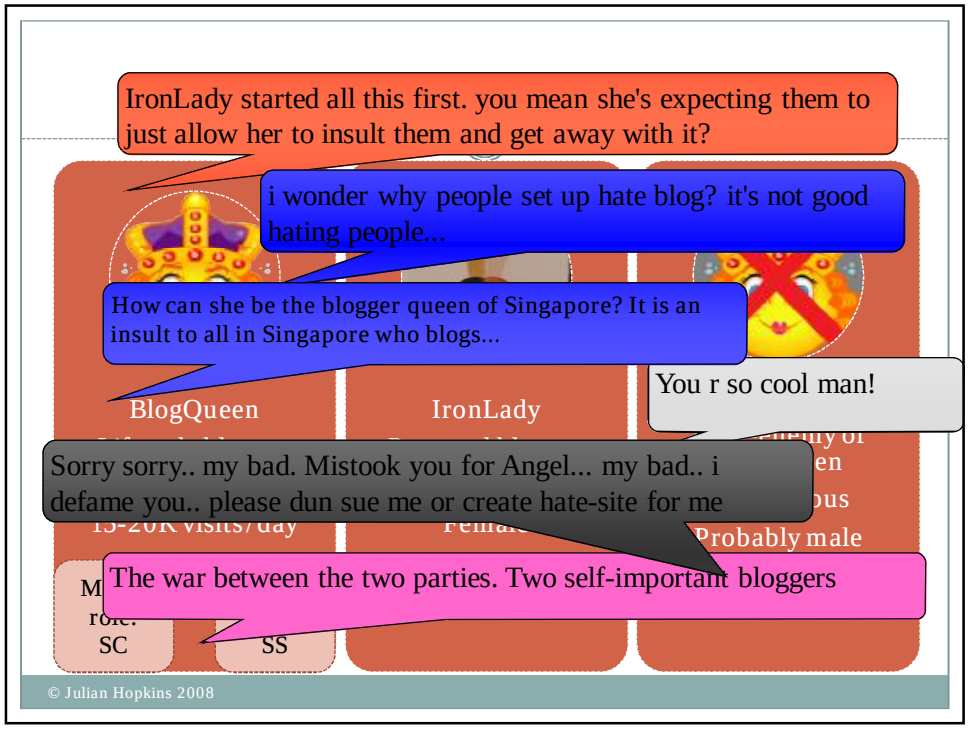
- IronLady had criticised BlogQueen for considering a free 'bikini shoot' with a men's magazine
  - However, in the end IronLady also accepted
- At the photo shoot she took a photo of BlogQueen and posted it online
  - BlogQueen openly admits to digitally enhancing all her photos ('Photoshopping'), this one was not
  - IronLady removed the photo after BlogQueen complained
- Later, they crossed paths at a bar
  - IronLady greeted BlogQueen, felt snubbed, and swore at her
  - BlogQueen felt threatened
- The next day, the hateblog appeared

© Julian Hopkins 2008

## Hateblog

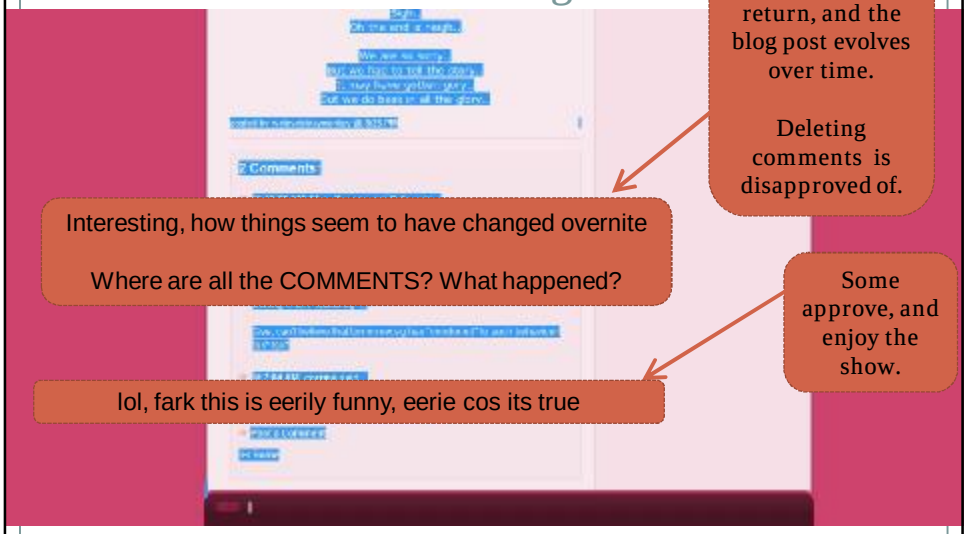



© Julian Hopkins 2008


IronLady started all this first. you mean she's expecting them to just allow her to insult them and get away with it?
i wonder why people set up hate blog? it's not good hating people...
How can she be the blogger queen of Singapore? It is an insult to all in Singapore who blogs...
You r so cool man!
BlogQueen
IronLady
Sorry sorry.. my bad. Mistook you for Angel... my bad.. i defame you.. please dun sue me or create hate-site for me
Probably male
The war between the two parties. Two self-important bloggers
SC
SS
© Julian Hopkins 2008

IronLady started all this first. you mean she's expecting them to just allow her to insult them and get away with it?
Who created the hateblog?
© Julian Hopkins 2008

## Hateblog



Commenters return, and the blog post evolves over time.

Deleting comments is disapproved of.

Interesting, how things seem to have changed overnite

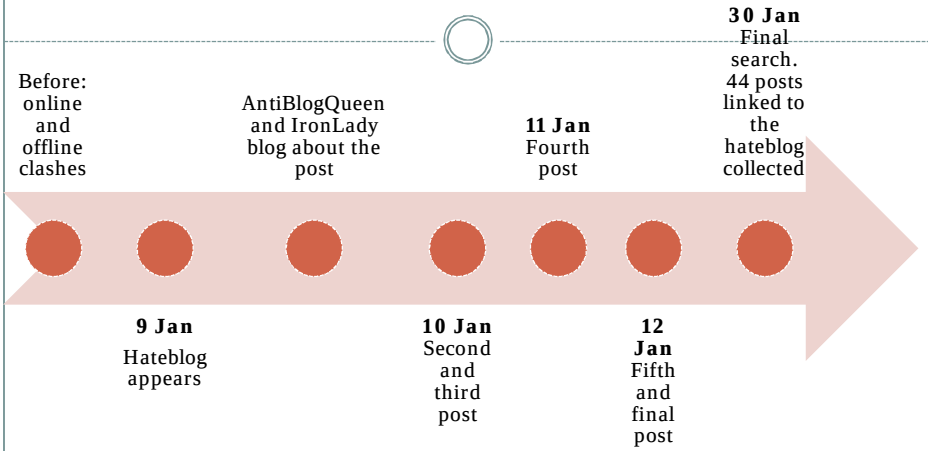
Where are all the COMMENTS? What happened?

Some approve, and enjoy the show.

lol, fark this is eerily funny, eerie cos its true

© Julian Hopkins 2008

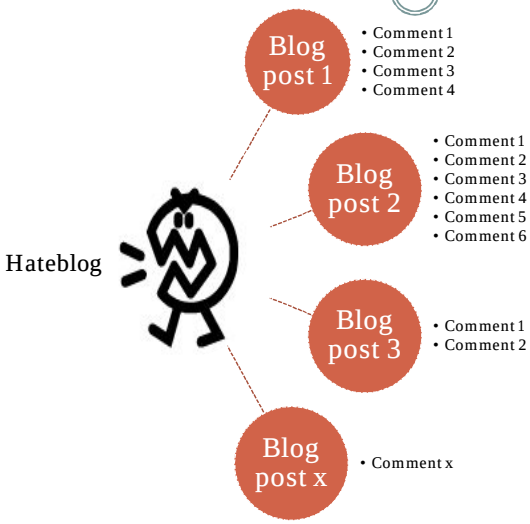
## Blogwar – Chronology




The hateblog existed for 4-5 days, and then was deleted

© Julian Hopkins 2008

## Methodology – Data collection




A search in Technorati finds all of the indexed blog posts that link to the hate blog.

All the linked blog posts and their comments are saved and then analysed.

44 posts and 525 comments indexed.

© Julian Hopkins 2008

## Methodology – Content Analysis

| 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

## Methodology – Content Analy

'Trio': grouped, on the assumption that they are all related to the authentic performance

'Values': generalised arguments used that are not confined to online issues

| | Arguments | |
|---|---|---|
| | **Category** | **Explanation** |
| For blogs and comments | Authenticity | Criticising the use of ABQ's pseudony anonymity, asserting the authentic ex 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 con someone directly discusses commer |
| | Money | When income generation matters ar |
| | Offline | When offline events are referred to 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

## Methodology – Content Analysis

'Authenticity'

"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)

'Authenticity'

"[BlogQueen] is trying to protray 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)

Blog posts: 27.9%
Comments: 7.2%

© Julian Hopkins 2008

## Methodology – Content Analysis

'Style'

"if you read carefully, it sounds like [BlogQueen] writing to deny that she is the one writing." (C14)

Blog posts: 9.3%
Comments: 5.9%

'Publicity'

"Oh, give me the epitome of an advertising whore." (B6 [referring to AntiBlogQueen])

Blog posts: 11.6%
Comments: 5.2%

© Julian Hopkins 2008

## Methodology – Content analysis

'Values'

"It's about honesty, integrity, and ethics. About maturity and [BlogQueen]'s apparent lack of it" (C32)

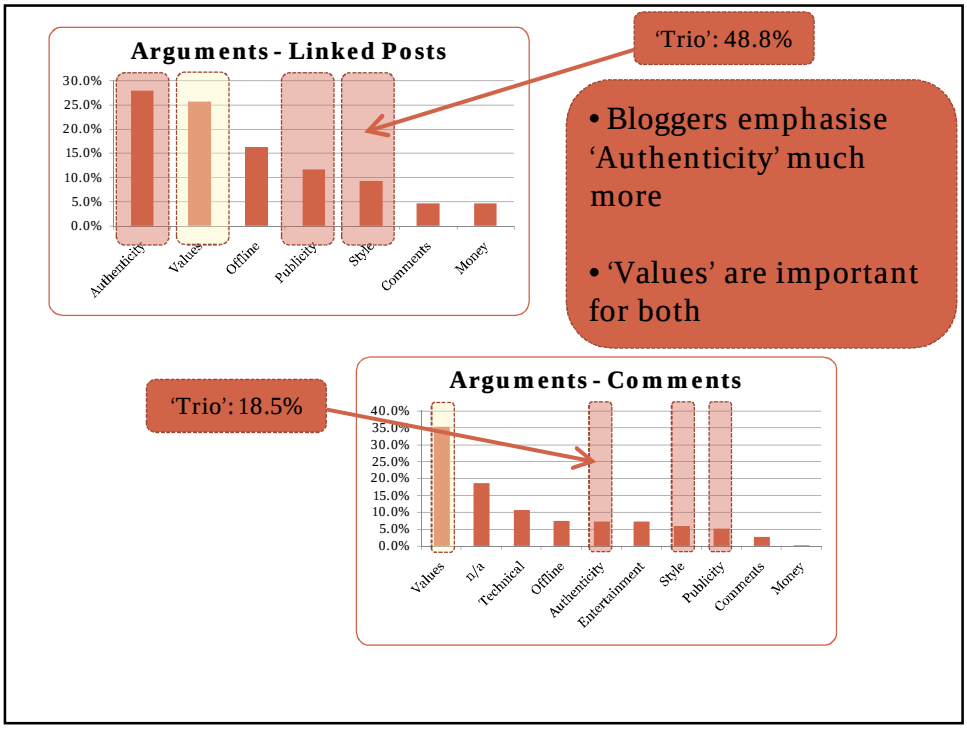
'Values'

"Sometimes this pepur the very bo liaou.
criticized other pepur country, other pepur tits, foreign workers (bangladeshi) and many many more..

bo liaou - nothing better to [illegible] (c33)

Blog posts: 25.6%
Comments: 35.2%

© Julian Hopkins 2008

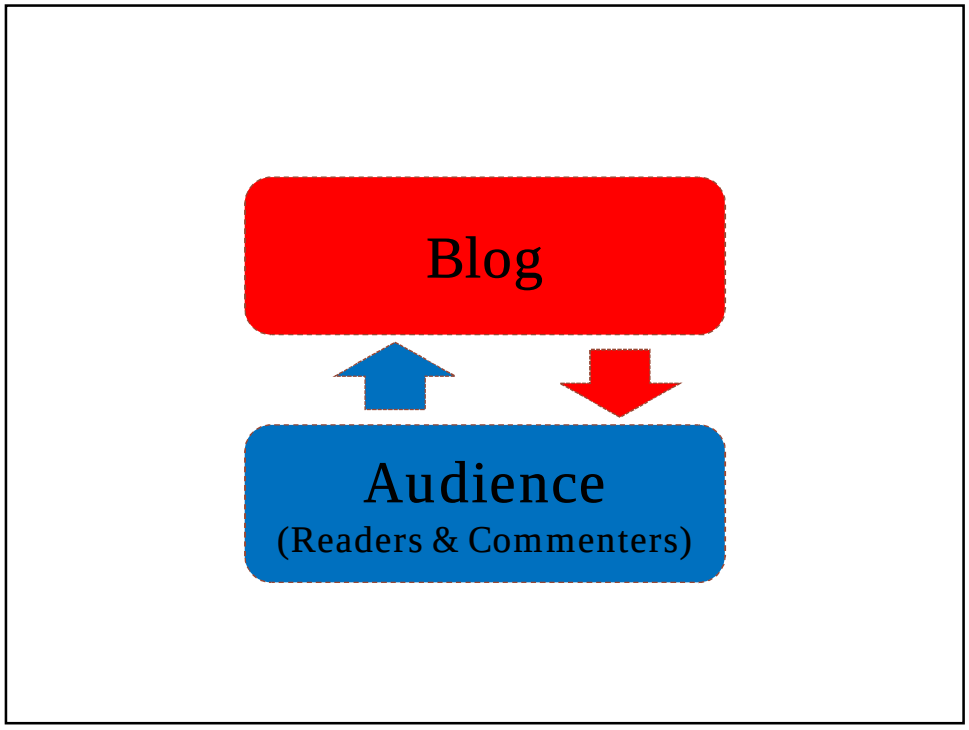


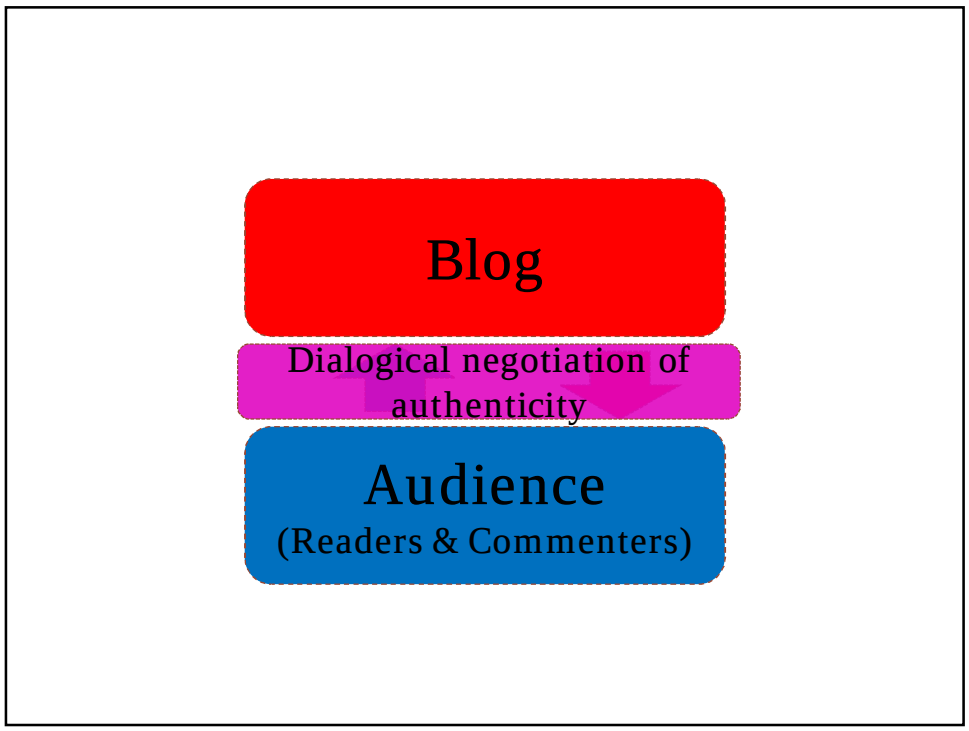

## Findings & Conclusions

- 'Blogocentric' arguments **à** centred around pseudonym & the authentic performance
- Benjamin: authenticity and its 'aura' is a product of socio-economic relations
  - "The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the 'spell of the personality,' the phony spell of a commodity." (Benjamin 224)
- Not arguing for the existence of 'real' authenticity – but that as an actant, it is 'enrolled' by bloggers and
- Generalised values from offline fields **à** no virtual/real dichotomy
- Appadurai also avoids dichotomies: "...looking at the commodity potential of all things" (*ibid*:13)
  - A commodity is "*any thing intended for exchange*" (9) – this is contingent on social context
  - All things can go through a "commodity candidacy ... that define the exchangeability of things in any particular social context." (*ibid*:13-14).

Why did the hateblog fail in its 'commodity candidacy'? Why did it fail to become something worthy of exchange?

© Julian Hopkins 2008


Blog
Audience
(Readers & Commenters)


Blog
Dialogical negotiation of authenticity
Audience
(Readers & Commenters)

## Findings & Conclusions

- Kelty: study of Open Source online 'gift economy'
  - i.e. It is not the thing (commodity, licence, blog) that is being exchanged, but the *potential to create social ties* through the thing
- Authenticity enables social interaction – no stable individual identities means no way to anchor an enduring habitus
  - The hateblog threatened the basis of the blogosphere
- The authentic blog is thus a dialogically created medium that acts as an articulatory node, dynamically and contingently enabling the development of a field of blogging – the 'blogosphere'.

© Julian Hopkins 2008

No authenticity = No blogs

## More information

For a copy of the full paper, or any other information, please contact me via my blog

www.julianhopkins.net

or, send me an email

j@julianhopkins.net

© Julian Hopkins 2008

## Works Cited & Used


- Adamic, Lada A, and Glance Natalie. "The Political Blogosphere and the 2004 U.S. Election: Divided They Blog." Proceedings of the 3rd international workshop on Link discovery. Chicago, Illinois: ACM, 2005. 11 June 2008 <http://doi.acm.org/10.1145/1134271.1134277>.
- Appadurai, Arjun, ed. The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- Baker, Stephen. "Updated blog numbers from David Sifry". Business Week. 18 Jan. 2008. 28 July 2008 <http://www.businessweek.com/the_thread/blogspotting/archives/2008/01/updated_blog_nu.html>.
- Bambury, Paul. "A Taxonomy of Internet Commerce." First Monday. 3.10 (1998). 20 Feb 2008 <http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3_10/bambury/index.html>.
- Barbrook, Richard. "The High-Tech Gift Economy." First Monday. 3.12 (1998). 20 Feb 2008 <http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3_12/barbrook/index.html>.
- Birchmeier, Zachary , Adam N. Joinson, and Beth Dietz-Uhler. "Storming and Forming a Normative Response to a Deception Revealed Online." Social Science Computer Review. 23.1 (2005): 108-21. 11 July 2008 <http://ssc.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/23/1/108>.
- Blood, Rebecca. "Introduction." We've Got Blog. How Weblogs Are Changing Our Culture. Ed. John Rodzvilla. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 2002. ix-xiii.
- boyd, danah. "A Blogger's Blog: Exploring the Definition of a Medium". reconstruction. 6.4 Date. 1 Oct 2007 <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/064/boyd.shtml>.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. The Field of Cultural Production. Essays on Art and Literature. Ed. Randal Johnson. UK: Polity Press, 1993.
- Butler, Judith. Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Castells, Manuel. The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture. Volume I: The Rise of the Network Society. 2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000.
- Donath, Judith S. "Identity and Deception in the Virtual Community." Communities in Cyberspace. Eds. Peter Kollock and Marc A. Smith. London: Routledge, 1996.
- China Internet Network Information Center. "CNNIC Releases 2007 Survey Report on China Weblog Market Number of Blog Writers Reaches 47 million Equaling One Fourth of Total Netizens". 27 Dec. 2007. 28 July 2008 <http://www.cnnic.cn/html/Dir/2007/12/27/4954.htm>.
- Ghosh, Rishab Aiyer. "Cooking Pot Markets: An Economic Model for the Trade in Free Goods and Services on the Internet." First Monday. 3.3 (1998). 20 Feb 2008 <http://www.uic.edu/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/580/501>.
- Herring, Susan C., et al. "Conversations in the Blogosphere: An Analysis 'from the Bottom up'." Proceedings of the 38th Annual Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS'05) -- Track 4. Hawaii, 2005. Vol. 107b. 7 Nov. 2006 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1109/HICSS.2005.167>.


© Julian Hopkins 2008

## Works Cited & Used


- Johnson, Randal. "Editors Introduction. Pierre Bourdieu on Art, Literature and Culture." The Field of Cultural Production. Essays on Art and Literature. Ed. Randal Johnson. London: Polity Press, 1993.
- Joinson, Adam N., and Beth Dietz-Uhler. "Explanations for the Perpetration of and Reactions to Deception in a Virtual Community." Social Science Computer Review. 20.3 (2002): 275-89. 14 July 2008 <http://ssc.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/20/3/275>.
- Kelty, Christopher. "Hau to Do Things with Words." Unpublished, 2002. 21 Feb 2008 <http://www.kelty.org/or/papers/Kelty.Hautodothings.2002.doc>.
- Lea, Martin, et al. "'Flaming' in Computer-Mediated Communication. Observations, Explanations, Implications." Contexts of Computer-Mediated Communication. Ed. Martin Lea. London: Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1992. 89-112.
- Lenhart, Amanda B. "Unstable Texts: An Ethnographic Look at How Bloggers and Their Audience Negotiate Self-Presentation, Authenticity and Norm Formation." Georgetown University, 2005.
- Miller, Hugh. "The Presentation of Self in Electronic Life: Goffman on the Internet." Embodied Knowledge and Virtual Space Conference. Goldsmiths' College, University of London, 1995. 18 Oct 2007 <http://www.psicopolis.com/psicopedia/selfweb.htm>.
- Morson, Gary Saul, and Caryl Emerson. Mikhail Bakhtin. Creation of a Prosaics. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990.
- Nardi, Bonnie A., Diane J. Schiano, and Michelle Gumbrecht. "Blogging as Social Activity, or, Would You Let 900 Million People Read Your Diary?" Proceedings of the 2004 ACM conference on Computer supported cooperative work, 2004. Vol. 6.3. 7 Nov. 2006 <http://doi.acm.org/10.1145/1031607.1031643>.
- Oon, Yeoh. "What's Actually a Blog?" The Star Online, 2008. 8 July 2008. <http://thestar.com.my/columnists/story.asp?col=wikimedia&file=/2008/6/19/columnists/wikimedia/21590314&sec=Wikimedia>.
- Park, Han Woo. "Hyperlink Network Analysis: A New Method for the Study of Social Structure on the Web." Connections. 25.1 (2003): 49-61. 1 Nov 2007 <http://www.insna.org/Connections-Web/Volume25-1/7.Hyperlink.pdf>.
- Raymond, Eric S. "The Cathedral and the Bazaar." First Monday. 3.3 (1998). 20 Feb 2008 <http://www.uic.edu/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/578/499>.
- Reed, Adam. "'My Blog Is Me': Texts and Persons in Uk Online Journal Culture (and Anthropology)." Ethnos. 70.2 (2005): 220-42. 5 Feb 2007 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00141840500141311>.
- Renfrew, Colin. "Varna and the Emergence of Wealth in Prehistoric Europe." The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective. Ed. Arjun Appadurai. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- Ross, Karen, and Virginia Nightingale. Media and Audiences: New Perspectives. n/a: Open University Press, 2003.
- Slater, Don. "Trading Sexpics on Irc: Embodiment and Authenticity on the Internet." Body and Society. 4.4 (1998): 91-117.
- Suler, John. "The Psychology of Avatars and Graphical Space in Multimedia Chat Communities." The Psychology of Cyberspace. Ed. John Suler. n/a: n/a, 2007. v. 2.7.
- Vrooman, Steven S. "The Art of Invective. Performing Identity in Cyberspace." new media & society. 4.1 (2002): 51-70. 15 July 2008 <http://nms.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/4/1/51>.


© Julian Hopkins 2008

# Thank you! **J**

© Julian Hopkins 2008