Chapter 7

On the Globalization of the Self:
Internet Weblogs as an Identity-forming Activity

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On the World Wide Web and Weblogs

During the infancy of the World Wide Web, academic, government and commercial institutions produced most of the content on the Internet. Until the late 1990s, the Web was simply a new medium for delivering information and online services by already established institutions. Personal webpages were few and far between because only those who had learned to code html, the language of webpage creation, could publish in the electronic medium of the Internet. This meant that if one wanted to create a webpage, one had to learn a new language. Thus, most personal webpages were maintained by individuals who worked as website developers for institutions and who spent their off-work hours surfing the Internet and maintaining their own websites.

Then in 1999, build your own website tools became popular. These tools were free services and applications that enabled amateurs to create and edit webpages. Hence, more and more people started publishing personal websites and they multiplied rapidly with the advent of what were eventually called weblogs.1 A weblog is basically a webpage that consists of dated entries where the weblog editor, called the blogger, is free to post links to other websites and publish essays or commentaries of any nature and topic. Normally, a weblog serves as an online journal where the weblog editor has the ability to publish anything on the global network: daily reflections, reactions to current events, graphic files, and music.2

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2 For a closer look at the cultural influences of weblogs, an anthology of essays was recently published by Rebecca Blood, ed., We’ve Got Blogs: How Weblogs are Changing Our Culture (Cambridge: Perseus Publishing, 2002).
Since then, the World Wide Web has not been the same, because content has gone far beyond what established institutions had made available. Previously, Internet users comprised the audience or spectators who passively received information and services from content providers, such as news services and government information agencies. Now the public can participate in the delivery of Internet content in and through weblogs. In this case, the World Wide Web has truly become a public space.

In January 2004, an Internet census reported that almost 1.7 million sites on the World Wide Web were weblogs. This phenomenon is unique. A journal or diary remains private and personal as it reflects a person’s thoughts and opinions, but a weblog brings these into an electronic and global medium. The journal becomes public, because a weblog provides a space in which to publish trivial stories, reactions to mundane affairs, personal lists and experiences. The weblog editor as a journal writer now has an audience; the medium is electronic and the audience is global.

Thus, the central interest of this chapter is the weblog as an electronic and global journal. What is significant about this phenomenon? What does a weblog do to and for the person who maintains it? How can we understand this new phenomenon in the context of what it means to be a human being? Or more specifically, how does the weblog determine the identity of a human being in this global and electronic age? These questions are given significance in a remarkable essay by one of the first weblog editors on the Internet:

Shortly after I began producing Rebecca’s Pocket I noticed two side effects I had not expected. First, I discovered my own interests. I thought I knew what I was interested in, but after linking stories for a few months I could see that I was much more interested in science, archaeology, and issues of injustice than I had realized. More importantly, I began to value more highly my own point of view. In composing my link text every day I carefully considered my own opinions and ideas, and I began to feel that my perspective was unique and important.4

3 NITLE Blog Census from http://www.blogcensus.net/, retrieved on 26 January 2004. According to the homepage, the National Institute for Technology and Liberal Arts (NITLE) “weblog census is an attempt to find as many active weblogs as possible, across all languages.” This online census has been active since 2003.