

Stuck with the Lettable (2005) Reviews

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CHAPTER ONE

What is a Blog?

of blogging and how you do it. If you're already a blogger, you might want to skip ahead to the examples of different kinds of blog: personal blogs, filter blogs and topic-driven blogs.

How to Blog

There are many online services that will let you set up your own blog for free, and that will host your blog for you on their server. Blogger.com was the first major service to do this, and is still one of the most popular blogging sites, but there are many others, including Wordpress.com, Livejournal.com, TypePad.com, as well as many sites that are specific to a particular country or region.

To really understand blogs, you need to read them over time. Following a blog is like getting to know someone, or like watching a television series. Because blogging is a cumulative process, most posts presuppose some knowledge of the history of the blog, and they fit into a larger story. There's a very different sense of rhythm and continuity when you follow a blog, or a group of blogs, over time, compared to simply reading a single post that you've found through a search engine or by following a link from another Web site.

In most forms of print publishing, such as newspaper articles, novels or poetry, the author is not in charge of the way the text will look. The text is written in a word processor (or on a typewriter, or by hand) and submitted to an editor who, usually with a staff of designers, determines the layout. Bloggers, on the other hand, choose their own template and often spend considerable time adjusting the way their blogs look and work. A literary critic will rarely see the binding of a book as being important to its literary quality. A blog, however, cannot be read simply for its writing, but will always be seen as the sum of writing, layout, connections and links, and tempo.

The best way of figuring out what a blog is is simply to look at some examples. I've chosen three blogs for us to look at and analyse: a personal, diary-style blog, a political blog and a blog that combines expertise with a personal twist. After examining these blogs, I'll discuss some definitions of blogs and consider how well they suit our examples. One of the most important reasons for the popularity of blogging is that it is extremely easy to do – so, first of all, let's look at the mechanics

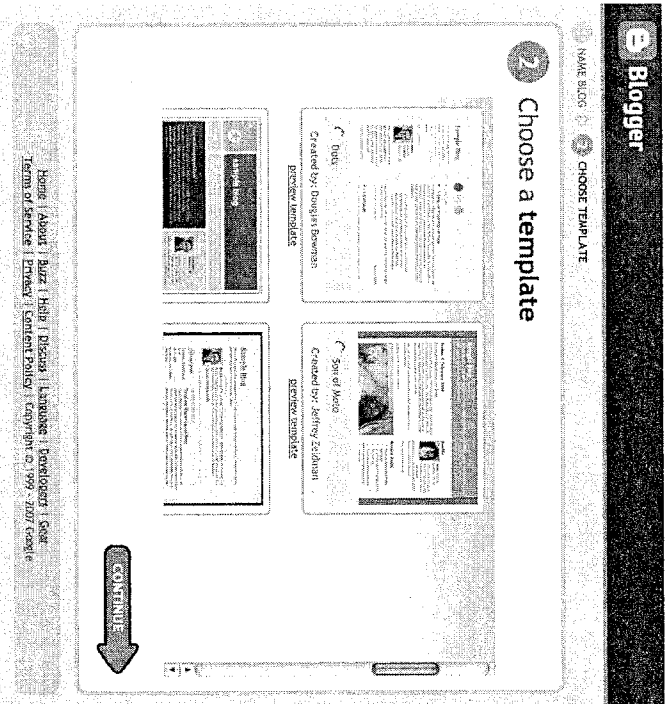


Figure 1: Selecting a template for your new blog at Blogger.com. (Screenshot taken 6 August 2007)

Web browser should 'style' or present pages that are marked up in HTML. So, for instance, a CSS 'rule' might specify that all paragraphs should have the first line indented. That would override the default of most Web browsers, which doesn't indent the first line, but instead inserts an extra line break between paragraphs. There are numerous tutorials explaining how to tweak the HTML and CSS code for blog templates to adjust them as you wish, but there are also many changes that can be made without diving into the code.

Once you've chosen a template you've created your blog, and you simply need to fill it with content. You're presented with a small empty box for the title of the post, and a larger box for the post itself (see figure 2). When you've written as much as you

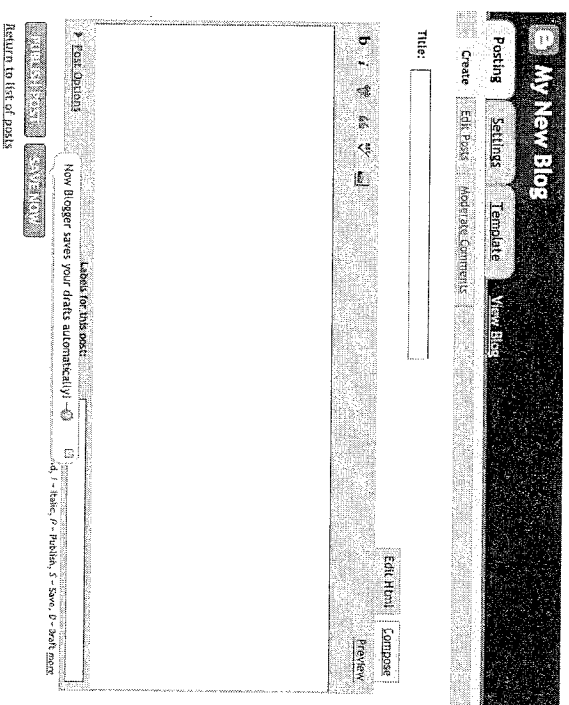


Figure 2: Writing a new post at Blogger.com. The title of the blog is at the very top of the page (in this case, it is 'My New Blog'). You enter the title of the post you are writing in the smaller text box and the main content of the post in the large text box. (Screenshot taken 6 August 2007)

want to write, you simply press the 'Publish Post' button (the publish button has different names on different blogging sites) and your words are uploaded to your blog and published on the Internet.

The templates you can choose from when you create a new blog also show the elements that are expected to be included in a blog. Just as a book is expected to have a cover with its title and the name of the author or editor, a blog usually has a number of standard features. The title of the whole blog is usually displayed at the top of the page, often presented in a graphic banner across the top section. Many blogs have taglines as well – subtitles or brief descriptions of the blog. There'll generally be some information about the blogger in one of the upper

corners, often with a photo. Many blog hosting sites encourage users to create profiles about themselves, with a photo, some biographical information and links to their blogs. The default templates will then pull in information from the blogger's profile to display on their blog, thus automatically generating this 'about' section. The main content of the blog – the posts, each with its own title – will generally be in the wide central column, and there are often side columns with automatically generated links to older blog posts (the archives), to other blogs the blogger enjoys reading (this list of links is known as a *blogroll*) and to comments left by users.

In the last few years, blog software has increasingly incorporated RSS as an additional way of publishing. RSS stands for Really Simple Syndication, and is a version of a Web site encoded in a way that allows computers to easily manipulate the content. For instance, an RSS feed of a blog will use codes like <title> and </title> to mark the beginning and end point of the title of an individual post. The content of the post and the name of the post's author will be similarly encoded, as will the date and time it was published. While blog readers can still visit a blog using their Web browser and read it as a Web page (see, for instance, figures 3, 4 and 5), they can also choose to use an RSS reader to read the RSS feed of a blog. One advantage of this is that you can subscribe to a number of blogs and your RSS reader will automatically alert you when they have new posts. Another advantage of RSS is that RSS feeds can be embedded into other Web pages. So for instance, if I have two blogs, one about my research and one for students in a class I am teaching, I could use the RSS feed from my student blog in my research blog, showing just the titles of the latest posts in my student blog in the sidebar of my research blog.

Blogs aren't the only sites that use RSS. Newspapers, discussion forums and photo sharing sites are just some of the kinds of sites that often provide RSS feeds. I can, for instance, subscribe to an RSS feed of recent activity on my Facebook pro-

file, and embed that in my blog. Or I can use the RSS from my blog and feed it into my Facebook profile. Most blogging software can automatically generate RSS feeds with no need for the user to know anything about the code.

Another term one often comes across in discussions of blogs is Web 2.0. This term was put forward by Tim O'Reilly and associates (O'Reilly 2005). The term is meant to characterize a second generation of Web sites. The first wave of Web developers focused largely on publishing content. Web 2.0, on the other hand, develops services that allow users to share their own content and to use the Web as a platform. Examples of Web 2.0 sites are the Wikipedia, YouTube, Flickr and Facebook. All these are services that become valuable because they are being used. Blogs are also seen as part of Web 2.0.

Three Blogs

An immense range of different blogs can be created using simple blogging software. We'll look at three blogs that represent three main styles of blogging: personal or diary-style blogging, filterblogging and topic-driven blogging.

Personal Blogs: Dooce.com

Dooce is one of the most popular personal blogs. Technorati.com is a site that ranks blogs according to how many other blogs link to them, and *Dooce* has been on Technorati's list of the hundred most popular blogs for several years. 'Dooce' is both the title of the blog and a pseudonym for its author, Heather B. Armstrong. Dooce rose to notoriety as one of the first bloggers to be fired from her job because of things she had written on her blog. In fact, the term 'to be dooced', is listed in UrbanDictionary.com as meaning: 'To be fired from your job because of the contents of your weblog.' These days, Dooce's blog mostly contains droll or satirical stories about life as the mother of a young child, along with photographs, often of her dog or her daughter.

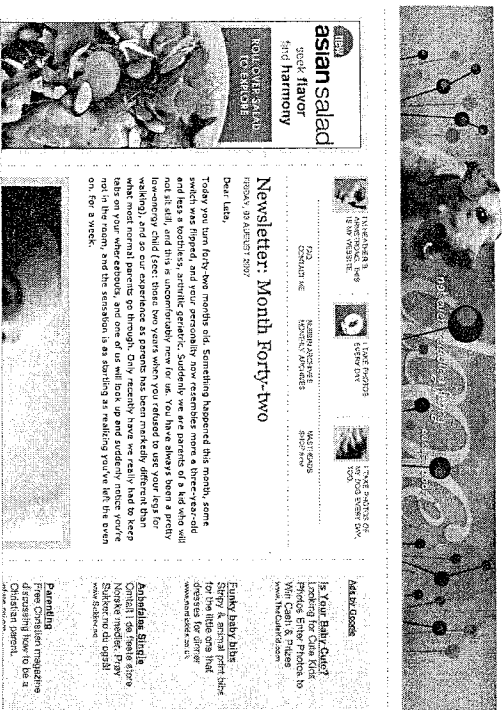


Figure 3: Screenshot of Heather B. Armstrong's blog, Dooce.com (taken 5 August 2007). The most recent post is a letter styled to the blogger's daughter, Leta, on the day she turns forty-two months old.

The basic layout of Dooce.com has remained fairly stable for the last few years, but the colour scheme and banner image across the top of the screen are regularly changed. Dooce is, after all, a designer. As you can see in figure 3, the blog has a large central area for the main content of the site, the posts. There is a simple navigation bar across the top with icons linked to her photos, a link from the small photo of the author to a page with more information about her, and there are ads in narrow columns on the left- and right-hand sides.

Most blogs have a small section in an upper corner that explains who the blogger is or what the blog is about. Sometimes there'll be a photograph of the blogger as well, and often a link to an 'About' page where the blogger explains the purpose and history of the blog, or describes her- or himself. Most blog templates have these features built in, and they will often fetch this information from the blogger's profile or from a form the blogger fills out. Like most blogs, Dooce.com has a

link to an 'About' page, where Dooce explains who she is and some of the history of the blog. Here she writes briefly about being fired:

I started this Web site in February 2001. A year later I was fired from my job for this Web site because I had written stories that included people in my workplace. My advice to you is BE YE NOT SO STUPID. Never write about work on the Internet unless your boss knows and sanctions the fact that YOU ARE WRITING ABOUT WORK ON THE INTERNET.

Yet Dooce seems to have done very well for herself after being fired. Reading the blog entries that led up to her being fired (they're all still online), it's clear that she hated her job as a Web designer in a dot com startup. Today she runs her own Web design business, looks after her daughter, and makes a reasonable income from ads on her very popular blog.

In the first years of blogging, there were no ads. Dooce's blog shows the path towards a commercialization – or, as many bloggers say, the monetization – of blogging. She introduced text ads, like the ones seen in her blog's right-hand column, in 2004, and graphical ads, like the large ad on the left, in 2005. By 2006, Dooce and her husband reported that "The monthly checks [from the advertisers] add up to a "comfortable enough middle class to upper-middle class income" (Salt Lake Tribune, October 14, 2006).

Dooce's primary subject is her life. Her blog is a diary that is open to the public. Of course, Dooce doesn't blog everything that happens to her – this is not a secret diary but a diary deliberately written to be shared. Posts are written with care and wit, and are clearly edited before they are published.

Most bloggers who use their blogs as personal diaries do so less publicly than Dooce. Often diarists belong to Web rings linking diaries together, or they write on social sites like LiveJournal, where they can set up friendlists and share sections of their diaries with specified friends or groups of friends. In these cases, the blog is often only meant as a way

of communicating with close friends. Dooce's posts don't document every aspect of her life, as a private diary might. Instead, they present slices of her life, episodes and anecdotes that give readers a strong feeling of knowing the blogger, but that also keep many secrets. This is the aspect of blogging that Viviane Serfaty refers to as the veil of the screen (Serfaty 2004: 13–14). She argues that online diarists and bloggers use their writing as a mirror that allows them to see themselves more clearly and to construct themselves as subjects in a digital society, but also as a veil that will always conceal much of their lives from their readers. We'll return to the ways bloggers both reveal and hide their lives from their readers in chapter 5.

Filter Blogs: Kottke.org

Unlike diary-style blogs, filter blogs don't log the blogger's offline life but record his or her experiences and finds on the Web. Jorn Barger's *Robot Wisdom* was one of the first examples of a filter blog, being simply a list of links with no commentary. Most weblogs do, however, provide some commentary in addition to simply linking. Today's filter blogs range from the popular *Boing Boing*, which provides news on bizarre Web finds, to *Metafilter*, a group blog where members post links to interesting Web sites, to personal sites like Rebecca Blood's *Rebecca's Pocket* or Jason Kottke's *Kottke.org*. While personal blogs like Dooce focus mostly on the life of the blogger, filter blogs filter the Web from the blogger's own point of view. There are often dominant topics, but these may shift as the blogger's interests change over time.

Jason Kottke is a Web designer who has been blogging since 1998 at the URL kottke.org. His blog is known for its witty commentary and expert opinions on the cultural sides of Web development, design and new technology; and Kottke succeeds in combining his discussion of Web news with a personal tone and the occasional personal story. The screenshot reproduced here (figure 4) shows an excellent example of this. When it was

taken, Kottke and his wife (Meg Hourihan, who coincidentally was a co-founder of Blogger.com) had recently become parents for the first time. Kottke's blogging had therefore dropped to a minimum, but, when he did post, it was to compare his newborn son's reflexes to the motion-sensitivity of two recently released technological toys: the iPhone and the Wii game console's remote. After considering the various advantages and drawbacks of the iPhone and the Wii remote, he concludes that the baby is the winner:

Newborns, however, are born with something called the Moro reflex. When infants feel themselves fall backwards, they startle and throw their arms out to the sides, as illustrated in this video. Even fast asleep they will do this, often waking up in the process. So while the Wii remote's accelerometer may be more sensitive, the psychological pressure exerted on the parent while lowering a sleeping baby slowly and smoothly enough so as not to wake them with the Moro reflex and thereby squandering 40 minutes of walking-the-baby-to-sleep time is beyond intense and so much greater than any stress one might feel serving for the match in tennis or getting that final strike in bowling.

In this cited portion, Kottke links out to information on newborn babies' 'accelerometer'; earlier in the post he has linked to information on the accelerometers built into the iPhone and the Wii remote. He does include a touch of a diary-style story about being a new parent, but its style is very different from Dooce's, woven into a discussion of recent technology.

Kottke's blog layout (see figure 4) shows his enthusiasm for and knowledge about the Web by integrating 'widgets', pieces of code that you can paste into your blog template to automatically display your activity on another site. Like most blogs, *Kottke.org* keeps the main content – the blog posts – in the widest column, and places extras (the title, the description, links and widgets) around the edges. When this screenshot was taken, Kottke had a widget at the top showing his most recent posts to Twitter.com, a site where people can exchange

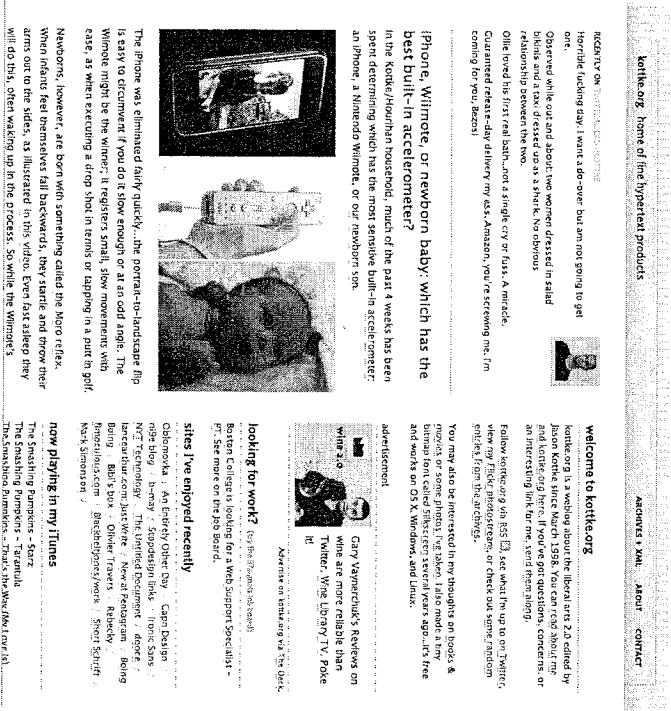


Figure 4: A screenshot of Jason Kotke's blog, kotke.org (taken 2 August 2007).

short, SMS-length messages on the Web on their mobile phones.

Jason Kotke usually does not permit comments on his posts, presumably because of the extremely high number of comments he used to receive, making it very work-intensive to moderate comments and participate in discussions. However, readers have created a Web site of their own called *KotkeKommments*, which sucks in the posts from Kotke.org's RSS feed and republishes them, the main difference being that comments are open on each post. There are no links from Kotke.org to *KotkeKommments*, meaning it is hard for readers to find the site, and not many readers seem to participate in the discussions held there. Kotke does participate in conversations between

blogs by linking to blogs in some of his posts, and he often acknowledges that he has found an interesting link or story in another blog by adding a line at the end of a post, for instance: 'via Matt', where the word Matt is linked to Matt's post at his blog *A Whole Lot of Nothing*. He doesn't have a blogroll, but includes a list of links to 'sites I've enjoyed recently' in the right-hand column of his blog, and there are several blogs among these.

Topic-driven Blogs: Dailykos.com

Jason Kotke and Heather Armstrong blog about issues that interest them. They don't limit their blogging to a pre-defined topic, although their interests are reasonably stable. Kotke is a graphic designer who mainly works with the Web, and so most of his posts are about the Web, design or information architecture. While Armstrong was in the tech industry she wrote about work and living in LA, whereas now her focus is largely on life as a mother of a small child. Despite changes in their lives, their individual voices are constant reminders that these blogs are personal.

Many blogs are not primarily focused on the varying interests of the individual blogger, but are instead focused on topics as diverse as knitting (*Brooklyn Tweed*), personal finances (*Get Rich Slowly*), fashion (*Style Bytes*), digital art and electronic literature (*GrandTextAuto*), politicians' use of the web (*techPresident*), quantum theory (*The Quantum Pontiff*) or personal productivity (*LifeHack*). All these topic-centred blogs share newly discovered ideas and information with their readers, usually providing links to more information. Thus they provide a filter to the vast amounts of news, information and conversations on the Web. While many of these blogs are run by individuals, topic-driven blogs are also often run collaboratively by a group of contributors. Often such blogs prioritize debate, both between posters and between posters and commentators.

There are as many different kinds of topic-driven blogs as there are hobbies, passions and professions. One large group within topic-driven blogs is blogs about politics. According to

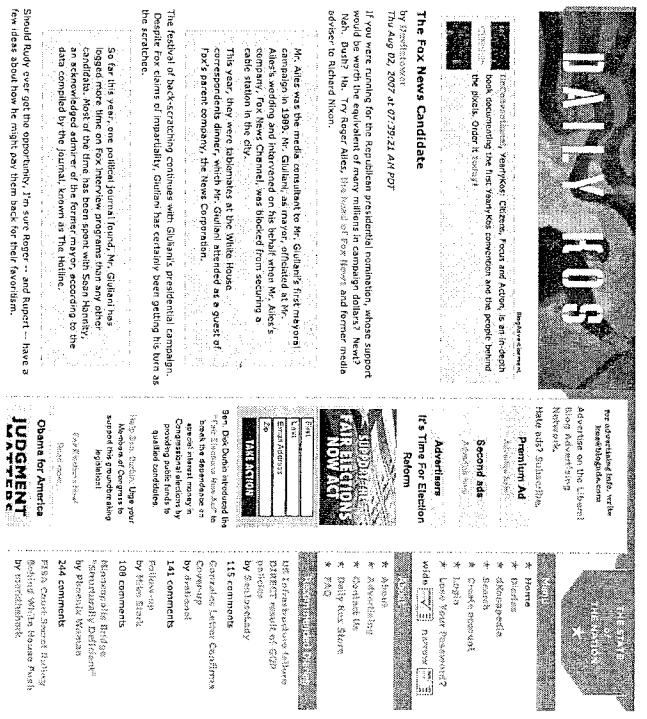


Figure 5: A screenshot of the popular political weblog *Daily Kos* (dailykos.com), which is written by its founder Markos Moulitsas and a number of contributing editors. (Screenshot taken 2 August 2007)

Pew Internet Research's survey of bloggers in July 2006, around 11 per cent of all bloggers write primarily about politics. *Daily Kos*, a liberal blog founded by Markos Moulitsas in 2002, is one of the most popular political blogs. Moulitsas writes many of the posts himself, but also has a number of other contributors. In the screenshot shown in figure 5, the most recent post, which is the only post visible in the screenshot, was written by Mark Sumner, using the pseudonym Devilstower. As you can see from figure 5, *Daily Kos* uses a similar layout to Kottke.org, except for two narrow side columns to the right instead of just one. The first side column contains ads, all political ads that agree with the blog's liberal point of view. There's another ad placed as a banner at the very top of the screen,

above the title and cropped from the screenshot. This leads to a blog called *MotherTalkers*, so, while it's not a political ad like the others, it is an ad for a compatible product. And above the most recent post there's a little ad for a book published by *Daily Kos*. The second side column contains standard blog paratexts: links to other parts of the site, an 'about' section, and recommended posts, or diaries, as they call them on this site. The post shown in the screenshot is titled 'The Fox News Candidate', and begins thus:

If you were running for the Republican presidential nomination, whose support would be worth the equivalent of many millions in campaign dollars? Newt? Nah. Bush? Ha. Try Roger Ailes, the head of Fox News and former media adviser to Richard Nixon.

The post then continues with a couple of fairly extensive quotes and some further discussion. Even without reading the post you can see from its layout that quotations make up most of the text. This is the case in most posts on *Daily Kos* and on other political blogs. Posts tend to take a news article, a press release or another blog post as a starting point, show readers specific sections of the post, and criticize or add to the points made in the quotation. The posts link back to the source, allowing readers to read the entire article if they so wish. This form of blogging is discussion-oriented and can lead to extensive conversations across blogs. It is not at all confined to political blogs, but may be most prolific in these blogs.

Defining Blogs

The word blog is a contraction of the words Web and log. Blogs have developed considerably since the word was first used about a Web site in 1997, but the basic sense of a blog being some kind of log, kept on the Web, remains. The word log is taken from nautical navigation, and originally referred to a chronological record of events during a sea journey.

tracking speed, weather, course and so on. The name originally comes from the practice of measuring speed by throwing a log attached to a rope overboard and counting how many knots in the rope passed through a sailor's hands in thirty seconds. Readings from the log would then be entered into the logbook. Today, other information is also entered into the logbook. Weblogs have retained the chronological organization of the ship's logbook, although their content is less ordered and less systematic than the conventional logbook. The implicit transfer of the navigation metaphor to the Web is fitting, as people in the nineties tended to talk about navigating the Web.

The three examples we've looked at so far, *Dooce*, *Kotke* and *Daily Kos*, have many things in common. Their basic layout is similar, with the page divided into two or three columns, where the largest column is for the main content, the posts, and the narrower columns are kept for links to other blogs, information about the blog or blogger, links within the blog and ads. Two of the blogs are written by individuals and have very subjective, personal writing styles, whereas *Daily Kos* is written by a group of contributors and has a more journalistic style, although posts are clearly opinionated and don't attempt to be neutral or objective.

There are blogs about acrobatics, cars, fashion, fatherhood, finances, gadgets, gardening, happiness, health, knitting, life, mathematics, motherhood, movies, pets, philosophy, photography, poetry, politics, personal productivity, religion, technology, travel, writing, and, of course, blogging. If you're interested in any particular topic, you can probably find a blog – or a dozen blogs – about it. If not, you can easily start your own blog. But what do these very diverse Web sites have in common that allows us to call them all 'blogs'?

Genres may be defined by their form or by their content. Comedies, for instance, are largely defined by their content and theme. M. H. Abrams's *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Abrams 1993) defines a comedy as 'a work in which the

materials are selected and managed primarily in order to interest, involve, and amuse us: the characters and their discomfutures engage our pleasurable attention rather than our profound concern, we are made to feel confident that no great disaster will occur, and usually the action turns out happily for the chief characters'. The sonnet, on the other hand, is an example of a genre that is defined by form alone. Abrams' definition reads thus: 'Sonnet. A lyric poem consisting of a single stanza of fourteen iambic pentameter lines linked by an intricate rhyme scheme.' There is, admittedly, later in the definition a discussion of the kinds of subject a sonnet typically addresses (sexual love was most common prior to John Donne, who introduced religious themes), but it is clear that the main defining quality of a sonnet is that it is constrained formally.

Blogs are far more diverse in their subject matter than either comedies or sonnets. On the other hand, blogs are easy to define formally, and, as we saw from looking at *Dooce*, *Kotke* and *Daily Kos*, blogs share similarities in layout and contain many of the same elements. The most obvious is the basic unit of the post, but there are many others, such as the timestamps, the post titles, the blogroll, the 'about' page and so on. Most definitions of blogs rely primarily on the formal qualities of blogs. The Wikipedia entry for 'blog' begins, as of 28 August 2007, by stating that a blog is 'a Web site where entries are written in chronological order and commonly displayed in reverse chronological order'. This entry was begun on 1 November 2001, and has since been edited by hundreds of Wikipedia users, and thus we might assume that it represents a consensus opinion. The definition of 'weblog' that I wrote for the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* begins in a similar manner, by stating that a weblog is 'a frequently updated Web site consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order so the most recent post appears first' (Walker 2005).

These can be taken as minimal definitions of a blog – however, they are also so broad that they could include many forms of Web site that are not typically called blogs – company

newsletters, for instance, or online newspapers. If we see blogs not as a genre but as a medium, that need not be a problem.

The difference between a medium and a genre has become blurred with the Internet. It's easy enough to say that television is a medium, and that soap operas, talk shows and sitcoms are genres. This differentiation is more difficult – and perhaps less useful – on the Internet. Scholars have suggested that, rather than looking at the Internet as a single medium, it makes more sense to consider different authoring software as providing different media (Ryan 2005). A game made in Flash is thus using a different medium, with different constraints and affordances, from a video edited in iMovie and uploaded to YouTube. In this sense of the word, blogs are a medium, not a genre. Just as an artist chooses to use oil paints rather than watercolour or a director chooses to work with cinema rather than television or theatre, a blogger has chosen to work within the set of constraints and affordances offered by blogging software.

Within the medium of blogs, you might then identify different genres and sub-genres, such as the diary-style blog, the filter blog or the political blog. Each of these carries a set of elective limitations – for instance, the filter blog would probably not include photographs on the blogger's cat, and the personal blog would probably not include frequent links to newspaper articles about politics or allow several posters. Of course, many blogs do cross genres, and as with every genre there are exceptions and crossovers.

Ultimately, whether or not you decide to define blogs as a medium or as a genre depends on your perspective. As Marie-Laure Ryan writes in her discussion of media and narrative for the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, the same thing might be seen as either a genre or a medium: 'Hypertext, for instance, is a genre if we view it as a type of text, but it is a (sub)medium if we regard it as an electronic tool for the organization of text' (Ryan 2005). We could say exactly the same thing of blogs. If we see blogs as a medium, then the formal

definitions are sufficient. These are the material limitations of blogs. An online newspaper or company newsletter may well choose to use blogging software as a medium. However, if we see blogs as a genre, or, as Ryan puts it, as a 'type of text', then our definition should include mention of the typical style and content that lets us at a glance say 'that's not a blog' when we see an online newspaper.

The personal tone that we saw in Kottke's and Dooce's blogs is one of the characteristics often said to define blogs. Evan Williams, who, with Meg Hourihan, co-founded the company that created Blogger.com, names three characteristics that, to him, define blogging: frequency, brevity and personality (Turnball 2001). This triad refers to the familiar though not uncontroversial rules for good writing: clarity, brevity and sincerity, a triad Richard Lanham calls a 'venerable Stoic theory of language' (Lanham 1993, 228). Lanham argues that such rules for good writing belong to a world that revolves around goods and commodities, where words are derivative, simple references to the objects they refer to. In today's information society, on the other hand, 'words *are* the "goods"' (229), and striving to be 'clear, brief and sincere' makes no sense.

Be that as it may, William's alternative, 'frequency, brevity and personality', does describe the gist of blogging. The first two points describe formal qualities: blogs consist of frequent, relatively brief postings. The third is a question of style and context: blogs are personal. They are usually written by individuals, and present an individual's subjective view of – or log of – the Web, their life or a particular topic. Even company blogs tend to be written by an individual or a small group of individuals, as we will see in chapter 6. Blogs are generally written in the first person.

In addition to being a first person form of writing, blogs are social. Most blogs allow and encourage readers to leave comments, and almost all use links to link to sources and to other bloggers discussing similar topics. The social aspect of blogs is

included in this definition of 'weblog' from the Oxford English Dictionary:

A frequently updated Web site consisting of personal observations, excerpts from other sources, etc., typically run by a single person, and usually with hyperlinks to other sites; an online journal or diary.

It's probably not possible to construct a water-tight definition of 'blog' that once and for all enables us to classify any Web site as being either a blog or not a blog, but in most cases people have no trouble making such a distinction. One sure sign that a set of conventions for a genre has been established is the existence of parodies of the genre – and there are already many parodies of blogs. One of the most well known is *The Dullest Blog in the World*, an anonymous blog with very short, very dull entries. The last entry to be posted to the blog, 'Tidying Some Pencils', on 16 March 2006, gives a good impression of the style: 'Some pencils were scattered around on my desk. I picked them up one by one. I placed the pencils in the drawer which I use to store pencils.' Beneath each post are the standard auto-generated list of links to the comments on the post, a permalink (permanent link) to the post, and, of course, the date and time stamp. The most remarkable thing about *The Dullest Blog in the World* is the sheer volume of comments each post attracts. Many posts have hundreds of comments, showing how fascinated people are with this simple parody.

A Brief History of Weblogs

Weblogs are unequivocally a product of the Web, and their history can be said to have begun at the same time as the Web was born. The World Wide Web was invented by Tim Berners-Lee and first implemented at the end of 1990, when Berners-Lee finished building the tools necessary to publish and view the first Web site: a Web server on which to host the Web site, a

Web browser with which to view it, and the site itself. At the time, Berners-Lee was a scientist at CERN, the well-known particle physics lab in Switzerland, and his project was not seen as particularly important. The Internet had already existed for two decades, and was used by scientists, programmers and people interested in new forms of communication. Before the Web, the Internet ran a number of protocols, such as email, UseNet (discussion groups), IRC (a chat system) and Gopher (a way of browsing files on remote servers). Many people simply saw the World Wide Web as yet another protocol. Berners-Lee's prototype had a browser that was entirely text-based, so Web pages couldn't include images or other media as they do today, and the browsers were not available on most computer platforms. It wasn't until 1993 that the Web opened up to the general public with the release of Mosaic, the first widely available graphical Web browser, and also the first Web browser to allow embedded images. Previous browsers had displayed images in separate windows, not in the same window as the text.

While today's blogs are expected to change regularly – indeed, their chief defining feature is that they are frequently updated and that the content does not stay the same – most early Web sites were imagined as stable products. In retrospect, personal home pages can be seen as a precursor to blogs, but they were envisioned as complete presentations of the user's interests, not as something that would change daily. Web sites were, however, often published before their creators imagined them to be complete. 'Under construction' signs were a common sight on Web sites in the 1990s, often accompanied by an icon depicting a worker with a shovel, as on road signs.

By 1994, some pioneers had started online diaries. Justin Hall was one of the first diarists, but if you look at the early pages on his Web site you'll see that his site was very different from today's blogs. His Web site, links.net, is a wonderful example of the shift from building ever-expanding, densely

hypertextual Web sites to developing blogs that are not intended to ever be completed. Hall used the section of his site called Vita to tell the story of his life. Some pages show links organized chronologically from his childhood to the present; others are organized thematically by family, the places he grew up in, places he travelled to, school, and people who meant a lot to him. Once you click a link you find yourself in a labyrinth of interlinked stories that keep leading you through parts of Hall's life, frequently circling back to certain key topics, such as his father's suicide when he was eight, or his fascination with the Web. In 1996, Hall began publishing diary entries (in a section of the site called Daze), but each entry still had the same rambling style as his autobiography. Hall didn't start using blogging software until 2003. Up until then, he hand-coded each entry.

When Justin Hall began publishing regular diary entries at links.net, his site matched today's understanding of what a blog might be. However, at the time, the word weblog didn't exist – or rather, the word existed, but was used for a different purpose. The term weblog was used in the early 1990s to refer to the log of visitors that a person who administers a Web server can see. A weblog showed the number of total hits a site had received, how many unique users had visited, how much data had been transferred and other information about the traffic to the site.

In December 1997, Jorn Barger proposed the term should be used differently (Blood 2000). Barger's new site, *Robot Wisdom*, was (and still is) a frequently updated list of links to other Web sites Barger has visited and wants to recommend, and Barger used the word weblog as part of the title of his site: *Robot Wisdom: A weblog by Jorn Barger*. This, it seems, was the first usage of the word weblog in this sense. *Robot Wisdom* was a very bare list of links, with little or no commentary to each link. This style is similar to the typical style of the more widely read *Scripting News* in the early years. *Scripting News* is the weblog of Dave Winer and was launched in April 1997,

several months before *Robot Wisdom*, and also consisted of links to Web sites the blogger had seen with very minimal commentary. Here are the first few lines of Winer's very first post, with the links underlined:

Tuesday, April 01, 1997

Linkbot, Big Brother,

Barry Frankel says Web Ads are Intrusive and Wesley Felter replies:

Check this out: Amazing!

MacWEEK: Goodbye AppleLink (A tear comes to my eye . . .)

Compare this with a post by Josh Catone at *Read/Write Web* on 7 August 2007. *Read/Write Web* was one of the top ten most popular blogs at the time of this post, according to Technorati.com, and Catone is a blogger who often writes on topics similar to those of Winer.

Online Ad Sales Growing, But Not At 'Premium' Sites

According to an article in the Financial Times today, online ads are expected to outsell those in print newspapers in the US by 2011. A study by Veronis Suhler Stevenson (VSS), FT reports, predicts ad spending online will grow to \$62 billion over the next three years, compared to \$60 billion for newspapers.

The post then continues for more than 500 words, providing several links to articles and Web sites that give different perspectives on the issue – a recent *New York Times* article reporting that premium Web publishers have seen a slowing in ad sales, and an article that compares the drop to the dot com boom and subsequent crash in the late 1990s. Catone also provides original analysis, suggesting that the text ads bloggers often use, provided by Google's AdSense program, might be where the money is in this business. (See chapter 6 for more on advertising in blogs.)

The most obvious difference between Catone's 2007 post and Winer's 1997 post is that Catone's is far more verbose. It uses links to build an argument, providing considerable

context and original ideas. Winer's 1997 posts are much closer to *Robot Wisdom's* simple list of links, logging the Web sites visited in much the same manner as the history menu on your Web browser.

In part, this would seem to be a historical development from weblogs as sparse, minimal lists of links to weblogs as sites where writers pull ideas together from different Web sites and weave links into miniature essays. But in fact, both kinds of blog post have existed in parallel. An early blogger who wrote considerably more essayistic posts than Jorn Barger and Dave Winer is Peter Merholz, who was the first person to shorten the term 'weblog' to 'blog'. Merholz simply noted this in the sidebar to his blog in 1999: 'I've decided to pronounce the word "weblog" as wee- blog. Or "blog" for short' (Blood 2000). Merholz's posts to his blog *PeterMe* have consistently been more essayistic than sparse.

Early bloggers hand-coded their sites, meaning that they had to create their blogs from scratch and edit raw HTML code, or use a visual HTML editor like Dreamweaver, each time they updated the blog. In late 1998 and throughout 1999, several free tools appeared that allowed bloggers to easily publish and update blogs and online diaries using templates and Web-based forms where posts could simply be typed straight in. Open Diary launched in October 1998, offering online diaries free hosting and an easy publishing solution. By January 1999, it hosted 2500 diaries, all of them anonymous. In fact, Open Diary required that users be anonymous:

The Open Diary is a totally anonymous diary community. We don't want to know who you are, and we don't want your readers to know who you are. Therefore, please do not include any information in your diary that would identify you. Such information includes full names, street addresses, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses that include your name in them (like JohnSmith@xyz.com).

We do not allow any such information on this site, and if you enter it, it will be deleted. [...] Remember, there is a potential

audience of 100 million people on the Internet who could read your diary, we would prefer (and we think you would also) if they didn't know who you are. (opendairy.com, 'The Rules', accessed at thearchive.org's archive for 25 January 1999)

Early weblogs differed from many online diaries in that they were generally written by people who used their full name, and, of course, in that they primarily consisted of comments on other Web sites and not of diary-like discussions of the writer's own life.

1999 also saw the launch of Pitas, the first free weblogging tool, followed by the release of Blogger in August of the same year. In her early essay on weblogs, Rebecca Blood argued that the actual posting interface of Blogger may have influenced the way weblogs developed in this period, from being sparse lists of links, like Barger and Winer's early posts, to being more essayistic, including thoughts on issues not directly related to a specific Web site, and links to other blogs that led to conversations between blogs (Blood 2000). When you posted to your Blogger blog in 1999, the interface looked quite similar to the 2007 interface shown in figure 2, with a small box for you to type the post's title, and a larger box for you to type whatever you like. Other blogging systems, like that at the still popular community blog *Metafilter*, had and still have a more rigid system. At *Metafilter*, you fill out several boxes, each clearly labelled with instructions to the writer:

- Post Title. Keep it short and descriptive.
- Link URL. Web address of the site you're posting about.
- Link Text. These will be the first words of your post, and will be a clickable link to the Web address you entered above.
- Description. The body of your post. Feel free to add links within your description, keep it one paragraph long if possible, line breaks will be stripped.

This leads to a very specific form of post that is quite similar to the early style of Winer and Barger. For instance, in August 2007, one could read posts such as the following:

The Icelandic coastline. A gallery of photos of the rugged, cold, and beautiful coast of Iceland.

posted by [Gambler](#) at 5:40 AM – 18 comments

[Time lapse animations of planets and satellites](#). See what an amateur digital astrophotographer could do a decade ago. This is what the animated gif was designed to do.

posted by [dlkg](#) at 6:43 AM – 20 comments

[Statetris is Tetris with European countries or American states as blocks](#).

posted by [goodnewsfortheinsane](#) at 8:53 PM – 27 comments

As you can see, the posts match the constraints set up by the four boxes of *Metafilter's* posting interface. There are exceptions, as it is possible to compose a post without using the initial link, but *Metafilter* is heavily dominated by brief, sparse posts linking to one or more interesting or unusual Web sites. The comments, however, can develop into lengthy debates, often involving scores and sometimes hundreds of participants.

By the year 2000, Rebecca Blood wrote that the transition from the sparse lists of links, or filter-style weblogs, as she calls them, to the more essayistic form of blogging had largely taken place. She credits the free-form interface of blogging sites like Blogger with this shift:

It is this free-form interface combined with absolute ease of use which has, in my opinion, done more to impel the shift from the filter-style weblog to journal-style blog than any other factor. And there has been a shift. Searching for a filter-style weblog by clicking through the thousands of weblogs listed at [weblogs.com](#), the [EatonWeb Portal](#), or [Blogger Directory](#) can be a Sisyphean task. (Blood 2000)

Another factor in the shift is likely to be the merging of genres. Early Web diaries such as that of Justin Hall have little in common with the early weblogs of Jorn Barger or Dave Winer, or with the *Metafilter* of today. Carolyn Burke, who started her

online diary in January 1995, wrote at The Online Diary History Project, 'I wanted everyone in the world to expose their inner lives to everyone else. Complete open honest people. What a great and ideal world would result' (Burke, not dated). There was certainly a heavy dose of utopianism and optimism going around. Blogger's slogan in 2000, 'Push-button publishing for the people', takes another tack on the matter – not shared intimacy, but opening up publishing to regular people.

Once blogging systems like Blogger.com and others were established, blogging took off. By 2002, the *Oxford English Dictionary* was asking Peter Metholz for a print source for the word 'blog', so they could include it in their dictionary ([peterre.com](#), 14 June 2002).

The blog search engine Technorati.com launched in 2003. The number of blogs it tracked grew rapidly, from a little over 100,000 in late 2003 to three million by July 2004. At this point, the total number of blogs was doubling every few months. That year, the Merriam-Webster declared 'blog' to be the word of the year; reporting that 'blog' was the most searched-for word on their online dictionary that year. By then, the media were writing about blogs regularly and almost everybody seemed to have heard about them. But in a survey late that year, 62 per cent of Internet users still said they didn't know what a blog was (Rainie 2005). No wonder they were trying to look the word up in a dictionary.

It's impossible to know exactly how many blogs there are. One problem is the number of inactive blogs. Many people will try to create a blog to see how it works, but then abandon the blog after a single post, or maybe after a week or two. The reverse problem occurs with spam blogs, blogs created by marketers and spammers that are simply foils for search engines, full of garbled, machine-generated posts that link to Web sites that the spammers want search engines to see as popular. Another reason why it's hard to track blogs accurately is that the Internet is distributed and there is no central counting house for blogs.

By 2007, the pace of growth had slowed somewhat, but was still steady. Technorati tracked over 70 million weblogs in April 2007 (Sifry 2007).

Rebecca Blood wrote in 2000:

The promise of the Web was that everyone could publish, that a thousand voices could flourish, communicate, connect. The truth was that only those people who knew how to code a Web page could make their voices heard. Blogger, Pitas, and all the rest have given people with little or no knowledge of HTML the ability to publish on the Web: to pontificate, remember, dream, and argue in public, as easily as they send an instant message. (Blood 2000)

To judge by the success of blogging in the last few years, it seems that the 'push-button publishing' Blogger.com offered in October 2000 was exactly what the people wanted.

CHAPTER TWO From Bards to Blogs

Blogs are part of a fundamental shift in how we communicate. Just a few decades ago, our media culture was dominated by a small number of media producers who distributed their publications and broadcasts to large, relatively passive audiences. Today, newspapers and television stations have to adapt to a new reality, where ordinary people create media and share their creations online. We have moved from a culture dominated by mass media, using one-to-many communication, to one where participatory media, using many-to-many communication, is becoming the norm.

Blogs tend to be understood in terms of their differences in comparison to the mass media that dominated the twentieth century. This is especially true in the media's presentation of blogs, which repeatedly attempts to understand blogs as a (possibly flawed) form of journalism. Journalism is a profession with conventions that have evolved alongside the technology of mass publication and mass broadcasting and that are contingent both on this technology and on the commercial aspects of selling newspapers and broadcast media to both consumers and to advertisers. We'll return to the question of blogs and journalism in chapter 4.

If we step back a little further, and look at the larger picture of communication and publication through the ages, blogs make more sense than if we see them strictly from the point of view of mass media. Rather than simply being a form born in opposition to mass media, blogs have aspects in common with many other forms of communication during the last centuries.