

The new amateurs

An essay by James Russell

August 27-September 3, 2003

Tathagata Buddha, the father Buddha, said: “With our thoughts we create the world.” At least that’s what it always said in the opening sequence of the Japanese TV series *Monkey*. I don’t know whether or not Tathagata Buddha ever said such a thing, but there is a certain truth to it; maybe our thoughts don’t create *the* world, but I think they can create *a* world. Which leads to the vexed question of just what sort of worlds are people’s thoughts creating, especially the worlds conjured up by people who maintain weblogs—”bloggers” for short.

The Evatt Foundation has recently published two lengthy considerations of the nature of blogging and its relationship to civic life, Tim Dunlop’s “If you build it they will come”¹ and Ken Parish’s “Monitorial cyber-citizens?”² Each of these takes a somewhat different approach to the weblog phenomenon to the other, so let’s begin by looking at the two of them.

Dunlop begins with a good description of what a blogger, and blogging, actually is, which I’ll take the liberty of quoting here to save having to produce my own definition:

A blogger is somebody who writes a weblog. A weblog is a website where a person logs, often on a daily basis, his or her thoughts on a range of topics. The beauty of such sites is that the software is pretty simple to use and it is freely available from providers like Blogger.com. Once you sign up with such a company, you can easily add entries via your home or work or local library computer. In one form or another they have been around for a number of years now, but it is in the last year especially that the practice has really taken off.

Once you have your site, it is available for all and sundry to see and, if you wish, you can set it up so that readers can leave comments about individual posts. There are now a large number of reasonably well-established weblogs that attract anywhere up to several hundred thousand readers a week each, and though this is small potatoes compared to mainstream networks and traditional media it does represent something of a phenomenon.

To some people, weblogs (blogs, as the word is almost universally abbreviated to) are a geek hula-hoop, a fad that will pass once the novelty wears off; a bit of fun, but not something to get too excited about. To others they represent a rebirth of participatory democracy, a new form of journalism, and even the home of the new public intellectuals.

That last paragraph indicates the fairly optimistic and upbeat approach the Dunlop essay takes towards blogging, or at least towards political blogging, which is the particular blog model Dunlop focuses on (and with good reason, since the sheer volume of political blogs out there often makes it seem that politics is what blogging *as such* is about, as if the act of starting a blog necessarily means it will have a political theme). There are, according to Dunlop, two key characteristics of political blogs:

¹ Tim Dunlop, “If you build it they will come : blogging and the new citizenship”, <http://evatt.labor.net.au/publications/papers/91.html>.

² Ken Parish, “Monitorial cyber-citizens? : the new fire alarms”, <http://evatt.labor.net.au/publications/papers/100.html>.

1. *The fact-checking facility*—blogs have what he calls a “sycophantic” relation to mainstream media, in that bloggers require the efforts of major news outlets to provide them with material, but in turn they often critique that material and those efforts, and will usually make a noise about especially egregious errors of fact and so forth.
2. *Declared political allegiances*—bloggers rarely make any show of journalistic objectivity, which consequently leads to a form of political engagement.

This all feeds into the main thesis of Dunlop’s essay, namely the idea of bloggers as the new public intellectuals. He cites conservative thinker Christopher Lasch’s theory that public argument these days no longer satisfies the needs of democracy because said public argument has become dominated by elites with easier media access than Joe Public, hence Joe Public becomes frozen out of such discussions. Blogging, on the other hand, gives Joe Public their voice back, and also restores their position as a participant. You don’t even have to be an expert in your field to take part; blogging encourages the input of the lay individual.

Ken Parish is less convinced about this lofty ideal, and uses this statement from John Zaller to get going:

The ideal of the informed citizen, as brandished by generations of political intellectuals intent on creating a style of politics they themselves find congenial, has been a positive-turnoff to vast numbers of citizens. It has led to forms of politics and political communication that are stilted, overly rationalistic, and just plain dull. Under the spur of market competition, workaday journalists have developed a variety of literary devices - horserace journalism, feeding frenzies, and soft news - that enliven coverage of public affairs. Rather than condemn this ‘infotainment’ journalism, as political intellectuals almost universally do, they should recognize and seek to exploit its potential for increasing citizen involvement in politics.³

Consequently, the most popular blogs aren’t the ones that aim for the higher levels of political discourse, but the ones that take a more “tabloid” approach. Parish cites American über-blogger Glenn Reynolds⁴ and Australian über-blogger Tim Blair⁵ as examples of this tendency. Dunlop says something similar in his piece:

Bloggging does not (and should not) try and emulate the sophistication of, say, an academic presentation or paper. It shouldn’t even try and emulate the precision of a news report, though paradoxically, as I’ve said, one its best functions is to fact-check such news reports. The attraction and strength of bloggging is that it is informal, first draftish, and more than a little breathless.

For Parish, the “relative lack of intellectual pretension” on display in the blogosphere is something to be praised, for similar reasons to those described by Dunlop. There is an egalitarian aspect to it that means that, while there is respect for such expertise as other bloggers may have in their field, it’s not an exaggerated respect; there’s no undue deference beyond what the individual actually deserves. In the end, then, while Parish is less convinced by the idea that bloggging leads to engagement in Dunlop’s sense (agreeing with Zaller’s idea that an informed citizenry may not actually be such a good thing), he’s still optimistic about its prospects for creating a *monitorial*

³ John Zaller, “Perversities in the ideal of the informed citizenry”, http://www.mtsu.edu/~seig/paper_j_zaller.html.

⁴ Instapundit, <http://www.instapundit.com/>.

⁵ Tim Blair, <http://timblair.spleenville.com/>.

citizenry, like an electronic equivalent of the talkback radio shock-jock, only covering the whole political spectrum as opposed to the rightward end of it which talkback radio generally gravitates to.

In the interests of muddying the waters a little, I want here to posit my own alternative model for blogging to these two. Before doing so, though, a little history and autobiography might not go astray.

There are a couple of key things to remember about the blogging phenomenon. One, the politically-based blogs are a relatively recent occurrence, Two, blogging itself is not. Australian blogger Graham Freeman, who's been in the game since 1999, recently posted⁶ a history of weblogging in which he claims the idea of the weblog ("the format of posting regular updates on a topic to a particular site") predates the World Wide Web itself. Tim Berners-Lee's "What's New" site⁷ was an example of what Freeman calls the "second-generation weblog", which in turn gave way to the journal website

as best typified by Justin Hall's Links from the Underground⁸, established in 1995. Though Justin had the weblogger's requisite flatulent ego, he wasn't quite as introspective as some. Generally, his format was "this is what happened to me today, here are some cool links I found".

It was the logical third step in the development of the weblog, and the majority of weblogs still follow the linklog-journal hybrid to some degree.

Seemingly all that remained was for the actual term "weblog" to be coined, and so it was in 1997.

The next step was the introduction of content management software to make the production of weblogs simpler. Enter, eventually, Pyra Labs with their Blogger product, which had the crucial benefit of not costing anything (unless one wanted to pay for the "pro" version); later, Pyra introduced Blogspot, thereby giving users free webspace for their blog if they didn't have their own domain. How could people resist? Short answer: they didn't. Then, of course, nineteen Middle Eastern terrorists boarded some aeroplanes and flew two of them into the World Trade Centre in New York. The monstrous flood of new, mainly politically-themed weblogs that ensued in the wake of that event has yet to run dry.

Now I first discovered that such a thing as a weblog existed sometime around 1999, which was also approximately the time I discovered such a thing as online journals existed. (Indeed, the first weblog I can remember discovering was maintained by someone who also maintained a journal separately.) I'd established my first website around the middle of August 1998, at which time it was primarily a repository for various stories and essays I'd written (there was also a page of bad teenage poetry, but let's not go there). An extensive but otherwise bog-standard homepage.

Through the next year or so I continued to discover more online journals, and finally decided to take the plunge myself. I'd kept a paper journal since about 1990, and was intrigued by the very idea of putting it online; after all, didn't that kind of defeat the idea of one's journal being a place for one's private thoughts and all of that? Still, I went ahead with it. For reasons I don't propose to go into, the online journalling experiment eventually proved disastrous, and I quit the journal around

⁶ Graham Freeman, http://grudnuk.com/vm/arch/2003_08_25.html.

⁷ Tim Berners-Lee, <http://archive.ncsa.uiuc.edu/SDG/Software/Mosaic/Docs/old-whats-new/whats-new-0693.html>.

⁸ Justin Hall, <http://www.links.net/>.

May 2001. Since then all my journalling as such has been done offline to avoid those sorts of problems recurring.

In the meantime, I was still frequenting a website called Three Way Action⁹, which is kind of a message-board/hub set-up primarily for online journal writers and readers and interested hangers-on. And one day in early 2002, someone started a thread on alternative news and opinion sources, what Internet sources could people go to if they were over the usual TV news outlets. I can't find the thread any more, as it was wiped in one of the hard drive purges the site operators periodically have to engage in to reclaim server space. Suffice to say that someone there recommended the previously-mentioned Instapundit, and that for some reason, of all the suggestions made by the various posters, that was the one I took a random punt on.

I won't say it blew the world of blogging wide open for me—as I said earlier, I'd already encountered weblogs as things distinct from journals—but I did discover now just how many people were out there using weblogs as more of a political commentary thing. A quick scoot through just a few of the blogs linked on Instapundit and a few more blogs linked from those blogs revealed how widespread that sort of blogging was. Hell, there were even people down here at the arse end of the world™ doing it.

Hence I decided that, my ultimately unpleasant experience of journalling aside, I wanted a piece of that action. (I have always been a firm believer in the principle that other people have the right to read my opinions. No reason why, when they can read so many other people's half-baked ideas, they shouldn't also have the option of reading mine.) And so None More Black was born on February 9, 2002, as an appendage of my website with the essays and stuff; the idea was that I'd have the blog as an outlet for interesting news items found on the Net and the rest of the site still being the repository for the bigger, more "important" writing.

The problem was that, over time, I became a lot more interested in the blog than I did the rest of the site, and the net result was that I eventually put the site to sleep to focus entirely on the blog. I was growing tired of my old essays and stories, and wasn't writing any new stuff to keep the site going. (I also wound up renaming the blog Hot Buttered Death¹⁰ after I went out for a walk one day and the words "hot buttered death" popped unbidden into my mind. I still don't know why, but I knew I had to use them somehow, so I changed the name of the blog accordingly. That may be more information than you really need, though it may also give you some insight into the sort of person writing this. I suggest being afraid.)

I came too late for the September 11 attacks and the war in Afghanistan, but I did arrive on the scene in time for conspiracy theories about it. I was also here in time for the Bali bombing, the threat of nuclear strikes between India and Pakistan, various huffs and puffs from North Korea, and the long-promised war on Iraq. I was also here for the various adventures of the Washington sniper, John Walker Lindh, David Hicks, Steve Earle, Peter Hollingworth, the people of the town of Inglis, Michael Kirby vs Bill Heffernan, Kim Beazley vs Simon Crean, Pim Fortuyn, William Pierce, David Kelly, Pete Townsend and Robert del Naja, Roman Polanski at the Oscars, plus the 2002 Winter Olympics and Commonwealth Games, the "Axis of Evil", John Ashcroft's singing career, Richard Nixon ranting about gay left-wing drug freaks, George Piggins vs everyone else on the South Sydney rugby league team board, the death and resurrection of Oprah's Book Club, *Baise-moi*, *Ken Park*, mass hatred of

⁹ Three Way Action, <http://www.threewayaction.com/>.

¹⁰ Hot Buttered Death, <http://hotbuttereddeath.ubersportingpundit.com/>.

the French and the Dixie Chicks and practically anyone else with the temerity to suggest declaring war on Iraq might not be the best move, Rene Rivkin and Pauline Hanson going to jail, various reports of Catholic priests (including our own Archbishop George Pell) sexually abusing children and often getting away with it, a number of new reality TV shows, ethnic gang violence in Sydney, assorted opinion columns by Piers Akerman, SARS, “vampires” in Malawi, bushfires in Sydney and Canberra, MuslimTerrorists.com, the space shuttle, Arab world boycotts of Western products, God knows how many atrocities between Israel and Palestine, and numerous incomprehensible Japanese Flash animations. Among other things. (Not to mention uncountable Blogger outages when I was unable to blog about these things.)

It’s been an interesting 18 months, all right.

In between world events, of course, I’ve had plenty of opportunities to witness the efforts of other bloggers everywhere. It hasn’t always been the most edifying of spectacles, as witness Ken Parish’s description in his essay of the stoush between Tim Blair and Tim Dunlop. I still stand by the quote from my own blog he cites, for bloggers (and their readers) do seem to have a gift for getting into fights with each other, usually along political lines. (If I have learned anything from blogging, it is that the mutual loathing between more or less doctrinaire liberals and conservatives is far deeper than I’d ever suspected before I discovered political blogging.) I don’t know how many times some blogger or other has gone and posted something spectacularly moronic and all I could do was just sigh at the idiocy of it all. Collectively speaking, the blogosphere often appears to be in a pretty bad mood about something or other. I don’t exclude myself from this sort of behaviour either; a fair amount of my own blogging arises from irritation at something or other which thereby motivates me to post about it.

If you do get into blogging at all, you will probably often encounter a number of such events that will make you wonder why on earth you started if that’s the quality of discourse it generates. Fortunately, you will almost certainly also find things to lift your spirits, make you laugh and generally make you glad that you did get in on the act. It’s usually enough to outweigh the bad stuff. You will probably also encounter a certain amount of discussion about the nature of blogging, for the blogosphere is nothing if not self-absorbed and likes to talk about itself as much as anything else. Of particular interest to the blogosphere is its relationship with mainstream media. The ABC’s *7.30 Report* did a segment¹¹ on blogging back in April which opened thusly:

The deluge of information, sound and pictures from the war has many people reeling, some turning away in horror. But for others around the world, there is never enough. Not content with switching between cable and free-to-air TV, radio broadcasts and newspaper websites, the webloggers are constantly updating themselves and each other on the very latest. Some claim the bloggers, as they are known, will one day supersede the mainstream media. Others see them as quirky parasites.

I am much less convinced than some others evidently are about that claim of blogging superseding “old media”, particularly while blogging retains that basically parasitical relationship that it does to the latter. Even were it not inherently parasitical, though, I’m not sure that blogging would still provide anything more than just an alternative to the mainstream. The most obvious journalistic model that blogging follows is, of

¹¹ Transcript of “Weblogging the world”, *7.30 Report*, <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2003/s822028.htm>.

course, the newspaper opinion column¹², and this, perhaps, is the real alternative that blogging provides; instead of the usual suspects in the pages of the *Sydney Morning Herald* or *The Australian*, online readers can turn to bloggers for a different take on the day's news, perhaps with more information or a deeper analysis of a situation.

But my own time spent within the world of blogging, and my observations of same, lead me to suspect that this positing of blogging as “new media” versus newspapers and TV and radio as “old media” is slightly misleading, and that in some respects blogging actually follows in the footsteps of a tradition dating back to the 1850s, and quite possibly even earlier than that. This, then, would be the appropriate juncture at which to introduce that alternative blogging model I mentioned some time back; before I do so, though, let me introduce you to a favourite author of mine...

Assuming people recognize the name H.P. Lovecraft at all, they almost always recognize him as a horror author. Some may indeed have read his work and class him as one of the most significant horror/science-fiction authors of the 20th century. Those who take a more academic interest in Lovecraft—who continues to provide a small but ongoing critical cottage industry with material—might add that while he is not famous for his amateur journalism, he is almost certainly the most famous person to be associated with it, and it is equally certain that with Lovecraft the amateur journalist, the world would probably never have had Lovecraft the master of horror.

What is amateur journalism? Here's a brief introduction from the American Amateur Press Association¹³ website:

It is publishing a little journal containing your own ideas and thoughts on a variety of subjects and having it distributed to fellow “ajays.” It is composing your own essay, poem, or short story and seeing it published in another member's paper. It is producing a paper from copy provided by others, just because you love to publish.

The end product is the amateur journal, a little magazine which might take any form. It could range from a tiny, whimsical “thumbnail” in size to a deluxe, deckle-edged heavyweight.

There is no price tag on anything, for we interpret “amateur” to mean untainted by the commercial dollar (although we have some professional journalists and printers who enjoy taking part in the AAPA on a no-deadlines hobby basis). We write and publish to please ourselves and each other.

In short, amateur journalism is pretty much what the name suggests, an organized outlet for interested amateurs to produce their own journals. APAs (amateur press associations or alliances) work on the basis of members producing their journal, printing sufficient copies for each member of the APA, mailing all of those copies to a person designated as the Mailer, who then bundles all the submitted journals together and mails a copy of each journal to each member in a collection usually known as—oddly enough—the bundle. There are a number of APAs in existence around the world¹⁴, quite a number of them originating within the world of science-fiction and

¹² As an aside, consider the format that's been adopted in recent months by the columns page of the *Daily Telegraph*: the body of the page contains the main column, but there's usually a sidebar now for the columnist to provide a few lines of brief discussion of other subjects. It's not entirely unlike some blogs that divide themselves between long and short posts and usually segregate the latter to a sidebar. Most intriguingly, the *Telegraph* sidebar usually includes a paragraph or so of feedback from a reader.

¹³ American Amateur Press Association, <http://members.aol.com/aapa96/>.

¹⁴ Cf. the National Amateur Press Association (<http://www.amateurpress.org/>) founded in 1876, the United Amateur Press Association (<http://uapaa.jarday.com/otherlinks.html>) founded in 1895, and the Australian/NZ version, ANZAPA (<http://www.rightword.com.au/anzapa/>), founded in 1968.

fantasy fandom (I myself was once asked to join one of the latter, as it happens). Lovecraft himself has inspired at least two APAs (the Esoteric Order of Dagon and Necronomicon) revolving around him and his work.

There are, of course, differences between amateur journalism and blogging, with one particularly major distinction being that the former is something of a closed shop (i.e. your publication is usually only seen by other members of the APA) whereas the latter is not (i.e. potentially thousands of people around the world can read your blog). Not to mention the fact that the amateur journalism movement tends to potter away some distance in the background without receiving much notice from the world at large, while blogs and bloggers have a somewhat greater media presence¹⁵. There's something strangely old-world about amateur journalism, whereas blogging has an inevitable aura of hip modernity to it. Nonetheless, I would argue that, despite these differences, amateur journalism is still the journalistic model from which blogging springs, that instead of being an example of "new media" as opposed to "old media", rather it is more like a modern update of a fairly old form—and that its sphere of influence is destined to be much the same in the end.

Much as amateur journalism exists alongside professional journalism as an alternative outlet for writers to publish their writing, so too does blogging exist—at least in my opinion—as an amateur alternative to "old media". The use of the word amateur, of course, is not intended to cast aspersions on the professional qualifications of those who take part in the activity (Lovecraft remained an amateur journalist all his life even when he had a professional outlet in pulp magazines such as *Weird Tales*, while Australia's afore-mentioned über-blogger Tim Blair not only maintains a blog, he also maintains a career as a columnist for publications such as *The Australian* and *The Bulletin*; the ranks of blogging contain other figures who certainly should be getting paid for the things they write¹⁶), merely as a description of its nature. And I doubt that either can ever exist as anything more than an alternative. They may be considered superior by their practitioners and their fans, but there is probably no way that they will overtake their bigger professional counterparts. Lovecraft had a tendency to bluster on about the role of amateur journalism in elevating literary standards and taste. It wasn't going to happen. Bloggers often like to see themselves as somehow displacing "old media" and generally changing the world. That's not going to happen either; in and of itself, I don't see blogging having a particularly great influence on the world at large. (Unless, of course, it eventually does, whereupon these comments shall look very foolish indeed.)

There is, of course, one superficial yet major way in which blogging and amateur journalism really display their connectedness: controversy. Lovecraft was not above participating in controversies, nor indeed starting some. The *Miscellaneous Writings*¹⁷ collection gathers a number of short essays written by Lovecraft for the various amateur publications he was involved in, some of which demonstrate the attacks he was capable of sinking to. Beyond that, though, there were some considerable rifts within the movement itself; the United Amateur Press Association had undergone a fairly traumatic split in 1912, resulting in the formation of a splinter organization with the same name. Lovecraft wrote in a 1927 essay called "A Matter of Uniteds"¹⁸:

¹⁵ Cf. the Guardian's weblog guide, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/weblog/0,6798,517233,00.html>.

¹⁶ Cf. this essay by Michael Jennings on "Hollywood's lousy summer", <http://www.samizdata.net/blog/archives/004252.html>.

¹⁷ H.P. Lovecraft, *Miscellaneous writings*, Arkham House, 1995.

¹⁸ H.P. Lovecraft, "A matter of Uniteds", in *Miscellaneous writings*, p.463-466.

Now although I did not join amateurdom until two years after these events, they were still recent enough in my time to make it very plain to me that both sides were equally sincere in their conflicting positions. [...] At no time have I been disposed to brand the other branch as illegal or unjustified, or to do other than regret that continuance of ill-feeling on both sides which makes recombination impossible. Opinionated “die-hards” in either faction are really playing with amusing unconsciousness into the hands of the National when they perpetuate this United division...

I am reminded of some of the sighs I’ve let out myself at times when I’ve witnessed some blogger or other on my side of the political chasm do or say something particularly stupid, thereby providing the folks on the other side of the great divide with ammunition. As for the National, the United’s older rival, Lovecraft had joined that in 1917 (three years after signing on with the United) and stayed with them for the rest of his days, long after he had given up on the United. By the end, though, he was finding that organization wasn’t behaving much better than the United; cf. his 1936 essay “Some Current Motives and Practices”¹⁹:

It is again appropriate, as on many past occasions, to ask whether the primary function of amateur journalism is to develop its members in the art of expression or to provide an outlet for crude egotism and quasi-juvenile spite. [...]

The sabotage, non-co-operation, legalistic harrying, published abuse, partly circulated attacks, and kindred phenomena which have lately cheapened the association and hampered its work are of an all too evident nature. Surface inspection and close analysis alike reveal only one motive behind them—the primitive and puerile desire of one individual or another, under the influence of childish caprice or ruffled self-esteem, to inflict pain or humiliation or general harm upon some other individual.

Which is not an altogether bad description of the sort of behaviour many bloggers engage in, except that more often their venom seems to be directed in general at the side of politics opposite their own than against a particular individual (though individual targets often have their place as well). Again, I don’t exclude myself from this sort of thing either. I’ve been known to do it too, and I’m not proud of myself for it.

I am, as I’ve said, sceptical about the ability of blogs to wield much public power and influence. Let’s face it—even the biggest blogs simply don’t attract the audiences that mainstream media can pull. Certainly I have no illusions about myself there; I probably have about a thousandth the circulation of the Daily Telegraph just in Sydney, and compared to the international readership of a paper like the Guardian or the New York Times, mine is utterly negligible. Thing is, even blogs that are a lot bigger than mine and attract daily readerships in the four digits (as opposed to the hundred or so hits my blog gets on an average day) probably don’t really have that much clout either. To be sure, bloggers may have some sway over their regular readers, but that readership is almost certainly small compared to that of mainstream media outlets—and, consequently, while that’s the case then the latter will have the firmer grip on the larger section of public opinion, and the greater power to attract and influence same.

Still, if bloggers don’t have much power over public opinion, they nonetheless present a public face of some sort or another. It doesn’t matter what the size of the audience is, that face is still a public one. If, to return to Tathagata Buddha for a moment, with our thoughts we create a/the world, then with our words on the Internet

¹⁹ H.P. Lovecraft, “Some current motives and practices”, in *Miscellaneous writings*, p.481-486.

we project a persona. Which, needless to say, may not entirely correspond with the persona we project in the flesh—which in turn begs the question of how people are supposed to be able to tell what’s what. Without going into too many details, let’s just say that the few bloggers I’ve met in the flesh have not always been what I was expecting, based upon my reading of their blogs, and that in the flesh we were able to comport ourselves with much more civility than we sometimes do online. I’ve been pondering the matter of blogger personas ever since as a result.

I’ve come to the conclusion, therefore, that there is a certain element of performance to blogging, with your humble online scribe adopting a tone or style that may not be entirely “them”. There are two things I have not yet determined in relation to this, one being the exact degree of performance any given blogger puts into their work, and the extent to which the act of a reader’s commenting on a blog also involves performance. Here’s what Ken Parish says in his essay on this subject:

Comment boxes create an anarchic, almost uncontrollable element in blogging which I personally find quite rewarding. Some bloggers are much less enamoured of the innovation, however, and continue to resist implementing it. Certainly the comment box provides a ready avenue for the posting of aggressive abuse by readers inclined in that direction, a cyberspace phenomenon known as ‘flaming’ which can sometimes make the blogging experience decidedly unpleasant.

A particularly noxious example of this, of course, is the aforementioned stoush between Tim Blair and Tim Dunlop. Matt, proprietor of the blog *A Bright Cold Day In April*, inadvertently kicked off this battle and has written about it at length at his blog²⁰. It was this incident as much as anything that left me wondering about the differences between private and public blogging personas, and the power of the latter to attract a certain type of reader. If the level of viciousness and venom displayed at times by some bloggers can be eye-popping, the behaviour of some of their readers and commenters can be more so. The evident xenophobia and racism of some of the commenters at *Little Green Footballs*²¹ makes for an admittedly extreme example, but it’s not an isolated phenomenon, nor is it necessarily limited to one side of the political spectrum. Australian blogger Gareth Parker²² says:

My blog (and others like it) seem to attract weirdos of all stripes who are unwilling/incapable of engaging in the issues. I don’t claim to be perfect in this regard myself, but I do try.
It’s best to ignore the whackos and soldier on, I find.

If only the whackos were always easily ignored... I said before that the blogosphere often seems to be in a collective bad mood, and some blogs’ commentary boxes have a rage of their own going on too... to the point where, as with the Blair/Dunlop fight, some commenters burst the banks of the comments box they usually inhabit and go swarming elsewhere to attack their imagined enemies. The time and energy some people are evidently willing to put into hating another individual or group, usually simply because they happen to have opposing political affiliations, is quite extraordinary. In his post, Matt is less than optimistic about what this sort of thing means for the future of blogging:

²⁰ *A Bright Cold Day In April*, <http://www.abrightcolddayinapril.com/index.php?p=blog/001157.htm>.

²¹ *Little Green Footballs*, <http://www.littlegreenfootballs.com/weblog/>.

²² See the comments (ironically enough) of this post by Dan Gordon, <http://www.tubagooba.com/archives.tubagooba.com/000143.html>. Gareth Parker’s site: <http://gareth.drivelwarehouse.com/>.

As Ken Parish said, this was an issue of mind-blowing triviality, or as one poster to Blair's site put it: "And to the bizarre notion that this is somehow a right/left thing - ha ha ha. What a load of absolute freaking crap."

And yet, this mindset informs the Australian blogosphere to such an extent that we have become a childish and shrill parody of the so-called culture wars that infect the tone of political blogging in the United States.

It means that it is impossible to describe anything like an Australian weblogging community, for a community affords differing opinions.

It means that new bloggers become alienated, despondent and depart - leaving an inbred remnant whose only possible future is atrophy.

It means that when blogging gets attention in the Australian mainstream media, non-bloggers will take one look at our Balkanised little circle-jerks and dismiss us for cranks.

To a certain extent, though, perhaps this sort of thing is inherent in the actual nature of blogging. Back in the days when I was mostly running my old website as a repository for my stories and things, I used to like the idea of being able to write something and not have to wait to publish it. If I were submitting it to a magazine or something, I might have to wait months for it to be accepted and be printed. With the Internet, there was no such trouble. All I needed to do was add the appropriate HTML code to make it Net browser-friendly, then fire up the FTP program to actually add it to the website. I could have something up within minutes of finishing it. It was a great thing.

Blogging, on the other hand, is often a matter of read news, digest news, form an opinion, hastily write something, hit the button. You don't even need to take time to add HTML code or connect your FTP program to your server, since most bloggers (apart from a few freaks who still insist on hand-coding everything) use some form of automated publishing system that handles those details. Blogging is all about speed, in other words, it's about some news item or other appearing on the Net and ten thousand bloggers posting about it simultaneously a couple of minutes later.

OK, so I exaggerate. Still, I'm not too far off. Many bloggers (including myself) use a program such as Feedreader to track other blogs and news sources, so that when Yahoo News (for example) posts some news item, I can find out as soon as they do so, read the article, and if it's suitably interesting, post to it from my blog within minutes. I'm still startled at times when someone (who's obviously been tracking my own blog with a Feedreader-type program) adds a comment to a posting of mine less than ten minutes after I posted it. That's when I realise the real-time speed involved in blogging. The problem is, of course, that this immediate, publish-or-be-damned nature of blogging occasionally tends to mean that a blogger will fire off some remark without thinking it through adequately, and of such half-baked opinion-mongering are flame wars and inter-blog disputes often made. And, once again, no one is innocent; I've been guilty of this as much as anyone else. Despite the evidently more reflective work of some bloggers, where you can tell they've spent quite a while ruminating on a post, it's not a medium that naturally encourages stopping and thinking about what you're saying; by the time you get around to that, it's probably too late. Look at Glenn Reynolds. You'll notice how he doesn't call himself Carefully Considered Pundit, or anything like that.

The speed factor of blogging has also had an effect on the perceived timescale of discourse and the turnover of ideas. Let's consider an example I analysed a while ago at my own blog. For a while there, libertarianism became the topic du jour in Australian blogdom (and around the traps beyond that as well). Ken Parish²³ started getting stuck into it by noting the persuasiveness of libertarian arguments in moral and

²³ Troppo Armadillo, <http://troppoarmadillo.ubersportingpundit.com/>.

interpersonal terms and the inadequacy of same in economic terms. Here's how it developed after that.

John Quiggin²⁴ offered his own critique of Robert Nozick.

Brian Weatherson²⁵ observed that Professor Quiggin may have an argument against Nozick, just not the one he intended. Immediately after, Chris Bertram²⁶ thought Nozick shouldn't be dismissed that lightly.

Gummo Trotsky²⁷ offered his own critique of Nozick and Ayn Rand.

John Quiggin offered "more serious objections to libertarianism".

Jason Soon²⁸ belatedly joined in the conversation with a lengthy critique of John's second post.

John McVey²⁹ insisted that he is an Objectivist, not a libertarian, and explained why at length.

John Quiggin responded to Jason Soon's post.

Most of these posts were attended by lengthy comments threads furthering the discussion. I didn't add to the discussion myself, as a lot of it got bogged in economics which is something I know virtually nothing about. I was and am fascinated, though, by how the discussion became so extensive in such a short amount of time. Ken's initial post appeared on July 7, 2003. John Quiggin's last post appeared a week later on the 14th. If this conversation were carried on in professional journals it would take months to play out. Imagine it, Ken would post his piece in the July issue of *The Monthly Armadillo*, John Quiggin would present his follow-up in the August issue of *The Dismal Science Journal*, Brian and Chris then respond in the September issue of *Crooked Dead Tree Media*, and so on... and imagine how long it would take for all the additional commentary to ensue.

In professional journals, then, you'd be looking at about four to six months for this discussion to fully play itself out. In weblogs, it reached the point it did within a week. Which I suppose only goes to show that if blogging has done anything, it's facilitated an unusually rapid turnover of ideas so that extensive discussions of weighty matters can be carried out in fairly short order, and completely screwed up my perception of the passage of time. Not even quite two months since the discussion above began, and it already feels like it happened a year ago.

The most interesting development in blogging at the moment is the way in which it's being co-opted for the purposes of political organisations. For all what I said about how I don't think blogs can have much if any real political clout, it seems others are determined to try and make blogging into a tool of organised political activity. Of these, the most interesting are blogs operated by (or on behalf of) individual politicians³⁰. I am reminded of US politicians in the early years of the 20th century using Edison's wax cylinders to record their speeches as means of putting out their ideas. This is exactly the sort of thing I was referring to earlier on when I said that, although blogging is an amateur medium, that doesn't mean the people who engage in

²⁴ John Quiggin, <http://mentalspace.ranters.net/quiggin/>.

²⁵ Crooked Timber, <http://www.crookedtimber.org/>.

²⁶ Also based at Crooked Timber.

²⁷ Tug Boat Potemkin, <http://tugboatpotemkin.blogspot.com/>.

²⁸ Catallaxy Files, <http://catallaxyfiles.blogspot.com/>.

²⁹ The Usurer, <http://usurer.ubersportingpundit.com/>.

³⁰ Cf. Howard Dean (<http://dean2004.blogspot.com/>), Austin Mitchell (<http://www.austinmitchell.org/>), Gary Hart (<http://www.garyhartnews.com/hart/blog/>), Richard Allan (<http://www.sheffieldhallam.co.uk/blog/>), Tom Watson (<http://www.tom-watson.co.uk/>), Dennis Kucinich (<http://radio.weblogs.com/0120875/>), and no doubt several others to be added over time.

it are necessarily amateurs in their field of interest. Still, at the present rate, amateur political commentators will continue to swell the ranks of blogging. With a bit of luck they'll forgive me if I don't join them.

There's a wide array of pundit blogs out there, by which I mean bloggers featuring the word "pundit" in the name of their blog. Cf. such examples as Instapundit (of course), Happy Fun Pundit, Tarheel Pundit, Patio Pundit, Vodkapundit, Gedankenpundit, Israpundit, Punning Pundit, Noble Pundit, CalPundit, Viking Pundit, Daily Pundit, Quasipundit, TX Pundit, NZPundit, AfricaPundit, PrestoPundit, ArchPundit, Self Made Pundit, Lazy Pundit, EvilPundit... the list goes on. Those who know me may understand why I half-regret never reserving the name Gothicpundit for myself.

Actually, no I don't. If I'd called myself that I'd probably have got out of the blogging game a while ago. I wouldn't want to be limited to political punditry. See, I don't really *like* political blogging, it's not what I want to do with my blog. It's something I've realised only relatively recently, i.e. that I don't have to have an opinion about everything that happens in the world and don't have to write about it. Obviously every now and then a world event occurs and you can't help but write about it (e.g. war in Iraq, bomb attack in Bali), but I don't want to spend my whole blog doing that. And I don't want to spend my whole time even *reading* that sort of thing. There's only a few political blogs I get much enjoyment out of reading any more.

Personally, what I find increasingly interesting are those blogs which take a broader approach than the primarily political, by which I'm talking about things referred to in some quarters as "culture blogs". As an example, consider what is probably the most prominent culture blog, 2 Blowhards³¹. At the moment of writing, the most recent entries on that site cover topics such as the effect of environment on IQ, the film *American Splendour*, parking lots, Dr Seuss, young women's fashion and magazines, examples of 1920s art, "kids these days", architecture, the relationship between postmodernism and France, French cinema, demographic studies, kids' cartoons, *Freddy Vs. Jason*, and clouds. Not everything is of equal interest, but the diversity of the material is appealing. And, frankly, so is the general lack of political matter

American critic Terry Teachout maintains a blog of his own too³² (another example of the professional journalist engaging in the amateur activity), where he recently said something interesting:

The surprising thing (or maybe not) is that it wasn't until after "About Last Night" went live that I first encountered any of the arts blogs listed in the right-hand column. Think about that. Here I was, a potential blogger with a serious interest in the medium, yet I didn't know of the existence of even one arts blog. It wasn't until I started getting e-mail from fellow arts bloggers and clicking my way through their blogrolls that I finally discovered what was already out there, and how good so much of it was.

All this indicates to me that arts blogging is a phenomenon waiting to happen, in much the same way that political blogging gradually built up to a critical mass, then suddenly mushroomed in the wake of 9/11. The difference, of course, is that arts bloggers can't count on a cataclysmic event to stimulate interest in what we're doing. We'll have to publicize ourselves, not only by linking to one another (though that's important) but also by reaching out to potential readers who don't yet know what a blog is.

³¹ 2 Blowhards, <http://www.2blowhards.com/>.

³² About Last Night, <http://www.artsjournal.com/aboutlastnight/>.

I suspect Teachout may indeed be onto something there, and that more “arts”-style blogging could be the next big wave following the rise of political blogging. Then again, if Ken Parish is correct in what he says about the tabloid qualities of blogging, then this sort of thing may never rise much above the existing range of blogs revolving around a pop music theme (which seems to be a mainly British phenomenon for some reason; at least I don’t know of as many American or Australian pop blogs in that vein), of which Simon B’s No Rock and Roll Fun³³ is a prime example.

Still, it’s probably too early even at this stage to tell exactly how the world of blogging will develop over the next few years. I suspect that the political junkies will always exist and will always have political blogs to turn to. Meanwhile the rest of us will be trying to see what else we can do with the format, and more pop culture-based blogs may follow as a result—or at least blogs with more diverse content than the strictly political. I kind of hope that’s what’ll happen, anyway; it’s happening now to some extent, just a matter of how far will it continue.

Will blogging one day acquire more power than I’ve ascribed to it? Probably not. Some people will no doubt get into blogging in the misguided belief they’ll be able to change the world with it. I can’t see it working. Which is, of course, no reason to not get involved in it. It’s fun, after all, to be able to shout your opinions into the void, and even better if you can somehow attract an audience. As long as it remains fun for us, the political bloggers will keep doing their stuff and I’ll keep ploughing my own furrow of barnyard oddities and acts of human strangeness.

One thing at least is certain: if I were contemplating a career in journalism, I’d be *exceptionally* careful about how I went about conducting my business. You never know when a blogger might be reading, after all.

To close, let me return to H.P. Lovecraft for a minute, and tell you the story of how he came to be involved with amateur journalism in the first place. Lovecraft is often, but incorrectly thought, of as a recluse; though largely based out of his home town of Providence in Rhode Island, he did live in New York for two years and enjoyed travelling around the US whenever time and money permitted. When he was young, though, he was indeed a reclusive individual. From about the age of 15 he turned to the pulp magazines of the day as a source of entertainment and distraction, and he would read them for many years to come before finally writing for them himself. In 1913, however, he wrote a letter to a magazine called the *Argosy*³⁴, a regular read of his. In this letter he was responding to, and agreeing with, an earlier letter writer’s criticism of one of the magazine’s mainstays, one Fred Jackson. There erupted in the magazine’s letter column what would now be called a flame war (if we can use 1990s terminology to describe something that happened in a 1913 pulp magazine), with Lovecraft having to fend off various Jackson admirers in a debate that went on for months. The fight was witnessed by one Edward F. Daas, who was then the President of the United (or one of them, anyway) and who invited Lovecraft to join the United on the basis of his *Argosy* performance. Needless to say, Lovecraft’s defence of himself in this fight he didn’t even start been a skilled one—and, moreover, it was mostly done in verse.

What a blogger he would have made.

³³ No Rock and Roll Fun, <http://xrrf.blogspot.com/>.

³⁴ S.T. Joshi (ed.), *H.P. Lovecraft in the Argosy*, Necronomicon Press, 1994.