

Book Review

Rettberg, Jill Walker. 2008. *Blogging*. Cambridge, UK & Malden, MA: Polity.

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Ten years ago, nobody had heard the rather strange word “blog” before (contraction of “web log”). This is quite extraordinary when we contemplate how important this practice has become for journalism, social interaction, academia and to some extent business. Today, blogging is a dominating phenomenon and a central part of the social turn (aka web 2.0), that we have witnessed over the last years. Many social networking sites such as the all-pervasive Facebook, include blogging, or at least features that are similar to blogging (69), and the idea of distributed conversations can be identified in all corners of the Web today.

A pervasive and still emerging phenomenon as important as blogging must, of course, be studied, and Jill W. Rettberg’s recent book is one such endeavor. Rettberg, a Norwegian scholar, is an early initiate to the field, as she began blogging in 2000 while working on her PhD thesis, well before most of us had even heard about this new form of participatory media. She aims to introduce readers to the world of blogging, as well as discuss the existing scholarship on blogs and their context. Interestingly, Rettberg also wants to situate the book within its subject, i.e. blogging: “The book aims to be like a blog in that it constantly links to – or refers to – actual examples of what blogs are doing and what bloggers are writing (...)” (3). This works quite well, although blogs and websites develop so rapidly that some references and examples seem outdated even as these words are being written.

In the first chapter, Rettberg gives a much-needed scholarly introduction to blogging by looking in detail at three rather different blogs. These three represent alternative ways of blogging: The personal or diary-style blogging, filterblogging and topic-driven blogging. Through a study of each, the characteristics of blogging are introduced and discussed. This chapter and the next two also take us through the history of blogging and situate the phenomenon in cultural and scholarly contexts. The following three chapters discuss blogging in relation to journalism, narratives and business.

Of special interest to surveillance scholars are Rettberg’s discussions of private and public in the context of reading. While the move from reading aloud for crowds to *silent* reading for oneself is associated with the introduction of print, blogging might bring about a similar development: “With silent reading, reading changed from a communal to a personal act, and it has been argued that this new solitary relationship between an individual and a text was a significant reason for the development of the notion of a separation between private and public (Chartier 2001). The solitude of reading and writing is, perhaps, changing with blogs, which are more explicitly social forms of writing.” (40). We have yet to see the extent of this development, but blogging along with online social networking have certainly challenged traditional ways of understanding power relations, as “reverse” surveillance practices, making oneself visible and available, are important parts of social interaction on the Web.

I found it especially interesting to follow Rettberg’s discussion of blogging and journalism. It is often claimed that blogging is a form of “citizen journalism”; a way for everyone to publish his or her own journalistic writings. On this point she quotes journalist Abbott Joseph Liebling’s view that “freedom of

the press is guaranteed only to those who own one" (84), a position which describes basic problems of "old" or traditional media relating to editing and capitalism. Blogging has made it possible for everyone to own a press, so to speak, and today the so-called "blogosphere," i.e. the totality of often networked blogs, is an important part of the media world. However, has this democratized our media? Improved it? Has it made traditional media, such as newspapers, magazines and TV shows redundant?

Rettberg addresses these and other questions by exploring the relationship between the blogosphere and the traditional media. Rather than replacing journalists, bloggers supplement and interact with traditional media. Mainstream media sometimes take up news stories originating from blogs, while new stories are scrutinized and heavily discussed in blogs. A famous example of this "gatewatching" is the so-called "Rathergate" case, which involved news anchor Dan Rather presenting documents critical of president George W. Bush's military record on the CBS Evening News. Bloggers then carefully checked these documents and raised questions about their authenticity, which led to further scrutiny by mainstream media and, ultimately, Dan Rather leaving CBS (107).

This book about blogging is essential reading for anyone who is interested in social media and Internet studies. Rettberg gives us a broad and deep study of the phenomenon of blogging based on her own first-hand experiences as a blogger as well as her scholarly work in the field. One of the reasons why *Blogging* works so well is this combination of practice and theory, which makes it a very accessible read for both scholars and the public.