

Why I blog

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[Or: a defense of non-clarity.]

Here's¹ a rant entitled "Why I fucking hate web logs". It's a little confusing because the guy put 4,200 words online on the subject of 'why I think it's dumb that people write so much and put it out to a semi-anonymous audience'. Miss AMJ of Richmond, VA gave the author benefit of the doubt and took it as an attempt at irony and/or humor, but I'm inclined to think that our anti-blog author means everything he/she says [the author didn't give a name, so I'll herein refer to the person as a female named Stevanna].² Anyway, it's always nice to have a foil, so I'm going to write a response in earnest.

Communicating information

Here's Stevanna's first coherent point:

Communication mediums like IRC/chat, email, instant messaging, etc. all [...] directly imitate, by design, communication channels used in the real world, such as telephones, direct in-person conversation, etc. They were designed this way because, over thousands of years, these are the methods of communication that have risen to the top of the usefulness list. People communicate and socialize much more effectively when communication happens in real-time. [...] Weblogs take us away from that.

The first time I saw that real-time communication is not really at the top of the usefulness list was my high school calculus class, where the teacher, in lieu of writing her own lessons, would read us sections from the textbook. I could directly compare the process of learning through reading and learning the exact same material through listening, and reading won by a mile [1.6 km]. There was a real problem that my teacher was overcoming by reading the book to us: nobody would bother to read the thing on their own. But outside of that social problem, words on paper win out. Reading is visual, and the majority of the world consists of visual learners; and I can spend as long as I want on the parts I care about or don't get, instead of allocating time based on what the speaker thinks I should focus on.

Academic conferences and presentations are the same thing: many people honestly mean to read the paper, but don't get around to it; showing up in a public place and

¹<http://mama.indstate.edu/users/bones/WhyIHateWebLogs.html>

²A year or so after I wrote this, the author placed his name, Donald Brook, at the top of the page, but I haven't bothered revising this essay accordingly.

seeing the author face-to-faces forces the reader/listener to pay the author attention. But don't confuse this attempt to overcome laziness as better communication. Academia is very much the sort of community that Stevanna describes, in that most academic papers are read by a small handful of people who understand the issues, and there are only a couple of superstars whose papers will break out and become widely read. In that community, the best means of communication has shown itself to be the paper. The self-interested and sort of antisocial part comes not in writing the paper but in presenting the paper face-to-face, forcing people to aurally read your paper instead of getting to it when s/he decides to make time.

Communicating affect

All this is in contrast to most face-to-face communication, wherein people don't really select with whom they hang out based on content, but based on personality, affect, and cuteness. Some people, like Ian Frazier, are fun to read, and it doesn't matter what they're talking about. That's a good definition of the celebrity: a whole lot of people want to spend time with that celebrity because they find their way of being agreeable, and it doesn't matter whether they're pontificating on the meaning of life or just reading lines the screenwriter wrote for them. My pals, to me, are like that. Your pals, to you, are like that.

Affect-oriented communication does indeed work best in person and in real time. But I think blogs really do have a place in this. Most of my pals are over 4,500 kilometers away, and don't get free evening minutes until right around my bedtime. When something interesting does happen in my life, I'll repeat the anecdote to both of my friends ad nauseum, whereas I can't do that if I've already written about it. No, the blog isn't the ideal medium, but on a practical level, it solves some problems pretty darn well.

Blogs

Blogs are a confusing idea because they fulfill both of the above roles on the same page. People chat online, watch movies, and read blogs by models because they want to spend time with a person that it feels good to spend time with, and the content is secondary. Meanwhile, people read academic papers, newspaper editorials, and blogs by programmers because they want to learn something that may be useful, and the personality of the author is secondary.

Stevanna doesn't understand blogs because they serve both purposes, without telling you. They don't follow the model of a Power Point presentation³, clearly stating at the top of the page what you're about to read; they just tell you stuff and it's your job as a literate human to actively filter the information.

One of Stevanna's complaints may be that the average blog author has the hubris of assuming that there are people who are both interested in what the author has to say and in the author him/herself. But any person who is reasonably well-adjusted will have some friends who care about the person and want to spend time with them; and that

³<http://www.norvig.com/Gettysburg/sld001.htm>

well-adjusted person is also no doubt an authority on something, which he or she will be happy to expound upon. Well-adjustedness aside, even I am comfortable writing on this page about my lousy moods, my authoritative pontifications on economic theory, and SQLite, because I know that there's some number of people who will read what I have to say about all of these topics with interest. I also know that there is no one person who is simultaneously interested in what I have to say about all three of these topics except myself. This is not a contradiction.

I don't know if she means to be doing this, but Stevana is pushing us to a lowest-common-denominator model of communication, where we throw style and fun out the window for the sake of not confusing the readers who aren't totally paying attention. Yes, bullet-pointed presentations are efficient and have their place, but they're also not very fun, which is why newspapers still print essays instead of bullet-pointed summaries of essays, and why we don't send letters to each other in presentation-style format. Affect trickles into informational essays, and information pervades affect-oriented conversation, and the mixing is inefficient, sometimes annoying, and generally more fun and more human. Compare with Stevanna's essay, itself a fun mix of affect and information, which says that blog authors should include a statement of purpose so the reader knows exactly what to expect.