

Bloggers through history

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Here is a list of some of the bloggers I have gotten a lot out of.

Victor Hugo Victor Hugo was among the first bloggers. His 1862 blog compilation, *Les Misérables*, included posts ranging from a metaphor about a man overboard, a post about religion, a post on puns (“Le calembour est la fiende de l’esprit qui vole.”: “puns are the droppings of a soaring spirit”), and about a hundred pages on Napoleon at Waterloo [Hugo, 1987]. There was also a story that ran between posts, which, strangely enough, you can get as a separate edition with the blog posts omitted.

Herman Melville I never had much interest in nautical-themed anything; e.g., I passed on *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840), which is as described: two years’ worth of what-I-had-for-lunch entries from a sailing vessel [Dana, 2007] . But I did read Melville’s 1851 blog compilation, *Moby Dick*, which was like *Les Misérables* in that it combined a story with the usual blogging fare [Melville, 2002]. I read it on my telephone. Most of the blog posts were about cetology (the study of whales). There you are, reading along about the exploits of the guy we call Ishmael, when Melville hits you with three or four pages on the anatomy of the porpoise, an exposition on nautical themes in the *Bible* (such as the plausibility of the story of Jonah and the whale), or a page or two on accounting methods for large enterprises.

George Orwell Oh, I’ll never forget when I got to the part in 1984 when Winston and Julia got in bed together and he read her a fifteen-page treatise on political economy [Orwell, 1949]. It’s been my model for courtship ever since. But for the most part, Mr. Orwell [as we call him; it’s a pen name taken from England’s Orwell river] was what had been called an *essayist*, being that the word *blog* had not yet been coined. See also his bullets-I-ate-for-lunch account of the Spanish Civil War, *Homage to Catalonia* [Orwell, 1980].

Neal Stephenson For my money, his career began with this lengthy article in Wired¹ in which he seimcircumnavigates the globe, chatting about whatever comes to mind along the way. His book *Cryptonomicon* recycled many of his notes from that article [Stephenson, 2002]. Since then, he’s continued to produce a lot of pages about whatever comes to mind, such as the foundations of currency or Alan Turing’s bicycle chain.

¹<http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/4.12/ffglass.html>

My impression is that people read his books as much for learning nifty factoids as for the plot.

The Baltimore Sun The Sun, like every newspaper in the country, has a number of daily bloggers, whom it calls *columnists*, a tortured word that is somehow related to the fact that newspapers are typically laid out in columns. Let us pause here and take note at the immense similarity of the words *essayist*, *columnist*, and *web-logger*, all of which describe a person in terms of the format of his or her text. Getting back to the Baltimore Sun's columnists, I read many of them reasonably often, because even though my cherries were shipped in from Chile, I at least want some of my blogs to be local. I gave up on bloggers at the New York Times a long time ago, by the way.

Bertrand Russel Russel is a mathematician, best known for his 3-volume *Principia Mathematica* (coauthored with Alfred Whitehead). But he digressed from that book, which already grappled with a few interesting philosophical problems, to just being a general philosopher and talk show pundit.

Lately, I've been reading his *History of Western Philosophy* [Russel, 1945]. Each chapter has the name of a prominent thinker at the head, and covers his [they're 100% males] life, his works, and what Mr. Russel thinks of his works. "Spinonza (1634–77) is the noblest and most lovable of the great philosophers." [p 569] He makes little effort to maintain an objective stance, and instead allows his personal philosophical position to come through throughout.

And here we get to the point of this, uh, column. Russel could have written a book that followed the history of various standard questions in philosophy and just tracked them through popular opinion: Did the average Roman think that there is a First Cause? How do Stoics think about the essence of an object? That may or may not be interesting, but that's not the book that he wanted to write or that people wanted to read: he wrote about ideas via the people who hold and embody them. That's why each chapter bears the name of a person and not a concept.

By binding ideas to people and taking each person as a bundle of ideas, we get to another favorite philosophy question [which the patent court has recently been facing]: can information be independent of its physical carrier? Do these concepts that the philosophers ponder all day exist by themselves, or do they exist only in the minds of the philosophers who ponder them?

Another guy, Richard Dawkins, embodies and represents the idea of the *meme*, a concept that is transmitted from person to person [Dawkins, 1976]. Once it has a host, it combines with other memes to form baby memes. The term has been violently misused online to refer to any data that gets handed from person to person.

You don't have to take Dawkins's perspective too literally, but it provides some symmetry between ideas and people. You can think of an idea in terms of the people who foster it; you can think of a person in terms of the ideas s/he fosters.

Categorizing on a grid Academic seminars often have a representative from every subfield in the audience. In the Q&A, the gender person asks a gender question, the econometrician asks about the details of the regressions, the education person asks

how people under 18 were included in the study. I've been a part of this pattern myself. Different combinations of people produce different outcomes for how the paper is presented and how it moves forward.

You can picture a grid with topics or questions along the columns and perspectives along the rows. People are trapped in their perspectives, so they're always looking along a row, but when researching a new topic we are interested in a looking along a single column, seen from all the multiple perspectives on all the rows. Conversely, the blog—or any work by one person—looks as multiple topics from one perspective.

Because any work consists of the sum of a topic and a personal perspective, we have a categorization problem. For most books, it's easy: the libraries sort fiction by person, because it is primarily about the affect and perspective of the author; nonfiction, where the author is typically expected to stay in the background, is sorted by topic.

Bloggers who write about, oh, Brazil, are just filed by topic under Brazil, so we can just ignore the perspective and focus on the topic and have no problem.

But what does the system does with encyclopædiasts?² The Library of Congress gave *The blog digest 2007 : twelve months of the best writing from the Web* the call number of PN6141 .B552 2006, which you'll recognize as the categorization for *essays*. [And people wonder why I have a librarian. . .] On the one hand, it's a nifty trick: buried within the overall system of category-based organization, there's a section for person-oriented organization. Also, the LoC recognizes that there's the only difference between an essayist and a blogger is the level of paper usage. But it still relies on a catch-all *essays* category, which is a hair away from being a *misc/other* category. So it's no wonder that bloggers, columnists, and essayists get so little respect: we have no idea where to put them. If they don't stick to a single topic, like whaling or the Spanish Civil war, they'll just get lost in the *miscellaneous* bin.

References

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Neal Stephenson. *Cryptonomicon*. Avon, 2002.

²For those of you who don't subscribe to the OED: "One who attempts to deal with every branch of knowledge, or whose studies have a very extensive range." The OED does not offer *encyclopediast* or *encyclopaediast* as correct spellings.