

## Blogs: Hanging dirty laundry on-line

By RUSSELL SMITH

UPDATED AT 2:04 PM EST

Wednesday, Sep. 3, 2003

The blog phenomenon is perhaps the strangest side of the Internet. It's stranger even than all the porn. Thousands of unremarkable people are posting their diaries on-line. Sometimes these blogs contain humorous commentary on global current events or local politics.



Advertisement

Sometimes -- and more often -- they contain a list of daily activities. "Went to the post office, managed to do laundry, talked to Jason about Our Relationship . . ." Who do they expect will read them?

Well, Jason, of course. Most personal blogs are an indirect means of communication with a small clique of friends, or even with one specific person. A woman in Poland writes a daily blog about her husband's possible cheating. She describes his activities and asks her readers to weigh in with their opinions. What's the point? Well, she's dying for her husband to read it, of course. She's too timid to confront him about this head on.

Just like "Josh" in California who writes, in a mystifying set of related threads posted by a group of friends, "Whew, I'm really glad I talked to my friend before I thought I was going to have to kill him . . . I should have known better than to think he had said things like that, silly me. Well, anyway, turns out that other people are spreading these 'rumors,' which I think is pretty stupid since, one, it's none of their business and two, it's annoying and can be hurtful. I know that people that really are my friends know me better than that, and I shouldn't care about what people say . . . blah, I'm just sick of all the drama . . . I don't care who said what to whom or for what reason anymore . . . why is it important?!?! It's not."

I love everything about this posting, including its illiteracy and its vagueness and its breathless smugness at being the centre of gossip, because despite its utter inarticulateness it describes the hothouse ambience of a teenage clique we've all been a part of, or at least witnessed. And again, who is the purported audience for this? Certainly not me. It's all the other friends in the group. Our narrator's unnamed scandal-mongers will no doubt read this posting and indignantly turn to their own blogs in which they write, "Well, I see some people have been accusing me of spreading rumours again . . ."

When I was in high school, there was no Internet, but some pretentious friends and I started writing down Thoughts in a scribbler which we would pass around. It served the same function as the Internet: a sort of public notice board, a kind of local newspaper with nothing but columnists in it, for which the only

audience was other columnists. The Thoughts rapidly degenerated into thinly disguised personal messages. I remember my anticipation at seeing the notebook each time, my hope that there would be new entries, in particular that Wendi Petersen would have written something about me.

The Web is a high-tech gossip network: an entirely public notice board with very private functions. There is something about publishing, even self-publishing, even Web posting, that lends an air of gravity to one's personal relations; when written, they come to seem more literary, more important.

I admit that the newspaper columnists analogy is not a joke: Of course even the legitimate media use our commercial forums to air personal grievances. Where else would we get our ideas but from an argument at dinner the night before? And so we write, "Many otherwise intelligent commentators have suggested recently . . ." (Meaning: that idiot husband of whatshername at the cocktail party.) And we secretly hope that said idiot husband will read the column and be cowed by the devastating refutation we have just adumbrated.

I don't know any "advice" columnist who doesn't make up questions and use the answers as set-pieces for the humorous excoriation of the exes who have done her wrong. Nothing wrong with this: The personal becomes political at the moment of its dissemination.

And blogs can be strangely compelling reading. You can read them as sociology -- just what exactly turns on California skatepunks when they're chatting on the beach at sunset?

You read the cheating-husband blog as you would watch a soap opera -- when is he going to get caught? What is going to give him away? Blogs feed the modern appetite for gossip, which seems to grow faster than even technology can feed it.

What urge is satisfied by this public confession of private tensions? The same satisfaction of the confessional itself: There is a relief in speaking a secret aloud. Indeed, there are several "confession" sites, where one can anonymously describe one's sins (usually under seven predictable categories). The important thing here is the idea that others can read them. The Internet affords an illusory sense of having made a public pronouncement. (These pronouncements are nominally public, since anybody can in theory read all of them, but in truth the authors can be pretty sure nobody will, unless they're personally involved.)

In fairy tales, protagonists with terrible secrets whisper them to the grass or to a hole in the ground. In the absence of such a poetic sensibility -- and in the absence of actual priests -- the Internet serves as a neutral receptor for yearnings and anger and confession: It is a cosmic ear.



© 2004 Bell Globemedia Publishing Inc. All Rights Reserved.