

# **Blogosphere Narrativity: Emerging Cultural Interventions<sup>(\*)</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

As digital forms of self-expression, blogs are at the crossroads of literature and media studies. Their growing popularity attests to the spontaneity, immediacy, and liberty that both writers and audience experience, unlike several other mainstream literary and media outlets, thus offering far-reaching and extensive global cross-cultural communication. Bloggers are offered a Habermasian ‘public sphere’ to share not only narrations based on first-hand life experiences, but also personal views and commentaries on contemporary events, with a readership instantly and freely sharing its feedback. Focusing on a heated, post-9/11 milieu, this article ventures to highlight the resistive qualities of blogs and self-narratives created by authors whose productions contribute to the deconstruction of several features of cultural hegemony often propagated within mainstream discourses. It studies the role of the blogosphere as an “emergent alternative culture” attempting to both challenge and deconstruct mainstream stereotypical configurations through digital media’s promotion of prod-usage and citizen media culture.

## **Keywords**

emerging culture, blogosphere, prod-usage, Habermasian public sphere, popular culture, alternative culture

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## المخلص

تتميز كتابات التدوين الرقمي بكونها شكلاً للتعبير المباشر عن الذات ولذا فهي من الدراسات البينية التي تُعنى بتحليل الكتابة الأدبية في ظل وسائل الإعلام الحديثة. يختبر الكاتب والقارئ في آن واحد بعض سمات هذا الأدب الناشئ من مباشرة وحرية وثقافية في السرد بعكس أشكال أدبية أخرى، الأمر الذي يضمن لها مجالاً للتواصل عابراً للحدود والثقافات. من خلال مفهوم "المجال العام" الذي اقترحه يورجن هابرماس، يمكن دراسة هذه الكتابات الإبداعية ليس فقط كونها سرديات لتجارب شخصية ولكن أيضاً تحليلاً ذاتياً منفتحاً على قاعدة قراء عريضة يتم دعوتها باستمرار للمشاركة في عملية السرد. تلقي هذه المقالة الضوء على بعض سمات هذه السرديات الذاتية خصوصاً في فترة 'ما بعد الحادي عشر من سبتمبر' من خلال دورها في تفكيك أشكال الهيمنة الثقافية المروج لها في بعض نماذج الخطاب العام. تدرس المقالة عالم التدوين الرقمي بصفته شكلاً من أشكال الثقافة البديلة الصاعدة التي تتحدى وتفكك الأشكال النمطية بالثقافة المهيمنة وذلك من خلال ثقافة المستخدم والمنتج في آن واحد.

### الكلمات المفتاحية:

الثقافة الصاعدة - عالم التدوين الرقمي - ثقافة المستخدم/المنتج - الطرح الهابرماسي للمجال العام - الثقافة الشعبية - الثقافة البديلة.

## Introduction

In his book *Media Matters* (1996), John Fiske ventures to examine the dynamics of cultural production, scrutinizing the emerging power of popular culture vis-à-vis dominant mainstream media platforms. Accentuating the role of individual agency and citizen media as an alternative cultural product resisting dominant media conglomerates, Fiske emphasizes the need to utilize technology as a means to give voice to otherwise marginalized individual narratives: "We can make our society one that is rich in diverse knowledges, but only if people strive to produce and circulate them. Technology will always be involved and, if its potential is exploited, its proliferation may make the control over knowledge less, not more, efficient" (238). Fiske's aspirations were soon met starting 1999 when "free fill-in-the-blank site-building tools and publishing software became available. Knowledge of HTML [Hypertext Markup Language; a basic ingredient in creating web pages and web applications] was no longer required, and anyone with an internet

connection could create a blog by using the new tools and software” (Berning n. pag.). Thus, the proliferation of a user-created blogosphere substantially foregrounded the essential role of individual narratives and personal stories of actual citizens while delineating their first hand experiences to an engaged global audience. The readership was no longer a passive recipient of knowledge that is widely disseminated in mainstream media outlets, but rather one that is necessarily invited to actively participate in such a dynamic process through sharing and posting its own life narratives as well. Two years later, after the traumatic attacks of 9/11 in 2001 had taken the world by surprise, and the role of corporate media in propagating the consequent “War on Terror” overseas was most evident, an urge for alternative individual narratives arose even further in order to give voice to members of society whose lives have been affected the most within such a volatile and unstable world scene. Therefore, this article examines blogs written by three US soldiers--Colby Buzzell, Zach, and Jason Hartley--during their service overseas whilst trying to communicate to their audience their own personal narrations of their lived realities which corporate media often tends to overlook, if not obliterate. Investigating the dynamics of blogosphere production as an emerging and efficient cultural alternative, their life writings will be specifically analyzed in light of Fiske’s notion of “semiotic democracy” in which he proposes the democratizing impact of new digital narrative forms in shaping modern literary production. Fiske’s proposition is essentially grounded in Jürgen Habermas’ ‘public sphere’ being a negotiable space “between civil society and the state, in which critical discussion of matters of general interest was institutionally guaranteed” (McCarthy xi). However, an initial overview of the development of diary writings as a genre in general is therefore key to the understanding of the emergence of the blogosphere and its impactful trajectories over the past two decades.

### **Historical Development of the Genre**

Traditionally, the three most popular forms of life writings throughout literary history have been memoir, autobiography, and diary. Despite their several commonalities, each of them has its own distinctive features:

A memoir ... is a retrospective narrative about a portion of the writer's life. An autobiography is a long memoir, covering most of the subject's life up to the time of writing. A diary is a document in which the writer records his or her experiences, thoughts and feelings shortly after they happen, in discrete entries, often dated. Diaries differ from memoirs in not being retrospective and in not having an explicit plot. They are written from day to day, with the present as a moving vantage point. (Heehs 6)

Thus, being essentially narratives of everyday life, diary writings necessarily evoke a distinctive sense of immediacy and spontaneity through their writers' flow of crude thought and emotion. Hence, the understanding of blogosphere narratives as a modern digitized correlative of diary writings is contingent on examining the dynamics of the latter and the narrative idiosyncrasies that shape its modern form. In the past, diaries were commonly underestimated as a mere subset of autobiography, thus, solely appreciated for the informational content which they might provide, "rather than for their innovative literary form" (Lensink 152). However, the way writers delineate their self-narratives in diaries requires a conscious reader who is aware of the different states a writer might go through; they are dynamic narratives that reflect diverse everyday life experiences which inevitably entails, as a result, using constantly changing linguistic and narrative techniques.

First, the language employed is remarkably descriptive; close attention to details that writers wish to communicate to their readers is easily recognized: "The language of ordinary people's diaries is considered tedious because it is often literal and repetitive" (Lensink 153). Thus, it is a spontaneous outpouring of thoughts that is not interested in premeditated fanciful language because "when the language within a diary is excessively metaphoric, ... it may obscure rather than inscribe true emotion" since it stops "raw emotion from pouring out onto the page" (153). Hence, diaries are usually regarded as a more flexible and direct form of self writings, unlike other forms such as autobiographical narratives, for example. Since the latter are principally documented through the recollection of past events rather than the immediate delineation of the present, writers are allowed the time and space to implement more complex linguistic techniques: "Autobiography

... requires a man to take a distance with regard to himself in order to constitute himself in the focus of his special unity and identity across time” (Gusdorf 35).

Second, the narrative methods inherent in diaries are dependent on what a writer chooses to record and present to the reader: “the diary is obviously not a literal transcription of a day. The artist too selects what to describe” where “a coherent world formed by the writer’s perceptions exists” (154). It is specifically this coherence and attempt to make sense of the surrounding world that initially drives a writer to document such narratives striving towards self-understanding and assertion within society. Paul Rosenblatt, thus, claims: “As one writes about what has happened and how one feels, one is defining the situation and one’s reactions. The act of defining may be seen as an act of controlling, delineating and shaping” (qtd. in Lensink 154). Therefore, building on such a rich literary tradition, blogs have emerged as a genre that addresses a timeless rhetorical exigence in ways that are specific to its time. In the blog, the potentialities of technology, a set of cultural patterns, rhetorical conventions available in antecedent genres, and the history of the subject have combined to produce a recurrent rhetorical motive that has found a conventional mode of expression. Bloggers acknowledge that motive in each other and continue enacting it for themselves. The blog-as-genre is a contemporary contribution to the art of the self. (Miller and Shepherd, qtd. in Lenze 18)

Thus, attempting to present themselves and their constantly developing identities, Buzzell, Zach, and Hartley all share the same yearning towards connecting to a larger audience who might share with them some of the atrocities they witness during the ongoing war, thus presenting a differing view to what they often passively watch on the news as distanced, rather than engaged, agents. The writers necessarily, thus, use a language that is direct, sarcastic, and oftentimes blunt in order to convey their crude and undisguised emotion. In his blog “A Soldier’s Thoughts,” Zach yearns to communicate his more profound thoughts and emotions to a readership that is often merely offered dry pieces of news through mainstream media platforms. Trying to make sense of a senseless and absurd existence, the distraught soldier publishes a blunt

post on May 12, 2005 entitled “Soldiers Die” wherein he laments the endless death toll taking place on both sides; he hardly accepts the reality of brutal death being the inevitable end, pathetically trying to negotiate such a traumatic existence:

When we first arrived at that field we noticed that near one of the paladins (a very large artillery piece, looks like a tank...) lay the body of a dead Iraqi soldier. We didn't bother him and he didn't bother us. We had become friends with the soldiers who's paladin was parked near the body, so we would usually visit them at least once a day or so....On a serious side though I think that the reason we made light of the situation was because we lived next to a dead and sun bloated body who had been killed violently. I mean, if we didn't laugh we would probably have been losing it. We had just fought a bloody war and now we were living IN the blood and violence of it all. I am glad though. Glad that Fred was a soldier. We understood that. Soldiers die. Us, them ... soldiers die. If it had been a civilian I don't know what we would have done. Civilians should be safe. At least that is the way it is supposed to be, but Iraqi civilians did die and still do every day. (Zach, “Soldiers Die”)

Thus, posts of the like whose unapologetic language is far from metaphoric or ornamental and that yearn towards reconstructing reality in their own light are what characterize blogs as an emerging literary form that needs to be appreciated within its literary, cultural, and historical contexts.

### **Emergence of the Blogosphere**

The word ‘blog’ derives from the words ‘web’ and ‘log’. Jorn Barger is credited with creating the term ‘weblog’ in 1997; two years later, Peter Merholz shortened it to ‘blog.’ A basic technical definition of a blog would be:

an online grouping of related items that are posted in chronological order and regularly updated. Most blogs are maintained by individuals, but some are maintained by a group of people or by a business. The items in a blog are typically listed in reverse-chronological order, that is, the most recent items appear at the top of the blog. These items are called *blog entries* or *entries*, for short. (Greenlaw et al. 35)

In their essay “Questions for Genre Theory from the Blogosphere,” Carolyn R. Miller and Dawn Shepherd claim that blogs have undergone three important phases. First, before 1999, blogs were tools to merely exchange information and website links among the web-savvy users (qtd. in Lenze 266). The second phase of blogging took place in 1999 with the advent of “a new kind of user, younger and less-technologically adept, and a new emphasis on personal commentary rather than links, self-disclosure rather than information sharing” (267). Therefore, blogs started to function principally as online diaries where writers could easily share their individual stories and narratives amidst a remarkably interactive blogging environment. However, emphasis on individuality was further consolidated through the third stage of blog development with the emergence of social networking websites which “changed the way ... blogs were accessed, primarily via a link on the user’s profile” (Berning n. pag.), which, in turn, helped increase the visibility of such currently cited blogs as well as enabling mutual interaction among bloggers and readers; hence, bloggers began to “redefine media as a public, participatory endeavor” (Blood, n. pag.) rather than a hierarchical structure solely providing information to a limited number of internet experts. Social networks, however, gave rise to “micro-blogging” which, unlike regular blogging, often limits the size of postings, thus confining an individual’s wish to fully express oneself (Jurkiewicz 7). Other distinctions are also noticeable through the accessibility of blogs to “anyone who enters the link” (7), unlike social networks that require private security systems, such as passwords. The relative durability of blogs, in comparison with Twitter streams, for example, is also essential, hence they present “the most stable and searchable form of blogging through their website-like format” (7).

These several developmental stages of the blog have inevitably coincided with integral changes and transformations in the blog itself as a genre. However, “unlike a good deal of other new online practices of communication or self-expression, the blog continues to exist because its hard core--the diary form and the personality conveyed by it--is still keeping the genre ‘afloat’” (Bozhankova 303). Thus, despite the outer and inherent changes they had experienced given the never-ending technological advancements, blogs emphasized both form and content of

individual self-narratives as bedrocks of its existence: “among the personal expressions on the Web, the blog occupies the special position of a form that has inherited the personal web pages of the 1990s and has been hybridized into the social platforms of Web 2.0, yet still retains the character of diary” (Bozhankova 303).

In his article “Alternative Media, the Mundane, and ‘Everyday Citizenship,’” Chris Atton suggests the need for new technical methods in the study of narratives grounded in the portrayal of everyday experiences:

To see these practices of ‘mundanization’ we need very different conceptual tools from those used in the valorization of popular (productive) consumption. The latter seek the extraordinary within the everyday, finding their resistance, infraction, and the refusal to accommodate with dominant cultural forces -- that is, radical critical activity within mundane activities. Instead, we require a model that encourages us to resignify both the everyday and what we construe as ‘significant.’ (Atton 351)

Therefore, in studying the blogosphere, an appreciation towards delineating everyday “mundane” life incidents needs to be developed in and of itself because it is the accumulation of such individual stories that clears up the vision regarding several social groups being previously marginalized. In one post entitled “Still Alive, guess it is another good day” published on May 21, 2005, Zach tries to ‘mundanize’ the traumatic experience of constant fear of an impending death through very few poetic words:

“The mortars hit us  
I'm glad that I didn't die  
Guess it's a good day

A haiku about my morning.”

Zach, therefore, does not only try to describe the most mundane and harsh realities he experiences first hand at war, but also attempts to aesthetically narrate them to his readers in the hope that they comprehend



the pricelessness of all human life; it ought not be taken for granted, nor, hopefully, futilely wasted in bloodshed.

Moreover, while Atton highlights the importance of resistive narrative language and techniques, Nick Couldry also studies the influence of alternative media through a theorisation of voice that argues for “a twofold understanding of the term: voice as process and voice as value. It is not enough to simply offer platforms for voice (the process of alternative media); voice must also be valued as part of wider processes that enable social change” (43). Thus, Couldry similarly emphasizes the role of individual life narratives in effecting tangible change in modern societies, a subversive mechanism against the “totalitarian” and generic representation of social narrative usually propagated in official media excluding the value of personal elements and signifiers. The same appreciation for the mundane has also been reiterated by Red Chidgey who argues that the “‘maker identity’ that represents the praxis of daily life activism enables cultural production to function as a site for political activity” (qtd. in Atton 354). Theorising alternative media, therefore, Atton identifies three qualities that qualify it for the role: first, as a counterpart to mainstream media, thus challenging established relations of authority and control; second, as “embedded in citizenship politics of civil society”; third, as a means for self-representation for communities while connecting people and their concerns locally and globally (354). The ultimate aim for alternative media production, thus, is “democratizing the relations of power at the heart of communication.” (Bailey et al. ix)

### **Semiotic Democracy**

In an early post on June 22, 2004 entitled “Blogging from a Combat Zone,” Colby Buzzell finds refuge in an emerging blogosphere that promises a safe venue for voicing his thoughts, fears, and hopes while serving in Iraq since 2003. He explains to his readers a little about his situation:

I've been here for about 8 months now, and i have no idea how much longer i'm going to be here. My whole outlook on everything has changed since being here, and I've probably aged a great deal over here. So far, this has been one hell of an experience. Lots of lows, and very

little highs. . . . FYI: In case you're wondering how and why i got the name "**MY WAR**" as a title to this web site, it's a **Black Flag** [an American punk rock music band formed in 1976] song, here are the lyrics to that song:

**MY WAR**

My war you're one of them

You say that you're my friend

But you're one of them

You don't want to see me live

You don't want me to give

...

I might not know what a friend is

All I know is what you're not. (Buzzell, "Blogging from a Combat Zone")

Such a casual conversational language typical of blogosphere narrativity allows Buzzell to connect on a more personal and intimate level with his audience which encourages them in return to engage and take part in a participatory narrative process. Thus, several readers choose to reply back with comments supporting his personal delineation of events on the ground throughout his blog; for example, one comment posted by the username "Sarah" reads: "your entries are amazing, completely unlike anything I have ever read before. I credit you with inspiring my new interest in the war in Iraq. You finally brought the human aspect of the war into my perspective. To me soldiers were always just numbers on the nightly news and I could never truly grasp the reality of your situation. I look forward to every posting and my thoughts and prayers are with you" (qtd. in Buzzell, "Comments"). Nonetheless, others opposing the war itself would also venture to convey their own thoughts to the blogger too to enrich such a participatory milieu, such as one with the username "RedWhiteandRed" commenting: "Your Blog is very interesting. . . . I cannot believe that you think invading someone's home and terrorizing their children is justified as part of President Bush's vendetta. . . . The people shooting at you believe that they are defending

their homeland against hostile invaders” (qtd. in Buzzell, “Comments”). Hence, through his blogging site, Buzzell offers his audience a space for public debate where diverse viewpoints are both voiced and welcomed to be able to connect with his readers on a more personal level. Moreover, his reference to the pop song behind naming his blog is all the same assuring to his readers that their soldier is after all connected to the same cultural background to which they too belong, and not a distanced member of their country’s army whom they probably would feel alienated from and merely know about via corporate media channels.

Thus, in his article “Why Fiske Still Matters” (2011), Henry Jenkins explains: “Fiske pushed back against arguments about ‘media effects’ throughout his work and he would have rejected any easy claims about the ‘democratizing’ impact of new media as much as he would have repudiated the alleged power of broadcasting to ‘brainwash’ the public” (xv). Drawing upon the notion of agency further, especially in the world of media as an influential player in shaping modern culture, Fiske claims that television, for example, “does not ‘cause’ identifiable effects in individuals; it does, however, work ideologically to promote and prefer certain meanings of the world, to circulate some meanings rather than others, and to serve some social interests better than others” (*Television Culture* 20). This is mainly the intrinsic quality of corporate media and power structures which blatantly threatens individual understanding of the self and the surrounding world. Despite being classified academically as a means of “mass communications,” corporate media does little justice to the term since communication seems to be one-dimensional in this case as it overlooks the agency of audiences in communicating ‘back’ their own understandings and views. Fiske refers to such a setback as “the participation gap” (*Media Matters* 238). The several technological advancements offered by mainstream media, unfortunately, still failed to fill this gap as the tools alone proved incapable of giving voice to the marginalised, passively receptive audiences. Public participation was similarly minimized given the absence of sincere commitment towards altering hegemonic social and cultural factors that had initially hampered such participation. Thus, Fiske sarcastically remarks: “In premodern Europe, ... everyone had a larynx, but few were able to speak in public and political life” (238).

Resisting such restrictive modes of self-expression, audiences had to create an “alternative media” that would create a new “popular culture” wherein their voices could be openly expressed and sincerely encouraged.

However, to explain the technological gap often existing between mainstream and alternative media, Fiske coins the term “technostruggles” to highlight the unequal opportunities granted to each in order to express themselves; however, ironically, alternative media often supersedes, nevertheless. He recalls a significant example that circulated within US media at the time of a teenager resisting police forces drawing a comparison between two video versions of the incident, one caught by corporate media, the other shot by a passerby camera and later disseminated through alternative media outlets. Fiske quotes the incident to contrast “the ‘videohigh’ of the broadcast industry with the ‘videolow’ of citizen camcorder activism, a contrast which paves the way to a consideration of how broadcast and grassroots media competes with each other for attention and credibility.” (*Television Culture* xix). Surprisingly, although lacking advanced technological sophistication, the citizen’s video promised higher credibility rates to its viewers: “he owned a camera, but not a computer enhancer; he could produce and replay an electronic image, but could not show it, reverse it, freeze it, or write upon it, and his videolow appeared so authentic to so many precisely because he could not.” (*Media Matters* 223). Such features of spontaneity, crudeness, and credibility are not restricted to visual elements of media alone, but to all cultural products created within this alternative popular culture such as blogs. For example, in a post published on June 23, 2004 entitled “Blood and Soap”--triggering a guilty ‘Lady Macbeth’ memory within his readers--Jason Hartley shares with his audience a disturbing photo of a dead Iraqi man. Documenting his feelings towards the helpless corpse in an attempt to humanize it further only implies to his readers how futile and painful the situation is on the ground. The audience is invited to think of people--whom they only know about their deaths via corporate news agencies in dry statistical figures representing the total number of casualties--as real human beings instead:

We bungled getting him onto the hood and partly dropped his body in the process. I think that’s how he got those two parallel cuts on his

brow. Postmortem, as there's no blood. For years I didn't want to share this photo because I felt that it was too graphic or in bad taste, but his face is young and was probably about my age, and it's a face I can't get out of my head. He doesn't really look dead to me. Maybe that's why I thought I could have saved him. It looks like he had a recent haircut. He's a stranger to me, but he's very real and very human. Shot by his own countrymen as punishment for working with us, the Americans. It was a barren and desolate place. The walk he took down that gully was his last. What a [horrible] ... place to die. (Hartley, "Blood and Soap")

Hence, a single amateurish photo that, nevertheless, foregrounds both the helpless body and the agitated soldier could efficiently communicate to a world audience what other gigantic and more sophisticated appliances of news agencies might tend to negligently ignore. Audience feedback is equally significant and distinctive of blogosphere narratives given its uncensored immediacy. For instance, one reader later comments back stating "I appreciate that you gave me an insight to your thoughts on the civilians that have died in this war. I am not sure if you read these blog comments anymore, and I understand if you do, a large portion is from people yelling, screaming, and mostly throwing tantrums because they do not feel that they can be heard otherwise" (qtd. in Hartley, "Comments"). This comment, among several others, attests to the power of Hartley's rather amateurish photo and its impact on a mostly furious audience who is seldom allowed space to voice their frustrations over the endless bloodshed as indifferently announced through larger, more sophisticated broadcasting agencies.

More specifically, a term that Fiske is frequently noted for coining is "semiotic democracy" whereby audiences are given "back" their voices and control to reconsider values and stories offered to them by official media. Although some critics equalize it with capitalism's "consumer sovereignty," both terms ought not be dealt with synonymously. While the latter merely refers to a "superficial" sovereignty expressed through dull audience ratings and ineffective feedback that would later be utilized to maximize corporate interests, Fiske, on the other hand, explains his term as a pressing urge which audiences need to experience instead. This consequently allows them to

be active participants in shaping diverse cultural production: “we need a theory of pleasure that goes beyond meanings and ideology, a theory of pleasure that centers on the power to make meanings rather than on the meanings that are made.... The reading positions of a producerly text are essentially democratic, not autocratic ones” (*Television Culture* 239). Since Fiske is occasionally criticised for idealising the agency and power of individuals, cultural analysts such as Jim McGuigan accuse him of “a romanticization of the audience and its power that belies its social, political, and economic powerlessness” (qtd. in *Television Culture* n. pag.). However, Fiske’s writings could potentially get more validated in light of the cultural scene nowadays, especially post Web 2.0 where individuals succeed in finding their own liberated spheres of expression in return. His “unlimited belief in consumers’ creative and interpretive capacities” and siding with the marginalized “cultural underdog” (n. pag.) are proof to the power of individual narratives to intervene with other dominating cultural practices. Thus, popular culture is inherently a culture of continuous conflict as it “involves the struggle to make social meanings that are in the interests of the subordinate and that are not those preferred by the dominant ideology” (qtd. in Hinds 119).

### **Habermasian Public Sphere**

The virtual space of negotiating powers that Fiske is discussing has been expressed earlier by the noted German critic, Jürgen Habermas, through his notion of “public sphere” which is grounded within a distinct historical framework:

the liberal public sphere took shape in the specific historical circumstances of a developing market economy.... In its clash with the arcane and bureaucratic practices of the absolutist state, the emergent bourgeoisie gradually replaced a public sphere in which the ruler’s power was merely represented *before* the people with a sphere in which state authority was publicly monitored through informed and crucial discourse *by* the people. (McCarthy xi)

Habermas’ public sphere remains even more relevant nowadays than when it first appeared given the menacing consequences of a “globalized” human society being unprecedentedly controlled by self-interested economic and political forces that impudently marginalise any

resistive or dissenting voices. The blogosphere's 'democratic' and uncensored cultural production proves to be a representation of such a Habermasian public sphere that hosts communal discussion and debate away from the hegemonic cultural practices that several mainstream platforms gradually adopt to ensure their often utilitarian policies. For example, Buzzell's blog serves as a stark representation of such a public sphere in which his voice, as well as his readers, whether supporting or opposing the war, are all given equal space to be heard with hardly any restrictive measures often dictated through other corporate-led media platforms, and which ultimately serve interests of hegemonic power structures. Hence, commenting on the ongoing tension amongst individual narratives and such structures, the LA Times published an article of solidarity for milbloggers in September 5, 2004 in appreciation of the emerging subgenre claiming:

Other wars produced poetry and novels and memoirs. But the war in Iraq has brought a new kind of literature. In real time, on the Internet, officers and enlisted men and women are chronicling the war on weblogs — better known as blogs. Two weeks ago, one of the most popular war bloggers, a soldier stationed near the northern Iraqi city of Mosul who identified himself only as CBFTW [Colby Buzzell], was disciplined for violating "operational security." His gritty postings described both the terror and boredom of war. (n. pag.)

Therefore, the public sphere represented through a participatory blogosphere is what allows writers a more fruitful prod-usage experience, i.e. being both producers and users of internet production. The personal stories of Buzzell and his fellow writers convey to a world audience the intricate details of human experience that could not be captured by other media forms. For instance, in a post entitled "Three Loud Explosions" published June 24, 2004, Buzzell documents his personal experience using several sensory images desperately trying to communicate to the remote readers in different parts of the world how chaotic the scene often is:

I can hear small arms fire right now coming from outside the wire as I write this entry. On my way to the internet cafe that they have set up for us on this FOB (Forward Operating Base) I heard three loud

explosions, about 5 minutes apart, followed by some brief small arms fire. We have cement mortar bunkers set up for us all over this FOB for us to seek cover in during an attack. From a cement shelter I observed three very large dust mushroom clouds from right outside the wire from where the explosions took place. You could feel the conclusion of the explosions from where I was standing. No word yet what just happened. The craziness begins. (Buzzell, "Three Loud Explosions")

Thus, in his article "The Media and the Public Sphere," Nicholas Garnham attests to the durability and functionality of the Habermasian notion on two levels: first, "the development of an increasingly integrated global market and centers of private economic power with global reach are steadily undermining the nation-state ....What new political institutions and new public sphere might be necessary for the democratic control of a global economy and polity?"; second, because "our inherited structures of public communication, those institutions within which we construct, distribute, and consume symbolic forms, are themselves undergoing a profound change" (362). Therefore, alternative media did rise as an emerging substitute that could effectively enforce such "profound change" emphasizing individual agency and participation.

In return, official media still endeavours to contain such authority-threatening powers through "seemingly" increasing the level of participation of social groups in media products. In their book *Talk on Television: Audience Participation and Public Debate*, Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt examine why ordinary people nowadays are increasingly encouraged to share their stories in public TV shows, and to what effect would such layman participation help voice views of marginalized social strata, and who actually benefits after all given the form and content of such scenes: "Why do the broadcast media increasingly offer opportunities for participation and how do they manage the arguments which take place? Is this a new form of public space or forum, part of a media public sphere?" (1). Although there is an undeniable change in the role of mass media nowadays in shaping "political discussion, participatory democracy and public discourse" (1), several justifiable concerns are under study regarding how such parades and media debates eventually serve consolidate the dominant position of corporate interests, while the ostensibly audience-oriented approach is



what Habermas confidently dismisses since “critical debate arranged in this manner certainly fulfils important social-psychological functions, especially that of a tranquilizing substitute for action” (qtd. in Livingstone et al. 15). Similarly, Livingstone and Lunt reiterate this conclusion claiming that such programmes are merely “a trick to capture a passive, mass audience through the illusion of influence and involvement” (15). Therefore, most talk shows braggingly hosting a passively silenced audience are in essence, as Philip Elliott identifies: “a continuation of the shift away from involving people in society as political citizens of nation states towards involving them as consumption units in a corporate world” (qtd. In Livingstone et al. 15).

Criticizing Habermas’ generic representation of a unified public sphere, however, during the 1990s, Nancy Fraser offers yet a more specific, inclusive, and participation-friendly ‘counter-public sphere’: “complicating the standard liberal picture of a single comprehensive public sphere, I claimed that the proliferation of subaltern counterpublics could enhance the participation of subordinate strata in stratified societies” (Fraser n. pag.). She aimed at spaces hosting multiple identities to ensure each individual ample room for self-expression respecting the cultural specificities and shared experiences within each group:

Fraser pointed out that processes of inclusion of previously excluded groups ... couldn’t be completed simply by allowing these Others into a pre-defined space in which particular interests or positions had already been declared as acceptable, rational, neutral or universal. A more radical rethinking involving a redefinition of the roles and gendering of public and private spaces was required. Fraser’s call was for the establishment of multiple public spheres across which debates might flow and through which difference could be recognised and respected rather than being resolved through the invocation of culturally constructed ‘universal’ values. (Thomham et al. 108)

Not only does Fraser criticize the tight space given to specific groups in Habermas’ public sphere, she also denounces his idealization of the bourgeoisie: “I argued that social equality is a necessary condition for political democracy. Under real-world conditions of massive inequality, I reckoned, the only way to reduce disparities in political

voice was through social movement contestation that challenged some basic features of bourgeois society” (Fraser n. pag.). She wants to envision a sphere that is linear, not hierarchical; that offers equal participatory space for each, rather than validate and dictate certain notions from above while dismissing others. Therefore, alternative media, and more specifically digital media is an influential extension of such counter-public spheres as it offers its users free spaces for both self-expression and communal debate.

### **Emerging Cultural Production**

Digital media is rising nowadays as an amalgamation of all previous human endeavours towards finding one’s voice and identity while at the same time being able to instantly connect and interact with different social groups in a democratic sphere of public discussion:

The digital media environment that has emerged involves both new and old formations. New generations of digital technologies do not start a world or start the whole world or start the whole of media studies over again. New media has a history as well as a future. Indeed it might be suggested that it has many histories, since it emerges at the intersection of so many other technologies and draws into itself so many formats, genres, forms of social practice and indeed so much previously ‘non-digital’ content. (Thomham et al. 792)

Raymond Williams has similarly anticipated the emergence of new media and literary forms that ensure some kind of “correspondence” between the producers of such cultural products and their audiences across diverse social strata: “It is obvious that we are living through a revolutionary period in which the creative response through new forms is clear.... The discovery of such forms is the work of creative individuals, but the necessary conventions and attitudes to ensure a form’s survival depend on a degree of correspondence between the individual discovery and the new general consciousness” (297-8). However, resistance is an embedded key feature of such emergent cultural forms which require users find more creative forms of expression not only content-wise but also through their incessant devising of mechanisms that allow them to evade hegemonic practices which either ruthlessly target their potentially

growing influence or even their mere existence in the first place. John Fiske explains:

The term ‘resistance’ is used in its literal sense, not in its more overtly political or even revolutionary one of attempting to overthrow the social system. Rather it refers to the refusal to accept the social identity proposed by the dominant ideology and the social control that goes with it.... The fact that this subversive or resistive activity is semiotic or cultural rather than social or even military does not denude it of any effectivity. Sociopolitical systems depend finally upon cultural systems, which is to say that the meanings people make of their social relations and the pleasures that they seek serve in the last instance to stabilize or destabilize that social system. Meanings and pleasures have a general and dispersed social effectivity though maybe not a direct and demonstrable effect. (*Television Culture* 241)

Moreover, in his book *Net Smart: How to Thrive Online*, Howard Rheingold also defines cultural resistance as the counter-hegemonic endeavour that overthrows the assumption that “average citizens are largely locked outside of the process of cultural production and circulations” (116). He quotes De Certeau’s “survival mechanisms” as the tactics that allow us “to negotiate a space for our own pleasures and meanings in a world where we mostly consumed content produced by corporate media” (116). Even the slightest participatory gestures could initiate or at least help build up more solid ground for cultural resistance: “from clicking on a link or “like,” or “favoriting” a tweet or video ... lightweight forms of participation can lead to more engaged and creative involvement” (119).

As this study is particularly examining blogs as a constitutive agent in such participatory media, the role of bloggers is center stage to the fruition of such resistance. Hence, being a writer and blog researcher himself, Scott Rosenberg, for instance, opens up about his own individual experience with this emerging online form and its inherently promising potential for shaping our modern world:

Writing is a way of discovering one’s voice and feeling its strength.... Writing -- making texts -- changes how we read and think. Every blogger (at least ... that wasn’t already a writer) is someone who

has learned to read the world differently. The person who has struggled to turn a thought into a blog post, and then seen how that post has been reflected back by readers and other bloggers, is someone who can think creatively about how sharing might work at other scales and in other contexts. A mind that has changed is more likely to imagine a world that can change. (qtd. in Rheingold 121)

Hence, the role of a blogger is being stretched to include new challenges that they need to efficiently address. They are not expected to simply jot down their personal thoughts or blandly delineate their surroundings, but rather embrace their newly ascribed social responsibilities having chosen to share their personal narratives publicly: “Many bloggers serve as ‘intelligent filters’ for their publics by selecting, contextualizing, and presenting links of particular interest for that public” (123). Rosenberg further emphasizes that the terms ‘public’ and ‘audience’ ought not be used interchangeably; a distinction is key for bloggers because they need to keep a community of peers in mind: “people you may or may not know personally, but who not only read but also could potentially respond to what you write, who might act on your advice, and who might join you in discussion and collective action” (123). Therefore, the emerging blogosphere cultural production has enabled both writers and readers to efficiently apply new configurations to their worlds endeavoring to bridge gaps left out by several mainstream narratives.

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