

Chapter 45

Blogging Their Way Out of Disadvantage: Women, Identity and Agency in the Blogosphere

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ABSTRACT

The ways that blogs are used to improve the lot of the disenfranchised is an area that is increasingly gaining research traction. This chapter presents a literature review of the recent literature in to the ways that minority groups are using blogs to tell their story to a wide audience. It looks at the ways that human rights bloggers have used Web 2.0 platforms to express themselves. It then applies Foucault's (1988) work on self-expression to other groups who are also heavy users of blogs to express themselves in new ways. The chapter looks at poverty, at those who identify as LGBTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer) and women. It suggests that there is much research that still needs to be undertaken to properly examine the role of blogs in the lives of increasing numbers of groups who are not able to express themselves in mainstream media, and to explore the ways that these blogs render mainstream media irrelevant in connected times.

INTRODUCTION

Blogging is an important means of self-expression. Studies (cf. El-Nawawy & Khamis, 2013; Howard, 2010) have suggested that minorities, the disenfranchised and those who may lack a voice are able to use blogs to express their frustrations. In addition, blogs provide an avenue to discuss and bring attention to the plight of specific groups, for example the LGBTQ community and the homeless. As researchers have frequently noted, one of the groups most at risk of discrimination and disenfranchisement (cf. Schuster 2013; Lawson; 2013; Bennet, 2014), are women. Thus, this chapter explores the ways that several marginalised groups and later more specifically women, can use blogs to overcome entrenched disadvantage.

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The chapter explores how marginalised groups negotiating identity, community, and agency in the blogosphere. It begins by exploring how blogs are used as a means of self-expression. It discusses the use of social capital theory (cf. Foucault, 2003) as a means of examining and understanding the purpose of blogs for people's ability to converse with a wider audience. Then, the chapter discusses how human rights groups use blogs to publicise specific examples of human rights abuses as a further form of self-expression. The next section examines a further group that has benefitted from the increase in blogging sites as a form of self-expression, those who are living in poverty, specifically the homeless. From this, further disenfranchised groups, those who identify as LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer) are discussed. Finally, the use of blogs and social media by women are more generally described. The discussion that follows looks at how Foucault's social capital theory can further enhance the analysis of blogs.

A TOOL FOR SELF-EXPRESSION

Blogging is often described in the literature as a means of self-expression. Until a decade ago, creative expression had been mostly produced and offered for a price by "experts" and corporations with little input from the consumers of the creative products themselves (Bruns, 2006). The print and broadcast era dominating the years roughly between 1950 and 1980 saw a strict division of labour between those who distributed creative products in a top-down fashion to the masses and those who purchased these products for private consumption (Bruns, 2006). The result of this approach was that few who were marginalised had the ability to publish. As we settle well into the new media environment, the Internet now acts as an open innovation network that benefits from harnessing the creative input of the entire population, not just the opinions of a select few (Bruns, 2006; Burgess, 2007; Hartley, 2004). Unlike other avenues for creative expression, the Internet does not distinguish between literacy and publication. In the new media environment there is an almost infinite scope for DIY (do-it-yourself) and DIWO (do-it-with-others) creative content produced by and for consumers, without the need for institutional filtering or bureaucracy (Burgess, 2007). New media is fueling population-wide online literacy, through which everyone is a potential publisher. But what is it that motivates individuals to publish their creative thoughts and feelings online?

Blogs are often characterised by high amounts of self-disclosure that foster and encourage the presentation of one's identity (Bronstein, 2013). Researchers (Bronstein, 2013; Schneider, 2012; Hsiu-Chia, et al., 2009) have adopted Foucault's social capital theory to describe how identity and social capital are transformed through blogs on the Internet. Foucault (1988) traces writing as one of several techniques for caring for one's self or constructing a new self. Foucault noted that "taking care of the self in and through writing is one of the oldest Western traditions," (1988, p. 27). Throughout his career, Foucault was interested in the relationship between societal regulation and individual self-regulation, and the formation of identity within the complex power relations of society. One of his main concerns in relation to power was with the notion of governmentality. Foucault (2003, p. 147) described governmentality as "the encounter between technologies of domination of others and those of the "self". Governmentality has been defined as "the art of government that includes a wide range of control techniques, and that applies to a wide variety of objects, from one's control of the self to control of populations" (O'Farrell, 2007). Foucault originally used the term governmentality to describe the ways in which the state administers populations and later expanded his definition to encompass the techniques and procedures,

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