

# Genre Under Construction: The Diary on the Internet

LAURIE MCNEILL

University of Michigan

## Abstract

The emergence of the diary as a digital form has generated the kinds of introduction and explanation that typically accumulate around emerging genres, even though online diarists in many ways strive to reproduce the stereotypical print diary. However, as diarists and readers explore the nature of blogs, both in diary entries and comments pages, a tension is apparent between users' accounts or explanations of the genre and their actual practices, and this tension provides a rich site for studying the evolution of the diary genre. Readers' and writers' comments illustrate the blogging community's ideas about genre as a concept and how these ideas transfer to the "new" world of online media. In this paper, I look at the diary's transition from page to screen, and consider how readers and writers build on and diverge from print culture practices in establishing expectations and "rules" for Weblogs. Examining how diarists and their communities establish and police the digital diary, and how generic knowledge is circulated and codified, helps understand the particular social actions the diary can perform only on the Internet.

In contemporary Western culture the diary is among the most familiar genres, an enduring everyday form that has evolved and adapted across time yet has remained recognizable in each instance. As a genre that straddles and confuses ideals of the literary and non-literary, public and private, the diary hasn't garnered much respect or even notice as either a form of literature or a cultural practice. But in the last decade the diary has taken centre stage in a rather unlikely venue, the Internet, where it has become one of the genres of choice for online writers. This pairing of genre and medium, however, seems troubling, if not paradoxical: after all, the diary is a centuries-old practice associated with the spiritual, the therapeutic, and the strictly private, while the Internet, home of the "New Media," has been celebrated for its publicity and accessibility. Perhaps because of this seemingly improbable conjunction, the diary's digitalization has generated the kinds of introduction and

explanation that typically accumulate around emerging genres, even though online diarists in many ways strive to reproduce the stereotypical print diary.

However, as diarists and readers explore the nature of blogs, both in diary entries and comments pages, a tension is apparent between users' accounts or explanations of the genre and their actual practices, and this tension provides a rich site for studying the evolution of the diary genre. Readers' and writers' comments illustrate the blogging community's ideas about genre as a concept and how these ideas transfer to the "new" world of online media. In this paper, I look at the diary's transition from page to screen, and consider how readers and writers build on and diverge from print culture practices in establishing expectations and "rules" for Weblogs. Examining how diarists and their communities establish and police the digital diary, and how generic knowledge is circulated and codified, helps understand the particular social actions the diary can perform only on the Internet.

First I will provide some background on the diary's history as an online form. Diaries began to appear on the Internet in 1995, typically developing out of the personal home pages of individuals already involved with Internet technologies (Astruc, Leitch-Thompson and Wade n.p.). In 1997 people started creating pages that became known as Weblogs (or "blogs")—these were daily lists of annotated links to other sites, without extended commentary or personal narratives. They acted as filters for the burgeoning content of the Web and directed readers to material the blogger found particularly worthwhile. In 1999 free software became available that allowed users who did not know HTML to make and post a blog or diary. As a result, blogging became an accessible activity for significantly more people, and the numbers of both diaries and blogs mushroomed (Blood "Weblogs" 8). (Now in 2004 there are hundreds of thousands of blogs and diaries online.) With the huge influx of new writers into the blogging and online diary communities, both forms evolved to suit these users' needs. Collapsing these related forms into one, the latest generation of writers marry personal narratives (like a diary) with critical commentary

about the Web and its content (like a blog), drawing on the Internet culture to speak to and for other “Netizens.”

As these formerly distinct text-types merged and the resulting hybrid form became hugely popular, writers talked openly in their texts about what they saw themselves doing and why, seeking to understand the genre by examining their own practices. Since the online diary—whether called a diary or a blog, a contentious issue of terminology that I will return to in a moment—has a relatively short history and challenges stereotypes of the offline version, many readers and writers see the genre as an emerging form. Consequently, its practitioners make particular efforts to tell readers how to read and other writers how to write. This commentary can be characterized as what Giltrow and others have called meta-genre, which is discourse about genres by its users. By advising and even prescribing how writing should be produced, what it should look or sound like, meta-genre acts to typify a genre. Because meta-genre comes from within the community formed by the genre, it indicates how the community, to paraphrase Burke, “acts together” through genre, using genre to accomplish purposes that serve and establish the group.

The appearance of such meta-genre is, perhaps, unexpected in a genre so frequently characterized as artless, without rules, fragmentary, and personal rather than professional. Despite the booming self-help market for journalling “how-to” guides, the print diary is typically considered a genre that requires no analysis or instruction. Because of the popular notion that the personal manuscript diary never circulates, new diarists apparently know how they are supposed to write through some kind of cultural osmosis. And since ostensibly no one else should be reading these diaries, it hardly matters whether or not a diarist successfully reproduces the genre.

Online diarists, on the other hand, who write diaries explicitly for external readers, *will* be evaluated on their generic performance. The consistent appearance of meta-genre in online diaries indicates bloggers’ awareness of this potential evaluation as well as their sense

that they are doing something new, even transgressive, and therefore requiring commentary. Web-diarists comment on all aspects of their texts, holding forth on topics including style, ethics, connections to other genres, and audience. These discussions, in which writers explain, justify, teach, or philosophize, illuminate cultural values, reading practices, and discourse features. In addition, such commentary allows diarists to address their desired readers specifically, distinguishing their community members from the hundreds of thousands of “lurkers” who read blogs without becoming part of the diary’s communities. Understanding genre and making a genre claim are therefore not simply academic concerns for practitioners. Internet diarists need to be clear about what kind of text they see themselves producing in order to attract the kinds of readers they seek. Building a faithful audience is one of the key social actions that diaries perform in this context, and the establishment of community is arguably the exigence to which bloggers use diaries to respond. Failure to understand or adequately perform the genre, to live up to the expectations it creates, may well mean a failure to attract and keep readers—and a lack of readership causes the demise of many blogs. While writing to an actual reader in a print diary may be seen as breaking generic “rules,” doing so online is not just expected but demanded. Internet diarists ignore their readers and their desires at their own (textual) peril. Advising readers how to read their texts allows diarists to anticipate readers’ misunderstandings about the nature of their texts, and avoid offending potential new audiences.

Looking at what bloggers say about the texts they are producing, and how they see their work in both a digital and literary context, demonstrates the careful negotiations these writers make in producing texts that will build the communities they seek. But their commentaries also underscore the tension and confusion that surrounds claims for “newness” in these personal sites. Recognizing that “a lot of people are quite insistent” that journals and blogs are different forms, for example, blogger Jane Pinckard discusses her

decision to create separate pages for her journal and her blog. She explains, “for me the weblog and the journal have very different functions. The weblog is sort of my “instant fix” for when I feel like I just *have* to write about something, even if I don’t necessarily have a lot of time.” In contrast to this off-the-cuff writing, the journal calls upon a more literary tradition: she says, “It takes me longer to write, I think about it more, and it tends to be much more rambling, introspective what have you” (<http://www.umamitsunami.com>). More forcefully, blogger Neale Talbot argues that blogs and diaries are distinct genres and should remain that way. He acknowledges that blogs “share similar elements to the journal world,” but concludes, “that don’t mean one will eat the other. Distinct places. Distinct genres. You say it’s the same old shit in the same old package. Well I say it’s a lot less shit in a much smaller package” (157). Echoing Pinckard, he explains, “They’re different styles for different audiences about different things” (157-158). The aggressiveness of his rant, a tone picked up by many bloggers—“Why your moveable type blog must die”--, demonstrates high anxiety about generic contamination, an anxiety perhaps fuelled by the diary’s offline reputation as a feminine genre of no consequence.

“Old school” bloggers like Talbot may want to see themselves as participating in a new enterprise, one without the cultural baggage of an existing (print) genre, and consequently disavow any connection to related or similar genres. While the term “online diaries” clearly connects these texts to the print world, to the traditions of the diary and the generic rules and expectations that come with them, the expression “blogs” invites a reading of these writings as a *new* form. However, as Pinckard’s definitions illustrate, generic (and, correspondingly, community) lines may not be any easier to keep clean online than off. Though bloggers clearly want to align themselves with a new genre and culture, reflective of their participation in the so-called “New Media,” their practices tie them to the traditions of the diary, too. Pinckard describes journal-writing as an activity requiring time, thought, and meditation, a characterization that reflects traditional uses of the diary as a spiritual exercise,

personal therapy tool, and literary production. Despite the public nature of the online journal, it still focuses on the personal and introspective. Her characterization of the blog as off-the-cuff, capturing her thoughts in the instant of writing, though, is a style also popularly associated with the diary genre as an artless, spontaneous text.

In reality even the scantiest of blog narratives incorporates trademark diary features, with regular, dated entries that focus on the diarist's experiences or at least his or her interests. Few practitioners separate their writings as Pinckard does, making instead texts that do a little bit of everything, and eliding the artificial distinction between the blog and the diary (just as the line between "diary" and "journal" is untenable when we look at actual writing practices). Despite their difference in name and occasionally in format, then, Weblogs draw upon the diary form and tradition, and perhaps we can read the blog as simply another kind or function of the diary genre, one particularly well-suited to contemporary diarists. Online participation in this genre allows writers to carry on public diary conversations that will no longer be monologic, where the response will not be just imagined but actual. These conversations may be in-depth discussions, as in Pinckard's journal, or simply chats, as in her blog, with varying degrees of personal disclosure and intimacy—the "different styles for different audiences" that Talbot highlights. But even in this new context, bloggers do not write in a vacuum; they participate in a generic activity with a long history, and this history will be activated each time the genre is used. They know that their diaries will be recognized by and understandable to their audiences in part because of this generic precedent, even as the genre evolves in this different situation. The fact that both bloggers felt the need to acknowledge this generic confusion and outline their approach underscores the importance of genre to their own projects and to the communities they address. Participation in a genre attracts particular kinds of readers, and Pinckard and Talbot's meta-genre suggests that "blogs" and "journals" can hail very different groups, particularly if the writer denies that any cross-over exists between the old and new forms.

Writers who identify their texts as “Internet diaries,” as opposed to “blogs,” in particular must keep a delicate balance between old and new practices and expectations. Readers again are central to this exercise, since they provide explicit feedback in comments pages and guestbooks that demonstrates their expectations and whether or not these are being met. Steve Schalchlin, who was one of the first Internet diarists when he began posting in 1996, incorporated his readers’ responses into his meta-genre, clearly indicating to his audience their instrumental role in the entries he writes. For instance, early on he struggled to reconcile the fluidity and public nature of the Internet diary with both his own and his readers’ experiences and expectations of the stereotypical “authentic” personal journal (that is, the idea of the diary as an uncensored or unmediated text, written in the moment for no external reader, that therefore presents the “truth.”) After looking back at the previous month’s entries, which he feels painted an overly optimistic view of his life, he ponders the ethics of going back and editing to reflect the “truth.” He muses, “[I]s it fair to add or change the way you *felt* at any given time? I just don’t know” (27 June 1996). By September 1997, he records the impulse to change an old entry in which he had been extremely angry, but concludes, “My diary page from yesterday will stay as it is (because readers have now laid down the law about me changing a single word of anything I write)” (12 Sept. 1997). To Schalchlin’s audience, his going back and changing entries that cast him in an unfavorable light would be “cheating,” inauthentic, inaccurate. They seek a text that cannot be altered after the fact, a “finished” version that would most resemble the fixed nature of the entries in a published diary. They look for their experiences of the traditional journal to be replicated in this new context, despite the changes Internet technology has made to that experience of genre.

The fact that readers have “laid down the law,” and that Schalchlin is respecting that (legalistic) decision, provides evidence of an implicit mutual agreement about the new rules of the diary, one formulated to suit this particular community’s understandings of the genre.

As Schalchlin's experiences suggest, these genre rules are produced in collaboration between writers and readers, a distinct departure in practice from manuscript diaries. Playing by these "rules" therefore both upholds community norms and assists in attracting readers, whose presence, as we have noted, is key to the Internet diary's social actions. Bloggers operate under an unwritten code of conduct that governs the appropriate uses of an Internet diary, a code based again on the generic traditions of the print diary but adapted to the genre's new online capacity. Readers still expect texts that are personal, even intimate, even while they hope to become part of a community through the shared experience of reading these "private" texts.

These opposing ideals can produce friction within a particular community when diarists infringe upon any of these sequestered expectations. I was not surprised to see this confusion and negotiation around generic practices when Schalchlin began—at that point Internet diaries had been on the scene for less than a year and very few of them existed. But his experiences in 1996 and 1997 with angry and rule-making readers are not in fact unusual for bloggers, nor has the issues his case highlights—issues including disclosure, truth claims, intimacy—been satisfactorily resolved. In May 2004, Justin Hall, another Web pioneer who has kept an online diary in various forms since 1994, ignited a firestorm of response when a reader posted a comment questioning whether Hall had been being truthful with his readers about his decision to go to grad school. Within hours of the original response, 64 replies appeared, and similar numbers of readers responded to each of Hall's subsequent posts. Hall was either pilloried or defended—some readers made point-by-point refutations of Hall's version of his experiences, while others came up with explanations or defended his right not to tell all. (Hall himself never directly addressed the debate.) These unhappy readers clearly expected Hall's diary to be an exact mirror of his offline life—expectations that arise out of the stereotype of the contemporary diary. Appearing almost 8 years after Schalchlin's near-misstep, and generating a huge response from readers (though notably not from Hall

himself), this meta-genre—generated by readers this time, not writers--shows how expectations of print-based genres linger on even in this new context, and may only become apparent or articulated when they have been violated.

I thought this situation was particularly interesting because these expectations of diaries were being reproduced or imported wholesale from print culture without any seeming recognition of the new context. Hall is partly responsible for these ongoing expectations, because of his site design and content, and his carefully cultivated reputation for telling all. But this brouhaha suggests to me that almost 10 years after the first diaries appeared on the Web the form and content continue to confuse. Both cases illustrate the ongoing evolution of and experimentation with these diaries and their possibilities. Diarists are still figuring out what are the acceptable uses (to both readers and to themselves) and the limits (and limitations) of these texts when they are read as diaries. These experiences of expectations and confusion make me curious whether CMC users, like the CMC theorists Janet studies, also bring a formalist understanding of genre to what they do. Perhaps because of all the claims of “newness” that surround online writing, readers and diarists seek order and reliability, stability instead of change. The volume of writing about the texts they either produce or read may be a reaction against the constant change of the Web, as technologies, types of users, and textual functions continue to evolve at a pace not typically experienced in print genres.

Since online diaries incorporate the familiar alongside the strange, they are unsettling generic territory. Producing texts that consciously bridge both print and Internet cultures, online diarists work to give new audiences a context within which to understand their texts and help them develop expectations for the genre and its producers. Concerned with creating texts that serve functions for both themselves and their readers, online diarists write with an awareness of, and a desire for, a reading public unprecedented for the traditional concept of the diary and diarist. Carrying over to the Internet such expected features as dated, distinct

entries, a confiding if not confessional tone, and a concern with the everyday details of one's own life, Web-diarists reassure readers of the print diary that their narrative expectations will be met online. But these diarists also expand the form to fit new uses and users, adding counters, e-mail addresses, links, and discussion boards, addressing the range of possibilities the technology of the Internet opens up for the diary genre. The combination of new technologies and an old form generates what has become a productive tension within the loose community formed by participation in the online diary. Both readers and writers work together to establish a definition of the genre and its consequences that suits their particular needs. As such, they make the Internet diary a useful response to the situations of contemporary society and culture.

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