Name: Nicholas Samuel Hookway

Full address: School of Sociology and Social Work
University of Tasmania
Locked Bag 1340
Launceston 7250 Tasmania
Australia

Phone: +61 +03 +63243657

Email: hookwayn@utas.edu.au
Human Documents Research: From the Diary to the Blog

Nicholas Hookway

School of Sociology and Social Work, University of Tasmania

hookwayn@utas.edu.au

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Abstract

The growing interest in narratives and story-telling in contemporary social life has corresponded with a growing theoretical interest in what Plummer (2001) calls ‘documents of life’. Documents of life offer a means for accessing life stories and are taken as providing insight into the lived experience of social actors. In this paper, I comment on what might be considered a new ‘document of life’, or at least an electronic revision of an existing offline format - the ‘weblog’, or more commonly, the ‘blog’. Specifically, I focus on how blogs may be considered an online extension of offline diary research and some of the benefits they offer the social researcher. The research context is a current empirical study that uses blogs as a technique for exploring the question of how contemporary urban Australians understand and experience morality in their everyday lives.


\textbf{Introduction}

I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read in the train.

(Oscar Wilde, 1895, \textit{The Importance of Being Earnest}, Act II)

Accounts of individual and subjective experience, both oral and written, are omnipresent in contemporary Western social life. This can be seen in a range of cultural developments from the rise of self-help literature and therapy, to talk shows, reality TV and seemingly endless celebrity interviews. The social sciences have not been immune, with narratives, subjectivities, life histories, story telling and biography becoming newly mapped sociological territory since the 1980’s (Plummer 2001). At the centre of this ‘narrative turn’ is the idea that storytelling can be understood as the ‘organising principle of human action’ (Riessman 2002:217) - imposing upon human experience a particular way of seeing, understanding and evaluating the world.

The burgeoning focus on narratives, story-telling and life-stories has corresponded with a growing theoretical interest in what Plummer (2001) calls ‘documents of life’: those personal artefacts of lived experience such as diaries, letters, biographies, self-observation, personal notes, photographs and films. Documents of life are taken as offering insight into how people understand and experience the world and the creative ways in which people express these understandings and experiences. In this paper, I comment on what might be considered a new ‘document of life’, or at least an electronic revision of an existing offline format - the ‘weblog’, or more commonly, the ‘blog’. In the first part of the paper I provide a brief overview of diary research and offer some preliminary suggestions about where blogs might fit within this research
tradition and finish with some of their practical and theoretical benefits that blogs might offer.

**Diaries as human documents**

Historically the use of personal documents in sociological research can be traced to the pioneering work of the Chicago School’s Thomas and Znaniecki (1927/1958). In their classic work *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, human documents, especially personal letters and life history, were used to investigate the experience of Polish peasants leaving their traditional village lives for the urban-industrial centres of America, particularly Chicago. In approaching this specific sociological problem and the wider theoretical issues of social (dis)integration and control, Thomas and Znaniecki make the controversial claim that ‘personal life records, as complete as possible, constitute the *perfect* type of sociological material’ (Thomas and Znaniecki 1958:1832-3).

For Thomas and Znaniecki, life records represent the ‘holy grail’ of sociological data as they offer insight into both ‘natural’ and ‘cultural’ systems, or more commonly now, ‘subjective’ meanings and ‘objective’ social structures. We are of course left with the question (and the possibility at all for that matter) of how *perfect* life records really are. For example, are participants’ accounts of individual experience enough – do they always know what’s significant about their social lives in the first place? Can life records be interpreted without understanding the social frameworks in which they are produced? Further, can lived experience be transparently read off written experience?
If documents of life are an exemplary form of sociological data, Allport (1942:95) argues that the diary is the ‘document of life par excellence’. As the ‘classic articulation of dailiness’ (Juhasz, 1980:334), social scientists have used diaries as a technique for collecting data on everyday life and as a means for understanding social actors both as observers and informants of social life (Toms and Duff 2002:1233). Diaries can be defined as a ‘document created by an individual who has maintained a regular, personal and contemporaneous record’ (Alaszewski 2006:1). Alaszewski (2006:2) identifies four characteristic features of diaries: 1) regular dated entries; 2) created by an individual person; 3) close proximity between experience and entries; and 4) record of entries.

Diaries are a somewhat neglected research strategy in sociological research (Toms and Duff 2002; Plummer 2001). Their marginal status is reflected not only in the small number of sociological studies that have utilised diaries but also in the paucity of methodological literature on their use (Alaszewski 2006). Plummer (2001:49), taking this point up, argues that the lack of systematic attention on diary research reflects the general decline of the diary as a form of writing in contemporary life. I would like to argue that diary writing is potentially being resurrected by one of the latest additions to Internet culture, blogs. Further, I argue that blogs might not only be breathing life into a dying form, they also provide new and exciting opportunities for social researchers.
Going Online: From the Diary to the Blog

The arrival of the Internet and other forms of computer-mediated communication has had a dramatic impact on the world of social scientific research. This is evident not only in terms of the scholarly focus on the types of interactions and social formations being built within cyberspace (Wellman et al 2001; Featherstone and Burrows 1995) but also in the recognition of cyberspace as a new frontier for social research (Hine 2005; Johns, Chen and Hall 2004). While there is a developing literature on how traditional research methodologies like surveys (Solomon 2001), interviews (O’Connor and Madge 2001) and focus groups (Franklin and Lowry 2001) can be adapted to internet technologies, the research potential of ‘blogs’ has been left untapped.

Touted as the ‘next evolution of web-based experience’ (Kahn and Kellner 2004:91), blogs have grown substantially in popularity since 1999. Historical accounts of blogging typically credit software developer Dave Winer as creating the first weblog in 1996. The coining of the term is attributed to Jorn Barger, who described his online journal Robot Wisdom in 1997 as a ‘weblog’ – literally a ‘log of his web surfing’ (Gurak et al 2004:1). The abbreviation ‘blog’ was subsequently applied by Peter Merholz in 1999 (Herring et al 2004:1). Whether blogs have revolutionised diary writing or not - a claim which remains open to empirical scrutiny - the number of blogs online is certainly impressive with estimates ranging from 2.8 million (National Institute for Technology and Liberal Education 2006), to 31.6 (Henning 2006) to over 100 million (Riley 2005).
What then is a blog? Quite simply, a blog refers to a website which contains a series of frequently updated, reverse chronologically ordered posts on a common web page, usually written by a single author (Herring et al 2005; Serfarty 2004). Evan Williams, the co-creator of blogging program ‘Blogger’, adds to this, arguing that blogs are united by ‘frequency, brevity and personality’ (Turnbull 2002). The narrative structure produced is linear, rigorously defined by chronology and has no sense of an ending. The personal and candid nature of online diaries combined with their open-endedness – in many ways reminiscent of the form and content of soap operas - gives them their addictive and captivating quality (Serfarty 2004). Blogs are also formally characterised by instant text/graphic publishing, an archiving system organised by date, and a feedback mechanism in which readers can ‘comment’ on specific posts.

While the format is relatively consistent, the content of blogs is wide-ranging and diverse. Rebecca Blood (2002), author of pioneering weblog, *Rebecca’s Pocket*, captures this diversity:

> Weblogs are the place for daily stories, impassioned reactions, mundane details, and miscellanea. They are as varied as their maintainers, and they are creating a generation of involved, impassioned citizens, and articulate, observant human beings.

This diversity in content translates into the existence of a variety of weblog genres from the pure filter blog (literally filters of one’s web surfing), to warblogs (eg, Salam Pax, aka the ‘Baghdad Blogger’) and celebrity blogs (eg, Wil Wheaton), through to educational, consumer, professional and pornographic ones. Typically however, as argued by Herring et al (2004) in their genre analysis of blogs, blogs take the form of online diaries or ‘life/human documents’, where private and intimate content is posted.
in daily, monthly and yearly snippets. The online diary is typically light on links with the focus being on the ‘drama’ (Goffman 1959) of everyday interactions, selves and situations. The ‘blogged about universe’ (Gumbrecht 2004:2) therefore can be on almost anything: daily appointments, work, partying, romantic interests, dreams, friends and daily interactions. Scattered among these descriptions and analyses of the minutiae of everyday life are references to various forms of popular culture, be it the music they are listening to (sometimes playing in the background of the blog), books they are reading or movies and TV they are watching.

From my experiences of researching blogs I’ve found them to vary greatly in degrees of self-reflection and analysis. At one end of the ‘self-reflection continuum’ are purely descriptive blogs, which non-reflexively recount the events of the day, from what the blogger has eaten for breakfast to who they have seen that day. At the other end of the continuum, are highly confessional and self-analytical blogs in which bloggers use their self-writing to make sense of their inner world, their emotions, their identity and their relationships with others.

The following quotes illustrate both the everyday and personal qualities of blogs and their variations in self-analysis:

32 year old male: Things i’ve done recently: been to ikea, been to my local furniture shop, been to ikea again, been to ikea yes i know, ... again .... bought a rug, bought a lamp, bought a bigger lamp … dug my lawn up, re-sown lawn, bought some shredded bark … walked along the beach, moved the shelving unit from the lounge to the kitchen, paid for my flight, cut my hair … had a performance review at work, asked for a pay rise, got laid, filed a years worth of bill ... thats all for now
36 year old male: I wish i had the magic to give Janine the life i stole from her. of all the people i've hurt in my life, it's her that i feel most dreadful about. she put so much trust and faith in me... and i really loved her. i still do. yet i screwed her over and tore that wonderful heart in two. if only i had some way to make it so i'd never happened to her life... if i could just patch up my era [sic] with a big sander bandaid... so that it had been him that she'd met and not me. admittedly, i'd lose a part of my life that means a lot to me... but i'd really rather never to have hurt her. and no matter how sorry i am, and how deeply i feel the grief, the apologies i give her can never unhurt her.

What can blogs offer social research?

Blogs offer substantial benefits for social scientific research providing similar, but far more extensive opportunities than their ‘offline’ parallel. Firstly, they share the generic advantages of offline diary research. That is, they provide a conduit for capturing situated action unadulterated by the scrutiny of a researcher and can help avoid problems associated with collecting sensitive information using traditional survey or interview methods (Elliot 1997; Corti 1993). Further, blogs capture an ‘ever-changing present’ (Elliot 1997:3) where there is a tight union between everyday experience and the record of that experience (Toms and Duff 2002). This means they are less susceptible to problems of memory impairment and retrospective reconstruction than interviews and focus groups (Verbrugge 1980).

However, as raised before in the general discussion of life records in social research, researchers need to be careful of treating lived experience as necessarily the same as the interpretation of written experience. For instance, there is a chance that reading and interpreting blogs without interaction with authors could result in misreading or substituting the researcher’s viewpoint for the participants. One solution to this
problem is to have some form of interaction with participants, which offers an opportunity to check understandings and interpretations. In my research, I attended to this problem by doing follow up online interviews with bloggers. This not only enabled me to check my initial analysis of the blog data but it is also provided an opportunity to explore emerging themes in greater depth.

Another disadvantage of diary research, and human document research generally, is the practical issues involved in collecting such data. Thomas and Znaniecki, for example, argued that while ‘human documents’ constitute the perfect type of sociological data, social scientists turned away from using life records because of the difficulties associated with obtaining it. One of the suggested ways of getting around this problem for Thomas and Znaniecki was to offer monetary rewards or run public contests.

Herein lies one of the key advantages of using blogs: they are an instantaneous, publicly available and low-cost technique for collecting substantial amounts of data. In addition, they are naturalistic data in textual form, allowing for the creation of immediate text without the resource intensiveness of tape recorders and transcription (Liamputtong and Ezzy 2005:232). Like the majority of online research strategies, they enable access to populations otherwise geographically or socially removed from the researcher (Mann and Stewart 2000).

The anonymity of the online context also means that bloggers may be relatively unselfconscious about what they write since they remain hidden from view. While this has it benefits in terms of accessing private and sensitive information, the flipside is
that it raises significant issues about potential identity play, display and deception.

This is of course not specific to blogs as an online genre. A lot of early internet research focused on the social implications of being anonymous in the online world, particularly in terms of online identity production and how this may or may not facilitate at type of postmodern realisation of the ‘decentred’ and ‘disembodied self’ (Danet, 1998; Turkle, 1995). While this may not be particularly problematic in terms of exploring the construction of specific cultural ideas (such as morality) it does raise methodological issues if a more systematic analysis (male vs female, older vs younger) of such ideas was to be undertaken.

Blogs in Social Research: A Case Study

To conclude I would like to briefly comment on the use of blogs as a research technique in an empirical study which seeks to explore the lived experience of morality in the everyday lives of urban Australians. The aim of this research is to investigate situated and grounded accounts of morality as it is experienced in everyday life. This means an attention to the everyday dilemmas, choices and self-struggles that are encountered in the process of living and making a life. I’m interested not so much in abstract philosophical debates about ethics and the nature of a good life but the grounded and everyday meanings of being a moral subject in contemporary social life.

The methodological question that I had to ask myself then was how do I attempt to capture peoples’ everyday moral worlds and realities from the perspective of the individual? One answer to this problem comes from psychology, particularly the
classic work of Lawrence Kohlberg (1981). Kohlberg presented subjects with hypothetical moral dilemmas and asked participants what they would do and why. The main problem with this approach is that it denies the lived and grounded experience of making a moral life and the ambivalence, stress and anxieties associated with moral decision-making. Further it privileges, like in-depth interviews and other research techniques that depend on soliciting ‘data’ from participants, accounts created within the research scenario rather than looking at what people actually do.

The narratives of everyday life that are a feature of blogs therefore provide a site for accessing peoples’ everyday understandings and subjective experiences of morality. As Plummer (2001:251) maintains ‘life stories are moral tales which show moral life at work’. What the blogs enable are access to rich first person accounts of the everyday moral dilemmas and ethical dramas that characterise contemporary life and how these are negotiated, managed and resolved. While I’m not claiming that blogs offer some magic route to ‘authentic’ experience, they are certainly useful for capturing situated action – for my purposes, situated moral action – unadulterated by the scrutiny of a researcher.

**Conclusion**

Contemporary life is filled with the telling of life stories, to the point that some suggest we inhabit an ‘auto/biographical’ (Plummer 2001) or ‘interview’ (Atkinson and Silverman 1997) society. While the telling of life stories has existed throughout history it seems that with the growing emphasis on the self as something to be created and reflected upon there is almost a contemporary compulsion to storing the self. As
one of the newest additions to internet culture, blogs are both symptom and cause of this trend. In this paper, I’ve argued that blogs represent the online version/updating of diary based human documents research. In particular I looked at some of the benefits that blogs might offer social researchers, specifically as an instantaneous, low-cost and global device for accessing the production of researcher free life-stories. I also offered some cautions around researchers non-problematically treating lived experience as the same thing as writing on that experience. I then concluded with an empirical case study looking at how blogs could be used to investigate the dynamics and lived experience of everyday moral life from a situated first-person perspective.
References


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