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Australian literary blogs and bloggers

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Australian literary blogs and bloggers: a review of the converged environment

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Australian literary blogs and bloggers: a review of the converged environment

Introduction

I write this paper from the perspective of an arts and humanities librarian at an Australian university. In this role I am expected to know about the information resources that Australian literary scholars and writers can access, and to have a perspective on some of the scholarly debates in the discipline.

Scholars in Australian Studies and other areas need to keep abreast of the literature and research within their field of study. It is a given now that both print resources and online resources need to be examined within the traditional scholarly ‘literature review’. One emerging area of scholarly and less scholarly publishing is the un-mediated world of online blogs. Blogs may now provide the very latest discussion on current topics for those scholars ‘in the know’. To illustrate this currency I provide an overview and critique of Australian literary blogs as they appeared online in 2008 and 2009.

My method is to critically survey the ‘online literature’ of Australian literary blogs. I describe some noteworthy blogs, indicating which ones I consider to be the most important and influential, and concluding that blogs now provide another rich source of current information and online debates, which should be better known by Australian scholars.

I have a particular interest in Web 2.0 technologies, including blogs. In 2007 I was the project leader of Learning 2.0, a professional development program at Edith Cowan University (Gross and Leslie 2007). As part of the program, each ECU library staff participant established a personal blog as a type of learning diary. At this time I established my own library blog (Gross). One of my current research interests is blogging and how the blog medium is being used by writers, reviewers, scholars and literary journalists.

I intend in this paper to describe the world of Australian literary blogs, within the conference themes: change, conflict and convergence, dealing with each in turn. Following this, I outline some key resources for evaluating, recording and preserving blogs.
Change

Change is inherent in technological development. Along the continuum of technological change, within this era of global networked information, the wave of social internet technologies known as Web 2.0 could be likened to a tsunami.

The term ‘Web 2.0’ can be traced back to Tim O’Reilly in 2004; it was used originally to describe the next generation of Web software where content could be shared, changed and exchanged (O'Reilly 2005). In usage it has come to refer to a cluster of social technologies such as blogs, and wikis, and social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, in and through which users are able to share, add and edit content, creating a socially networked web environment (Anderson 2007).

One key Web 2.0 technology is the weblog or blog. At first appearance a blog is similar to a web page. However, it has distinct characteristics. Peter Scott (Clyde 2004) defines a blog as “a web page containing brief chronologically arranged items of information”. But blogs are much more than this, and the potential of the blog genre is still being explored.

Blogging technology is deemed part of Web 2.0 because of its social potential, which enables easy comment and exchange of comments. Online dialogues can continue over time and blog writing has immediacy about it, not apparent in other forms of writing. The term ‘blogging’ has now come to refer not just to those who write blogs, but also those who post a comment on the blog. David Weinberger, author of *The Cluetrain Manifesto* is quoted by Lovink as stating: “blogs are not a new form of journalism ... blogs are not even primarily a form of individual expression. They are better understood as conversations”. (Lovink 2008)

With this in mind, online communities can be observed and conversations tracked over time. For example, communities of Australian literary bloggers have already developed in the internet community.
According to Kerryn Goldsworthy, Australian literary writer, reviewer and blogger:

"blogging … is protean and ongoing, something that exists in the continuous present…it’s a potentially interactive act of communication, something that not only gives out, but … invites readers in" (Goldsworthy 2008).

As Goldsworthy notes, the most successful blogs develop a sense of community. Typically the blog owner posts material, receives responses, and then responds to readers’ comments. Unlike other writing, the writer has a more immediate sense of the reader and can more readily establish an ongoing dialogue with the reader. Kerryn Goldsworthy herself writes several blogs, including *Australian Literature Diary*, (Goldsworthy) and *Ask the Bronte Sisters*, which gives light-hearted advice to writers. (Goldsworthy).

**Convergence**

For the purposes of this paper, I use the term “convergence” in the sense that online communication technologies are providing the medium for the integration and blending of ideas across disciplines.

One fine example of a converged Australian blog, with ideas about Australian literature, media and culture is the group blog: *Sarsaparilla lite* named after the Patrick White play. This blog is:

"devoted to discussing books, writing, film and television, theatre and the performing arts, music, publishing, the humanities, reading, cultural studies, and … other things, from a distinctively Australian perspective. (*Sarsaparilla lite*)"

Some of the *Sarsaparilla lite* host bloggers maintain their own blogs. The quality of the content is high and conversations lively. The idea of a group blog has huge practical benefits as the writing can be spread around. In recent months when tracking blogs, I have found that those maintained by individuals can remain dormant for a while, probably because individuals have other demands/responsibilities, which prevent them from continuing to write blog posts."
As an example of the type of posts you will find on the Sarsaparilla blog, in October 2008 Beth Driscoll posted the Australia-Asia Literary Award longlist (Driscoll 2008). The post was in essence a criticism of the list of books that had been nominated for the award, stating “they’ve already been heavily reviewed and nominated for multiple awards (some as long ago as the Booker 2007)”. This drew a thoughtful response from one reader, defending the prize longlist, and subsequently there were other messages on the topic.

There is a wide range of Australian literary blogs: blogs about Australian literature and writers; book reviewing blogs; blogs in the literary pages of newspapers; creative writer’s blogs; blogs devoted to particular authors, and on types of literature such as poetry, fantasy and young adult literature.

I will now give a brief overview of what I consider to be the most influential Australian literary blogs.

The premier blog source for Australian literary news is Matilda, written by the indefatigable Perry Middlemiss who has been actively promoting and gathering web resources on Australian literature and culture since 1996 (Middlemiss). His scholarly interests are in C. J. Dennis and Edward Dyson, as well as other Australian writers and poets from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Matilda attracts comments from researchers and amateurs alike. It includes poetry, book reviews, and news on literary events, prizes, and literature sources, with a series of Australian writer-watch posts: such as “Tim Winton Watch” and “Helen Garner Watch”, which track online news on the authors. Middlemiss also maintains an Australian literature website as a separate venture (Middlemiss).

Speakeasy is another blog that is a valuable resource for writers, published by the Australian Writer’s Marketplace (The Australian Writer's Marketplace). It includes writing and publishing news, advice for writers, and information about events and markets. An example of a recent post on Speakeasy is a post entitled: The Perils of being an author in a digital age. This gives an account of e-books and the royalties paid to authors for e-books (The Australian Writer's Marketplace 2008).
For the purists blogging may be regarded as a diversion from serious creative writing and a medium not suited to literature. However, some creative writers do maintain blogs and I explored some of these blogs to see how they were being used. For example London-based Australian author, Susan Johnson, has a website and a blog linked with her website (Johnson 2008), which includes postings about book tours and writer's festivals. She also talks about the writing process and receives many comments from readers. Her blog helps to establish contact with her readers and also to promote her work. It is probably fair to say she is still exploring the potential of the genre. In November 2008, reflecting on her year of blogging, she posted:

I am still not sure whether it is worth doing (the blog attracts about fifty hits a day but whether that is a marker of success or failure I have no idea) … is a writer's blog simply a marketing device aimed at selling more books, or is it a way of engaging with readers…? (Johnson 2008).

Conflict

Blogs can be seen as a narrowcast rather than broadcast model because they focus debate on a particular topic, with conflicting viewpoints aired. Many bloggers use the forum to post ‘off topic’, in the online equivalent of ‘blog as soap box’.

A recent example of conflict occurring in the Australian literary blogosphere was in relation to the major Arts story of 2008: the Bill Henson controversy. Alison Crogan's blog, Theatre Notes, published 100s of messages relating to this story during 2008. Theatre Notes is devoted to “independent theatre reviews and commentary” (Croggan Theatre Notes). Alison is also the Melbourne theatre reviewer for The Australian newspaper, and she edits the literary webzine known as Masthead. In May 2008, when the Bill Henson story broke in the Australian mainstream media, Theatre Notes became the focus of discussions that ran in tandem with all other media attracting new voices. In essence the debate was (and is) about allegations of child pornography against one Australia's most important photographic artists.

During the year Theatre Notes provided a set of views more sympathetic to the artist than what had been published in the mainstream media. Alison Croggan signalled her support for Bill Henson in May 2008, by organising the Open Letter from members of the Creative Stream of the Australia 2020 Summit (Croggan 2008). Actor Cate Blanchett and others in the
Australian Arts community signed the letter of support, which was sent to Australian media outlets. The debate on this issue is continuing.

What interests me, from the point of view of Web 2.0 technologies, is how debates can unfold in this public digital space. As noted above, discussions are recorded and they can easily be retrieved later because the blog software archives comments and responses. All the Bill Henson posts and comments on Theatre Notes are still accessible via the Web 2.0 tags.

This quote indicates the tone of the Theatre Notes blog on the topic:

the arts community (perhaps because they are more likely to be familiar with Henson's work), seem to be the only people actually defending him. Everyone else has dropped him like a hot cake - the mere suggestion of kiddie porn is enough to condemn him. I don't know what this will do to Henson … but this kind of public humiliation can destroy an artist. I am very sad and very angry that this is happening in my country (Croggan 2008)

Evaluation, recording and preservation of blogs

The idea of literary blogging may challenge the nature of authorship and pose questions regarding the quality of the discourse to be found on a blog. This online ‘self-publishing’ has few of the editorial control systems in place which exist in the traditional publishing business model, so it is important to be able to find quality content. There are reviewing-type resources for this purpose and I will outline some of them below.

The Technorati website finds and evaluates blogs worldwide, using a ranking system based on the number of sites that link to the blog (Technorati). This is typical of Web 2.0 evaluation where the ‘wisdom of the crowd’ is taken as a measure of quality and relevance. Undoubtedly this ranking can be criticised as being a type of popularity polling. However, in checking the Technorati ranking of these literary blogs, I found that Perry Middlemiss’s Matilda is ranked highest. So I think Technorati has some value within the Web 2.0 context.

Many Australian blogs have been archived by the National Library of Australia's Pandora Digital Archive, which is another rich resource, preserving Australia's online culture (National Library of Australia).
Conclusion

In this paper I have briefly explored the emergence of the Australian literary blogosphere. I have not conducted a thorough or systematic study of the topic. Rather, I have tracked the leading blog writers over the past twelve months. Blogs provide an environment for public comment and in effect an opportunity for writers, reviewers, literary journalists, and scholars to self-publish. The fact that it is an unmediated space puts the onus on the reader to evaluate quality. But it is somewhat reassuring to note that many of the long-term blog writers have already established their credentials by writing in mainstream media or in the academic journals. They are mostly editors of literary journals, reviewers or journalists. There are new voices too, such as Angela Meyer publishing the LiteraryMinded blog on *Crikey (Meyer)* and Genevieve Tucker who writes the well-researched Australian media and writing blog titled *reeling and writhing* (Tucker). Thus blogs can provide a new, un-mediated space for current literary information and scholarly discourse that deserves to be better known. I refer you to these online voices, as a window into a dynamic Australian literary community.
Reference List


