

INTRODUCTION

Anthroblogia

Participant Observation and Blogging in Malaysia

Working in a private college in Kuala Lumpur involves many late nights preparing lectures and marking work. Surfing the internet is an easy outlet for distraction, and in 2004 I found myself googling ‘blogs’ after reading about the latest online trend. At first, I became a regular reader and occasional commenter on a few blogs written by educators, and then I started to come across Malaysian bloggers who would talk about their life, politics and everything under the sun. I found the critical outlook on Malaysian politics refreshingly different from the self-censorship that dominates the mainstream media, and appreciated the antics, rants and insights into Malaysian life of a variety of personal bloggers. Taking the plunge, I started my own pseudonymous blog in 2004: it became a creative cathartic outlet, and I enjoyed the opportunity to write about whatever took my fancy. This freedom was helped by its anonymity, a decision I took because I was worried that my occasional comments on current affairs and politics may attract unwanted attention from the Malaysian authorities, my employers or my students.

As time went by, I had some favourite bloggers and some regular commenters on my blog. There was a great diversity of bloggers, one of whom often provoked heated debates because of his religious comments and abrasive manner, and I would read his blog to gain insight into a different worldview and occasionally participate in the discussion. By 2006 – like an increasing number of bloggers by then – he had started monetising his blog by selling advertising space, and one day I realised I was actually contributing to his income by visiting his blog, something that I was not comfortable with. I became conscious that there was a new dynamic in blogging – the exchange of attention, previously only counted in visitor rates and incoming links worth bragging points, had now become translatable into money. My anthropological

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interest was sparked, and I found that – making a virtue out of a necessity due to a heavy workload – I could participate and collect data on blogs from my desktop. I had already noticed clustering of linked blogs, habitual commenters and clear subcultural patterns/socialities, but now I had a further question that I wanted to answer: how was monetisation affecting personal blogging in Malaysia?

This book tells the story of the emergence of the lifestyle blog from the personal blog, from a time when blogging was a niche hobby of early adopters and making money from a blog was almost unheard of to a time when it became normalised and widespread. This transition occurred before the rapid growth and adoption of social network sites, and many of the activities recounted here prefigured those that were later to become specialised features of different social media platforms. Most of the bloggers we will encounter had started their blogs in the premonetised period and then embraced monetisation as opportunities proliferated. Others were also key industry players in the development of a market for blog advertising in Malaysia. This book draws on data from an ethnographic study that used on- and offline participant observation, a survey, as well as in-depth interviews and many conversations with bloggers and industry actors.

This account starts with an early ‘blog war’ occurring in the Singaporean blogosphere and progresses through the expansion of blogging to a mainstream activity and the development of a significant new addition to the advertising and marketing industry in the form of the lifestyle blog. This book covers almost four years – in ‘internet years’ this might be seen as something close to an age, perhaps the ‘age of blogs’. While they were the cutting-edge means of online self-expression and socialisation in 2006, this role has now largely been replaced by other social media such as Facebook, Instagram and others. However, as Rettberg (2014) argues, the blog format has now become ubiquitous and generic – while individuals have many more outlets for personal expression, blogs are now used on mainstream websites such as news outlets or corporate websites. They offer an easily accessible means to create quasi-permanent webpages with an opportunity for direct interaction with and between the readers via the comments. They have a direct descendent in video logs (vlogs), and we can see in blogging practices many of the specialised features that are promoted through social network sites (SNSs) today, such as Instagram’s focus on images and Facebook’s focus on sharing content on social networks. The bloggers in these pages would now often be described as micro-celebrities or influencers; however, this book will focus on the term

lifestyle bloggers because of its focus on historical experience that is entangled with the medium of the blog.

Personal Blogging

Personal blogs focus on the quotidian life of the blogger, as opposed to any specialised topic, and during the period this book covers, many tens of thousands, perhaps even hundreds of thousands, of young Malaysians used blogs to express themselves, to consolidate and extend offline social relations and to make new relations online that often extended into offline relations too. A decade later, social media is an integral part of most Malaysians' lives, and blogs have become a smaller part of the range of internet-based media in use. In the earlier stages, the most visible bloggers were Social-Political (SoPo) bloggers – self-nominated pundits and proto-journalists who write about current affairs. One went into exile following an arrest under the draconian Internal Security Act (ISA) that allowed detention without trial, and others became Members of Parliament in the elections of 2008 that brought sweeping changes to the political landscape, helped by blogs and other digital social media. Other notable SoPo bloggers are the Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir, the ex-Prime Minister, Najib Razak and senior opposition figures (Hopkins 2012, 2014b). These most visible bloggers were, however, in the minority; most bloggers were 'personal bloggers' who write about their life and thoughts, usually with small audiences. This disproportional interest in favour of SoPo blogs was reflected, both in Malaysia and worldwide, in the mainstream media and in academic research (Brake 2009: 22; Cenite et al. 2009: 589; Sifry 2008; Technorati 2009).

Although most histories of blogging refer to Jorn Barger's 1997 blog as the original prototype (e.g. Blood 2002a), there is an earlier 'founding father of personal bloggers' (Rosen 2004) – Justin Hall – who started in 1994 (Harmanci 2005; Israel 2011; Rettberg 2014: 12; Sandy 2011).¹ It was a curious feature of most accounts of blogging that although personal blogging was recognised as predominant it mostly remained in the background – mentioned in passing, or as means to show the changes in what was seen as the central form – a public reflection on other material on the web (i.e. an annotated hyperlink), or discussion of current affairs. Thus Blood remarked that most blogs were 'journal-style' rather than 'filter-style' weblogs (Blood 2002b: 11) but preferred to concentrate on the latter. Barger also obliquely referred to the increase in personal bloggers, saying that 'you can certainly include links

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to your original thoughts, posted elsewhere ... but if you have more original posts than links, you probably need to learn some humility' (quoted in Ammann 2009: 284).

The underrepresentation of personal blogs may have reflected a gendered approach that relegates the personal to the conventionally female and less powerful private sphere (Gregg 2006b) and a connected privileging of the democratising potential of blogs with regard to a political economy of the media (Herring, Kouper et al. 2004), where the political debates and aggressive posturing of political bloggers took centre stage. This helps to explain two early stereotypes that were common – the teenage female 'Dear Diary' blogger and the serious older male pundit (Gregg 2006b: 155). Thus, Herring, Kouper et al. concluded that not only has the role of females in developing blogging been understated but 'more attention needs to be paid to "typical" blogs and the people who create them in order to understand the real motivations, gratifications, and societal effects of [blogging]' (2004). Over time, a variety of blog genres have developed that mirror sectorial interests in the media, and much of the work of maintaining everyday relations has moved to SNSs. With hindsight, the predominance of personal bloggers can now be understood as a precursor to the widespread use of social media to maintain everyday relations and – for professionals – to garner an audience and leverage celebrity of varying degrees for commercial gain.

Advertising has become the commercial foundation of the internet, and social media represent the commercialising of interpersonal social relations that is a central development of the early twenty-first century, a development that needs to be carefully and critically considered. Starting in a predominantly non-commercial blogosphere, this book narrates and analyses how a previously non-commercial sphere of on-line activity became interwoven with commercial imperatives. Bloggers and readers had to engage with these, negotiating the meaning of their changed relations that were now entangled with powerful commercial interests that targeted their interpersonal relations to channel them towards consumerism and a market strategy that depends heavily on extracting value from symbolic brands.

Ethnographic Fieldwork On- and Offline

I have lived and worked in Malaysia since 2002, during which time I have worked as a lecturer, become a father, completed a PhD and focused on research into the role of social media in everyday life. All these experiences inform this book, but the anthropological tradition

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dictates that the best way to learn about cultural activity is to participate in it, while always keeping one foot in a systematic analysis by means of varied methods of data collection and recording perspectives in field-notes. To this end, I started by creating a new blog – *anthroblogia*² – to serve both as a base for my online blogging presence and a field diary of sorts where I could record observations and receive feedback from bloggers. This blog also serves as a companion to this book and occasional footnotes will link to relevant blogposts. For about three months near the beginning of my fieldwork, I systematically explored and categorised all the blogs I read. I purposely expanded my usual range of blogs by following links in comments and reading the blog posts that appeared in the ‘top ten’ posts of the BlogAdNet blog aggregator and recorded details such as the blog title, the name or pseudonym of the blogger, available demographic details, the genre, types of advertisements hosted, means of monetisation and so on. This content analysis of approximately 500 blogs was useful in building a more systematic understanding of patterns of blog usage and elements of the different genres, guiding me in how to construct my own blog and to develop questions for a survey. Based on this, I also started *Tropical Gardening*³ – an experiment in niche blogging to test monetisation techniques based on search engine optimisation (SEO) to pull in an audience and leverage it for income by selling advertisements, links and getting commissions on sales for Amazon.com. From March to April 2009 I conducted an online ‘Malaysian Blog Survey 2009’ (‘myBlogS 2009’) and gathered 553 valid records.⁴ Thirty-six per cent of these were ‘Blog readers’ (non-bloggers who read blogs), and the rest were active bloggers who had updated at least once in the previous three months. Fifty-one per cent of the bloggers were ‘Monetisers’ who were either making money from their blog or wished to and the remaining ‘Non-Monetisers’ stated that they had no intention of making money with their blog.⁵

When BlogAdNet started, I registered with them and took part in as many activities as I could. This included online competitions as well as offline blogmeets, of which I attended twenty-nine overall, and four blog-related events, most of which were organised by BlogAdNet. In combination with online blogging and interactions, blogmeets were an essential part of the fieldwork – they were the main means of meeting informants, and I would chat casually and ask questions, taking photos, observing and using a voice recorder to take quick notes before, during and after the events. It also contributed an important understanding of the offline context – for example, I was able to compare the offline experience with the ways in which it was represented online afterwards. Through these events, I was able to meet some key actors in the “Monetising the Dividual Self: The Emergence of the Lifestyle Blog and Influencers in Malaysia” by Julian Hopkins. <http://berghahnbooks.com/title/HopkinsMonetising>

Malaysian blogosphere and requested their permission to track and record their blogging before conducting an in-depth interview with them. Most interviews were conducted between August and October 2009: seventeen semi-structured interviews of one hour or more, three brief interviews of about fifteen minutes each and two email interviews. All bloggers – except for some SoPo public figures – are pseudonymised, and permission was sought for verbatim quotes from blogs. All text taken from blogs is reproduced as was, without grammatical or spelling corrections. Where permission for direct quotes was not given and to avoid being identified via a search engine, quotes from blogs are paraphrased without changing the meaning. In some circumstances, different pseudonyms are used for bloggers to avoid their interviews being associated with extracts of blogs.

Book Overview

The discussion in this book uses a mixed method analysis of all the above data, emphasising qualitative and interpretive analysis. The chapters follow a chronological sequence that intersperses ‘thick descriptions’ (Geertz 1972) of key events with theoretical discussion and analysis. A thick description provides a detailed description of events that uses empirical data and contextual understanding to explain the layered meanings and inference of social interactions in a particular situation. The events were chosen to exemplify key aspects of the emergence of the lifestyle blog and can mostly be read as standalone chapters, although they use concepts that are developed and explained in the other chapters.

Chapter 1 explains the theoretical framework that emerged during the fieldwork and introduces the three main analytical concepts and theories that are used: affordances, actor-network theory (ANT) and assemblage. Drawing from ANT, it argues that blogs can be considered to have agency in their own right, and the concept of assemblage is used to conceptualise of the blogger and the blog as causally articulating together in a relatively stable configuration of machinic and expressive components. An example of this is how a blogger’s sense of their self begins to causally interact with the personalisation and interactive affordances of the blog, and a discussion of the relational self is developed. A central argument of this book is that we need to acknowledge the possibility that software intended for use in social interaction can influence the forms of interaction, and the concept of affordances is used to detail the processes of interaction of the blogger and the blog.

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The role of software as both material platform and malleable technology is acknowledged through conceptualising affordances as ‘cascading’ from *a priori* affordances to emergent affordances.

The first of the thick descriptions in Chapter 2 details a ‘blogwar’ in what was the predominantly non-monetised blogosphere of January 2006. Using detailed content and textual analysis, it describes how an anonymous ‘hate blog’ was created by ‘BlogQueen’ to disparage ‘IronLady’ and ‘AntiBlogQueen’. The author was widely suspected (and later confirmed) to be a leading personal blogger at the time, and she is still now a leading social media celebrity in Singapore and Malaysia. This blog and the debate that developed are used to explain key components of the premonetised personal blog genre such as authenticity and the tensions arising from the anonymity affordance. This discussion leads into Chapter 3, which describes both the structural components of blogs and bloggers’ practices that combine to enable expressions of the ‘dividual self’ through the personal blog genre and interrogates the concept of authenticity based on a unitary concept of the self.

In this chapter, we meet many of the main characters whose interviews and blogs were important to the fieldwork. Chee Keong, Haliza, Magdalene, Nicky, Tommy and Ibrahim were leading ‘A-list’ bloggers, each with their own distinctive style and daily readers in the thousands. Chee Keong was infamous for no holds barred accounts of recreational drug use that eventually led to his arrest and detention, and Tommy was probably the most popular personal blogger at the time with a trademark comedic style. Haliza, Magdalene and Nicky were proficient personal bloggers, publishing affective accounts of their lives and discussing fashion and food. Haliza’s life as a mother was central to her blog, Magdalene’s witty and genuine chronicling of her everyday life marked her out, Nicky’s zest and flair for fashion was to become her career, and the success of Ibrahim’s fan blog led to a job with Malaysia’s leading cable TV provider. Adeline and Jaymee were longstanding ‘old school’ bloggers whose voice was influential, although they did not have as large an audience as the A-listers. Andrew, Stephanie and Thomas were of a newer generation, having started with the knowledge of monetisation as an option, and Stephanie had been successful in getting funding and support for her travels by blogging about them. Alvin and Rachel differed by being older and with a more professional motivation – Rachel supported and publicised her writing activities with her blog, and Alvin was more of a newcomer to blogs but already an established columnist in a national newspaper with significant name recognition.

The next thick description in Chapter 4 focuses on an early ‘blog-meet’ in May 2007. Although it focuses mostly on SoPo bloggers, it also

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shows how bloggers were grappling with the intersection of on- and offline activities – demonstrating the development of genre as social practice. While SoPo bloggers were gathering and claiming to represent all bloggers, reactions from personal bloggers and government-aligned interests showed how different genres were triggering the reorganisation of assemblages spanning on- and offline activities. Most of the data relate to the SoPo bloggers, but Tommy also makes an appearance here, and material from personal bloggers is also used. This discussion of bloggers organising around genres serves to introduce Chapter 5, which explores the ways in which blogs and bloggers interacted and developed collective practices that stabilised the emergent assemblages. This chapter interrogates the commonplace use of ‘community’ as a discursive term and proposes the use of socialities to understand collective action and how blog affordances such as interactivity stabilise on- and offline social assemblages. We meet James for the first time, a senior figure in BlogAdNet and – incidentally – Magdalene’s future spouse, whose courtship and eventual proposal were detailed on both their blogs.

Chapter 6’s thick description is focused on a blog that reviewed the new blog advertising networks in April 2007. ‘Reviewer’ is the main character, but James, his colleague Chang and Peter – the founder of AppAds, BlogAdNet’s competitor – feature prominently. There was an unexpectedly rapid take-up of the blog advertising networks’ services, and through a series of blogposts and their attendant comments, a networked public emerged debating matters of common interest and tensions occurring over probable ill-intentioned manipulations of the anonymity affordance. As in the blogwar in Chapter 2, the importance of consistent pseudonyms and online performances is again highlighted, as well as the ability of digitally literate actors to manipulate and decode automated actions by software. Chapter 7 then develops a theoretically and empirically informed overview of the processes by which blogs and their audiences both disrupted and were integrated into the existing advertising market. Using the ANT concepts of the ‘economy of qualities’ and ‘voicy consumers’ (Callon 1998a; Callon, Méadel and Rabeharisoa 2002) as well as anthropological approaches to consumerism and markets, it highlights the importance of the ability to measure audiences, how BlogAdNet responded to the limitations of this, and the central role of bloggers’ affective labour that encourages the development of parasocial relations by their readers. It draws on interview material from James and Andy – both working with BlogAdNet – and we also meet Sebastian for the first time, a public relations consultant who had a reputation as an expert in the newly emerging blog

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advertising sector. Interview material from Xi Ving and Faizal is used here for the first time; they were newer bloggers who arrived with clear models of blog monetisation already present, prefiguring the current environment where younger social media users can visualise themselves as professional social media influencers.

By January 2009, when the events of Chapter 8 took place, blog advertising was commonplace. The thick description describes how the construction of a fictional romantic narrative for an advertorial was misinterpreted and became contentious. The main characters are Shi Han – a noted blogger who thrived on a ‘bad boy’ image – and his unwitting target Mei Chan. Through a detailed discussion of the advertorial and its accompanying comments, questions of how authenticity is negotiated and integrated into the parasocial relations that centre on the blog as assemblage are laid out. Advertorials are paid blog posts that weave advertising messages into the habitual stream of blog posts and as such epitomise the new lifestyle blog genre. Chapter 9 draws upon the previous chapters and explains how the process of blog monetisation culminated in the emergence of this new genre. BlogAdNet emerges as a central influence – providing income and creating opportunities for bloggers to meet and model marketing-oriented activities. When we understand economic markets as a cultural phenomenon we can see how the social relations enabled with blogs become commodified, and the textual enactment of the relational self through the blog enables a calibrated authenticity that continues to leverage parasocial relations.

In hindsight, the October 2009 regional awards blogmeet described in Chapter 10 represented the high point of the blog as the leading form of social media. The scale of the blogmeet was unprecedented and demonstrated the maturity of the form and the interest by the marketing sector. The blog awards ceremony mirrored mainstream media awards ceremonies and represented a convergence of a previously fringe medium that gained legitimacy through its ability to be reconfigured as an advertising platform. The chapter also sees how BlogAdNet was expanding regionally and having to grapple with different sociocultural contexts. Finally, the conclusion of the book reflects upon the current state of social media celebrity and the way in which the emergence of the lifestyle blog sheds light on the phenomenon of the social media influencer and the ubiquity of social network sites.

Notes

1. Justin Hall no longer blogs, but some of his work can be seen here: <http://www.links.net/vita/> (last accessed 2 October 2018).

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2. <http://julianhopkins.net>.
3. <http://tropical-gardening.blogspot.com/>.
4. <http://julianhopkins.net/index.php?/plugin/tag/survey>.
5. All percentages from the survey are rounded to the nearest per cent point.