

## 9. Everyone's an Author

Reading and writing may be two of the basic three R's in American education, but schools have always emphasized reading over writing, no doubt because there have always been more consumers than creators of text, more readers than writers. But thanks to the internet, that gap may be narrowing dramatically. Each new stage in the history of writing technologies tends to expand the authors club, and the digital explosion seems to have opened that guild up to something approaching universal membership, at least so far as the universe of computer users goes. On the internet, everyone's an author, every scrap of prose, a publication.

Whether it's the invention of writing itself or the introduction of a new writing technology down the line, at the start only the adventurous and single-minded buy in, working laboriously with slabs of clay, or "the skins of wethers blackened with ink and weighted with a little lump of lead," as skeptical eleventh-century English nobles dismissively characterized a letter from the pope (Clanchy 1993, 261). But as each technology becomes user-friendly and affordable, more and more people learn not just to write, but to become writers.

The technologies of papyrus, parchment, paper, pens and pencils, the printing press, and the typewriter, all wound up making writing cheaper, easier, faster. At the same time, they created demands for reading material and jobs for writers. The current digital revolution extends the potential of writing even further and more quickly: in the time it takes to read this book, yet another digital genre may have been created by the latest and largest generation of scribblers ever.

In the typewriter's heyday, journalists, novelists, scholars and other professional writers gave up pen and paper to compose at the machine's keyboard. Poets were the last to shift to typing, just as they've been slower to take up composing at the computer. But so clear was the preference of many writers for the typewriter that, as we will see in the last chapter, some educators even saw it as the way to teach children how to write in school. Today, researchers are intent on proving that computers enhance learning.

Despite the machine's promise for improving national literacy levels, attempts to place typewriters on school desks went nowhere, and our schools taught typing not for the benefit of tomorrow's novelists or reporters, but for students who would eventually work in offices. Just as penmanship drill developed the big round hand of future clerks, typing class trained generations of twentieth-century office workers whose job it would

be to reproduce complex texts composed in longhand or dictated by other people. Before the computer, writing tools probably didn't create new writers so much as they created new ways for those who were already writers to do their work.

Certainly computers reproduce text as well, and the fact that American offices long ago replaced their typewriters with computers means that anyone working in an office has to know their way around these machines. But unlike earlier writing technologies, more and more computer users write for themselves as well as for work and school.

It has always been a challenge for individual writers to put typed text in front of large numbers of readers. Typewriters were superior to printing presses for producing single documents, but for the mass production required to satisfy a growing reading public, printing presses had no real rivals from their invention around 1450 until the present digital age. Even with carbon paper, which dates from 1806, typewriters could never provide more than a few legible copies of a top sheet.

In the 1950s, the mimeograph machine came to the rescue: teachers reproduced handouts for class and political radicals unable to storm the radio stations or commandeer the newspapers cranked out their calls for revolution on basement mimeos. The photocopier served the next generation bent on producing limited-edition texts, whether administrative, educational, or political, or to copy party invitations or other personal documents. But today all anyone needs to get the message out to the great unwashed, or to a small circle of friends, is a wi-fi-enabled laptop. And such messages are going out at ever-increasing rates.

Computers, once they became word machines and not just calculators, started out much like typewriters. Their goal was modest – to produce a better way not so much to *write* as to *process* words: to fill in forms, to reproduce letters and reports and memoranda drafted by other people. Computers do these jobs well, but they really pushed the typewriter out of the picture for good when it became possible for computers both to produce business letters *and* address envelopes to stuff those letters into.

Even as the computer was becoming the quintessential business machine, something unexpected happened. Instead of merely reproducing texts, office workers began creating their own. Instead of simply keying in their homework (or copying it from a web site instead of a printed encyclopedia), students began to spend hours writing voluntarily. And it goes without saying that professional writers, with an exception here or there, traded in their old Remingtons *en masse* once PCs became affordable. The result of this shift from pencils to pixels is that, in the United States, keyboarding, whether learned in school or picked up on the fly, has become an almost universal skill. And the point of keyboarding is not simply to replicate other people's words, as it largely was with typing and penmanship, but to create original texts.

### **Should everybody write?**

The neo-Luddites may want us to go back to the No. 2 pencil – itself a fairly new tool in the writer's workshop, but in the days before WordStar was king, when humans roamed the earth brandishing their pencils or the styluses that were used for centuries before the pencil was invented, not that many people could read, and fewer still could write. Surely the technophobes who romanticize the pencil don't want to return us to the low literacy rates that characterized the good old days of writing with pencils and quills. Still, a few

critics object to the new technologies because they enable too many people to join the guild of writers, and they might paraphrase Thoreau's objection to the telegraph: these new computer writers, it may be, have nothing to say to one another. But the data suggests otherwise: in just a few years, massive amounts of digital text have been generated, and there's even enough digital text online to make Roszak and other critics of the technology agree that the writers who have put it there are "saying something."

### **The slow rise of literacy**

Like the fourth-century BCE Athenians and eleventh-century Anglo-Saxons, most people initially viewed literacy, and the subsequent innovations in literacy technologies, with skepticism. Rosalind Thomas (1989) argues that although the citizens of Plato's Athens were surrounded by inscriptions on public buildings, and they were certainly aware of literary texts and written legal and business records, few Greeks actually felt the need to read, and fewer still were engaged in writing. The Greece that we look to as the source of western literacy was never a world of schoolrooms or of letters. William Harris has shown that, at the height of Athenian civilization, barely ten percent of men in Attica were literate. Virgil's accomplishments notwithstanding, Roman literacy numbers were also well under 10% (Harris 1989, 114, 22; literacy has always been a gendered phenomenon, and until modern times, figures for women were slightly – sometimes significantly – lower than those for men).

The one literacy event of the ancient world that has drawn the most attention is the destruction of the great library at Alexandria, in Egypt. Estimates vary, but the library may have housed as many as half a million scrolls, attracting scholars from throughout the Mediterranean world (Casson 2001, 36), and its disappearance represents a massive loss of knowledge. Accounts, none of them contemporary, suggest that a series of fires ravaged the library building and reduced its collection to ashes. An early one was set by Julius Caesar, presumably by accident since his goal was to burn ships in the harbor nearby, not books. Subsequent book burnings at Alexandria are attributed to fanatical fourth-century Christians and to seventh-century Muslim conquerors, the latter said to have burned the scrolls to heat water for the city's baths. It's also possible that the lost scrolls were the victims of decay and neglect as much as political or religious strife. But even when the library's collections were the envy of the ancient world rather than collateral damage, compendiums of heresy, or a convenient source of fuel, the average Egyptian did not carry a library card. People then, as now, must be convinced that reading can do something for them before they make the effort.

More recently, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in England, Shakespeare and his contemporaries brought English letters to new heights; the Royal Society oversaw the birth of English scientific writing; Protestant reformers encouraged everyone to read the Bible, newly-translated under King James into English, for themselves, and grammars, dictionaries and usage guides began rolling off the presses. But with literacy rates soaring to no more than thirty-five to forty percent of the adult population by the 1770s, the majority of the British public remained skeptical about the uses of reading and writing, or simply indifferent, as well as resolutely illiterate (Cressy 1980, 177).

In Europe and America in the nineteenth century, reading and writing – but mostly reading – had firmly emerged as talents necessary for spiritual and professional

advancement, and for filling the new-found leisure hours. Presses brought out ever-increasing numbers of books and pamphlets to satisfy public demand, and clerks copied out invoices and letters by hand to ensure that commerce continued to thrive. Literacy rates did rise, but by 1870 they had only reached eighty percent in England: literacy was still far from universal (Cressy 1980, 177). Even today, with literacy considered vital for participation in an information-saturated world, most of the Earth's inhabitants remain unable to read or write.

Reading and writing have never manifested themselves equally either in terms of demand for these skills in a given culture at a given point in history, or in terms of saturation: writers deploy their skill far less frequently than readers: from the dawn of text down to the present, literates able to read might also be able to write their names, or copy out letters, but fewer of them actually created original documents, whether personal letters, business records, or literary treasures.

It should come as no surprise, then, that public support for reading always outstrips support for writing. Reading is typically characterized as much more than simply useful. It is edifying, mind-expanding, and in certain cases even liberating. Since the Renaissance, reading has been increasingly encouraged through the proliferation of schools and libraries. On the other hand, while writing may also be conceived in positive terms as utilitarian, essential for work, therapeutic, and a necessary part of knowledge creation, writers are frequently eyed with some suspicion. It's true that policies may seek to limit what we read, but writers are always subject to more controls and sanctions than readers.

The idea of every citizen a writer brings with it some anxiety, not just in autocratic states, but in democratic ones as well. Governments, religious groups, businesses, and schools regard writing as a force that must be channeled, censored, even licensed, so that reading materials are appropriately shaped and the public has access only to the approved words of approved writers. Publication may proceed through official channels, like Elizabethan England's Stationers Company, a publishers guild with the authority granted by government charter to search all printing houses and bookshops to determine the legality of their wares, or the Index of Prohibited Books, the list maintained by the Vatican from 1559 to 1966 of all titles forbidden to Roman Catholics.

These controls may be semi-official, like the Hays Office, a Hollywood group which operated from the 1920s through the 1960s to remove sexual or political content from screenplays before filming, and from movies before they could be exhibited. Or the controls may be conventional rather than governed by law, like the peer review required before manuscripts can appear in learned journals, or the editorial budget meetings that decide which stories will run in the daily paper.

While such mechanisms are put in place ostensibly to provide readers with appropriate and reliable texts, these systems of control mean that writers must always pass muster, whether it's the nod of teacher or boss, the acceptance of an editor, the endorsement of a reviewer, the approbation of popular opinion, or the eye (and as often as not, the "nay") of the censor. Today's technology adds to that the v-chip, the rating system for popular music lyrics and video games, and the web filter. At the extreme, writers who persist in their efforts despite a failure to satisfy established criteria, or who evade the traditional paths to publication altogether, wind up on the wrong side of the law and find their books denounced, banned from school curricula, ripped from library

shelves, even burned. If official readers get angry enough, writers find themselves the objects of *fatwa*, with a price not on their books, but on their heads.

### **Technology and the authors club**

The call for the regulation of writing often comes from quarters where a new communication technology is viewed with concern rather than welcome. The increase of books in late fifth-century Athens brought opposition and criticism (Thomas 1989, 34). Similarly, as we've seen above, writing as a means of conducting business produced a skeptical response in eleventh-century England, but not because it was new. Bibles and prayer books were familiar to the Anglo-Saxons, who had been converted to Christianity centuries earlier, and while the average Brit, being unable to read, received the word of God by word of mouth from priests, these exemplars of the written text were venerated, not scorned. Rather, the English distrusted business writing because they thought that the motives of a new class of writers, Normans drafting charters, deeds, and letters, might be less than above-board.

Later technologies of printing, typing, mimeographing, photocopying, and telephoning also eventually led to an increase in who could communicate, and the products of these technologies were greeted cautiously, because with them, new writers, and in the case of the telephone, new speakers – whose *bona fides* had yet to be established – seemed to arise from nowhere. These upstarts took advantage of the destabilization produced by the new communication machines in order to take text and talk in new directions, but they and their contributions were not always welcome.

An early critic of the telephone argued that it allowed total strangers, who would be turned away should they knock at the door, to enter one's home unannounced simply by putting a nickel in a pay phone (cited by Marvin 1988). Just as the phone increased the number of people who could initiate a conversation, advances in literacy technology widened the door to the authors club in ways that led readers to seek some seal of approval before allowing these unfamiliar voices to enter their homes. One way to ensure the trustworthiness of text was a mechanism for prior review by editors and publishers. Another was licensing by state or church. Yet a third was workplace control of speech and writing. All have come into play as the growing community of literates learned to regulate itself and to accommodate new literacy technologies and practices.

Writing itself was never so easy as reading, either to acquire or to practice, and so while the ranks of writers inevitably grew as literacy rates rose, writing did not explode in the same way reading did, and while even in the ancient world there was always too much to read (Nunberg 1996, xx), and while the increase in office work in the nineteenth and especially the twentieth centuries meant more people than ever used writing on the job – huge sales of cheap pens and pencils attest to this – the authors club remained a subset in the world of literacy practice. Membership in this guild was restricted; upstarts, renegades, and malcontents could be dealt with in ways that sought to limit their readership. If necessary, there were ways both social and technological to silence writers.

Until the digital explosion, that is. For with computer creation and dissemination of text, writers can now bypass many of the long-established winnowing and qualifying procedures that we have come to associate with writing. In the computer age, the term “aspiring writer” is meaningless. Just as texts have freed themselves from the constraint of traditional publishers' imprints, writers no longer need to carry a guild card. Anyone

with the right tools can ignore the traditional routes to publication and set himself or herself up to be a writer. "Readers wanted" seems the catchphrase of every *.htm* launched on the internet, and the itinerant laptop user's away message now reads, "Have text, will travel." Lastly, and most disturbing to those who would control this explosion of writers, since cyberspace is international, digital technology has brought us a cyberworld of writers without borders.

With writing so apparently out of control, we see the predictable backlash. "Computers are destroying the language," cries one lament, as teachers strain to keep the lingo of email and IM out of student prose. "The internet is full of lies and misinformation," cries another. But neither complaint resonates with writers, as more and more of us see our writing in a seamless continuum that stretches from pencils to pixels. In addition, as readers, more and more of us get our information not from traditional print sources, or from conventional media like television, but on screen.

Literacy technologies provoke cycles of new practices accompanied by new complaints. We've seen these in the past, and they are coming to a head again, as teachers ban smiley faces and IM acronyms from book reports, or employers banish email and instant messaging from a workplace that now embraces them, or drag bloggers through the courts, for it's the blog that has become the latest digital battleground.

### **Dear digital diary . . .**

Instant messaging may be just the ticket for teen-age boredom and angst, witty one-liners, or a rapid-fire exchange of meaningless smileys over the internet. And now that the business world is embracing as a capitalist tool what it once trivialized as the high-tech equivalent of passing notes in class, IM may be the perfect vehicle for quick and efficient exchanges in re: the latest corporate transaction. But the blog, or web log, is exactly what the digital doctor ordered for those people who are more comfortable composing introspective diary entries at a leisurely pace, yet are exhibitionist enough to put their innermost thoughts, ramblings, and musings on public display.

A few years ago I surveyed my students to find out how many of them kept diaries, and how many kept those diaries on a computer. About a third of the students, mostly women, confessed to writing in a diary or journal on a regular basis, but at a time when all my students were writing their papers and doing their homework on computers, only one – a male – kept a disk-based diary. For most of those students, diaries still meant special little books that could be locked and hidden away from siblings and roommates, books in which one wrote with a special pen, perhaps choosing an ink color to match a mood. The students assured me that a computer wasn't inviting enough, or secret enough, for the kinds of thoughts that went into diaries. What if my little brother, or my roomie, read my disk? they worried. Computer diaries seemed a recipe for blackmail.

Today students still keep their secret diaries in locked quarto-sized notebooks hidden under mattresses. But the computer has become the instrument of choice for writing and publishing the increasingly popular genre of public diary known as the blog. All of my college students know about blogs. A few read them. But only a couple of them maintain blogs in college: blogging is a phenomenon they associate with political commentators like Matt Drudge or the Daily Kos, but even more with high school students, particularly girls. That perception seems accurate: nineteen percent of American

teens aged 12-17 write blogs, twice as many read them, and at least initially, significantly more girls than boys are involved in blogging (while the girls were blogging, the boys were busy downloading music and videos; Lenhart and Madden 2005). In contrast, eight percent of on-line American adults keep blogs, and thirty-nine percent – 57 million people – read them, and the latest report shows men and women blogging in equal numbers (Lenhart and Fox 2006). And blogging, perhaps more than any other internet genre, has become the way to join the authors club. Lenhart and Fox (2006) report that 54% of the bloggers they surveyed have never published their work before.

While the date of the first blog is hard to pin down, the term *web log* appears in 1997 to describe a practice that had been under way for a couple of years, and its blended form, *blog*, comes on the scene two years later, in 1999. Definitions of what constitutes a blog vary, though most people agree that blogs are whatever we want them to be, so long as they are published in serial form, and that blogging as we know it started up slowly in the mid-1990s, though it has exploded in the last couple of years. The percentage of adult blog readers almost quadrupled between 2004 and 2006 (Lenhart and Fox 2006).

The popularity of the blog demonstrates that writers are not as reluctant to share their innermost thoughts with a wider audience as one might have thought. According to a count by *Business Week*, there are more than nine million currently active blogs, with some 40,000 new ones appearing every day. Perseus, an observer of web trends, estimated that there were 31.6 million hosted blogs (those on sites like Xanga and LiveJournal) in 2005, and an unknown number of private-server blogs (“Blogging Geyser” 2005). My students aren’t blogging – they’re too preoccupied with Facebook, which I’ll discuss in the next chapter – but everybody else seems to be busy writing or reading blogs. When I began this section on blogging, over a year ago, I didn’t have a blog. Now I do: the Web of Language is not a confessional blog, but one devoted to discussions of language policy. I began to blog simply as a way to find out how blogs work, so that I could write about them, but the activity became so compelling that I continued writing the blog itself, and I’ll even be teaching a new course in which students study language policy by blogging on the subject.

As a genre, blogs blend the diary with features of the scrapbook and the top ten list. Blog posts are brief, typically a few paragraphs focused on a single theme, arranged in reverse chronological order, with the most recent appearing first. Blogs are updated regularly – or at least genre rules suggest that they should be – and readers may consult archives for earlier entries. In addition to commentary, blogs often showcase the blogger’s favorite websites, and while blogs tend to be monologues, many bloggers invite their readers to post comments, setting up at least the possibility of a wider conversation. Just as bloggers can control the flow of feedback, they can also restrict who has access to the blog by setting passwords and requiring subscribers to register. But most blogs don’t bother with gatekeeping. Instead, balancing the needs of the poseur and the voyeur, they are available to anyone who wants to look.

Reading blogs requires knowing where to find them. Readers can sort through the millions of blogs on the internet using a variety of specialized search engines or by visiting aggregators which collect links and summaries of new blog posts in one convenient cyberlocation, and feeds are available that will send updates to subscribers as they are posted.

Blog subject matter ranges from the dreary, unexpurgated minutiae of a single blogger's life – reality TV with the boring parts left in – to tightly-focused political and commercial campaigns whose goal is to sign readers up for a cause or lighten their wallets. In between these extremes are those blogs with enough merit to attract large numbers of readers and even encourage new bloggers to put their two cents in.

Not every blogger writes confessional kiss-and-tell posts or records the dinner menu – the blogosphere is not all blogorrhea and mystery meat. Current events often bring bloggers to their computers to report, comment, rant and harangue. Patriotic blogs blossomed after the 9-11 tragedy. Eyewitness blogs gained prominence during the Iraq War. Milblogs, the diaries of American soldiers in Iraq, offered some counterpoint to government press releases and news reports about the war. Bloggers pursued U.S. Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott for his racist comments and they hounded Dan Rather for his sloppy reporting on the Bush national guard memos. Political blogs flourished in both the red and the blue states during the 2004 American presidential race, when blogging entered the public consciousness full force and Merriam-Webster named *blog* as its 2004 word of the year. Bloggers funneled news and pictures about the 2007 Myanmar uprisings to the outside world, or at least they did until the government pulled the plug on Myanmar's internet. And there are both gushing and caustic blogs that discuss every new film, TV show, pop culture icon, and music group.

Search engines like the one provided by LiveJournal allow readers to find blogs by key word, topic, blogger's (purported) age, location, or other characteristics. Like web crawlers, these search engines are necessary because there really are all sorts of blogs to sort through, from the kind that one commentator calls WBC blogs – for whine, bitch, complain – to those whose goal is to convey information, like the newsblogs published by the *Guardian* and the *Washington Post*.

A variety of specialist groups have found blogging to be a useful way to communicate. Linguists have turned to blogging to discuss the language issues of the day. Librarians have their own blogs for discussing such professional topics as the value of blogs, and I'm not the only educator looking for ways to incorporate blogs into courses. Graduate students blog to warm up for writing dissertations, or to lament their writer's block. And an enterprising techie is even taking the blog back to its roots by turning Samuel Pepys' *Diary* into a blog (the latest Pepys daily post, together with linked background material on this seventeenth-century British diarist, can be found at [www.pepysdiary.com](http://www.pepysdiary.com)).

What raises the numbers of blog sites well into the millions, though, are not these specialist blogs, but the many personal web logs that all seem to attract at least some readers. The blog has created a phenomenon that industry analysts at Perseus call the "nanoaudience," the small group of readers who follow particular blogs. According to a 2003 Perseus survey, the average blog has 250 readers, "far smaller audiences than any traditional one-to-many communication method" ("Blogging Iceberg" 2003). Blogs created specifically for friends and family, on the analogy of those annoying annual holiday missives that recount in excruciating detail the events of the past year, have fewer readers still. In practice, according to Perseus, "many blogs have no more than two dozen readers" ("Blogging Iceberg" 2003).

Half of all blogs are written by teen-agers, for whom the blog has become almost as indispensable as the cell phone and the screen name (Nussbaum 2004). Teens blog for



an audience of their friends and they read blogs written by those friends (Lenhart and Madden 2005, 8). A random search of recently-updated blog posts on LiveJournal produced the following selection of actual blog entries, ranging from the personal to the political:

Ok.. I am a big fan of Dr. Pepper. Great fan... But this... This is something I am going to frame when I finish... It is a name only the most honored, luckiest beings may speak in company of the same caliber... Hold on to your butts everyone.. The name.. Of the greatest off-brand in the world is...

DR. WOW!!!!!!!!!!!!

Omfg!! It was amazing!!! [from the blog called poetrywheniweep]

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This morning my toes seemed fine, they just hurtalittle. Now one of my toes is purple and all swelled. It doesn't hurt that bad to walk, but I haven't tried walking in shoes yet. It better get better before band camp, or band camp is gonna be hell for me. [mcponiel]

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Emotional relief

ok...i have this major issue...with people that is...~smiles sheepishly~ when don't i??...but anyways...i like to hum...and sing...and all sorts of things along that line but in my house every time i do Jim yells at me...yes Jim....the man who claims to be practically deaf in one ear complains that he can hear me hum at a whisper two rooms away from him and that it bugs him...and since that is the case i get yelled at quite a bit...go figure...but here's the deal...to me singing is not just singing....it is a way to express myself in a way that i can do anything with...i know i don't have the best voice but hey...not everyone does...at least i stay on key...but when i am denied my right to sing...i am being denied a bit of myself... [whiteprophecy]

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so our friendship officially ended tonight because apparently 90% of the things i say to him pisses him off and vice versa. so all the girls out there that like him you can have him. do whatever the hell you want with him. i don't care. i took you out of my phone, erased you from my Myspace and my buddy list. it's over. i can't do this anymore. i gave you so many chances to just be my friend but that's never gonna happen. you and i will never have a normal relationship therefore we can't have one at all. go get a new girl and get over me. i'm not that great. i'm not great at all. you should hate me. go find a better girl for yourself cuz all i do is upset you. it's over. don't try to talk to me, it's best this way and you know it. so goodbye for good [shortie716]

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### The Man You Love To Hate

in case anyone missed it last night... on TVLand they did the Top 10 Characters You Love To Hate, and Larry came in at #4! I don't know who ranks them, but I'd say at least the top 4 were fairly close to what I would have ranked as well. I won't spoil it because knowing TVLand, they'll probably show it again 18 times in the next week, so there'll be plenty of opportunities to catch it again.

one good part was a direct quote from Tony Danza: "I think it's the funniest show on TV today", so that was cool.

[from the fan blog, "larrydavid"]

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Terrorism is a natural outgrowth of capitalism and globalization. There are two ways in which this works. First, there is the usurpation of global networks and connections which, when hijacked by insurgent forces, facilitate the ability for terrorists to wreak maximum damage with maximum ease. [from the aptly-named blog, "The Political Rant"]

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### **Discipline and punish**

Given the large number of new writers pushing out blogs as well as the wide range of blog content, it's not surprising that of all the new genres facilitated by digital technology, the blog is the one that brings the loudest calls for regulation. One indicator of the impact that blogs are having on our communication practices is the growing number of bloggers who get in trouble for what they write. Many bloggers are teen-agers, and just as school principals have always tried to control what students write in the school newspaper or the literary magazine, administrators are starting to take action against bloggers who aren't sufficiently true to their school (Schaarsmith and Kalson 2005).

Blogging out of school has come under attack as well. The American Civil Liberties Union successfully defended a student at an Ohio high school who criticized the school administration on his personal blog, and a Pittsburgh high school senior suspended for a send-up of the principal on the popular student blog site, MySpace (Paulson 2006). At least one negative comment on a private blog resulted in a fight the next day at another Ohio school. Fearing the new digital genre as a source of unrest, and continuing the long-standing school tradition of regulating student speech, several Ohio school districts now forbid student blogging in school (Roduta 2005).

So common is the practice of attacking students and teachers on line that it now has a name: cyberbullying. One study in Alberta, Canada, reported that one quarter of the seventh-graders surveyed had experienced on-line attacks (Gillis 2006). In Chicago, three AP students at Taft High School were suspended for making obscene and threatening remarks about a teacher in their blogs. One student later retracted his remarks on line, adding, "I didn't know our Xanga's were being monitored. I should have expected it. I thought it . . . was freedom of speech, but it's not" (Ihejirika 2005). Editorializing on the

incident, the Chicago *Sun-Times* cited a Supreme Court ruling which states that students may lose their First Amendment rights if their speech is potentially disruptive.

That Supreme Court decision, *Tinker v. Des Moines* (393 U.S. 503 [1969]), covers speech in school or on campus, and while the high court has not ruled on students' personal, out-of-school, blogs, lower courts have supported school censorship and punishment for threats to their peers or to school personnel made on personal blogs. Applying the so-called Tinker test, such language "materially disrupts classwork or involves substantial disorder or invasion of the rights of others," and may therefore be censored or punished (EFF n.d.).

The Taft High School community in Chicago was split over the blogging issue: there's still a sense among teachers, students, and parents that off-campus speech is none of the school's business. It's much easier to rally support for blogging clamp-downs by focusing on the internet as a threat to America's youth. Newspapers don't like to be in the position of supporting the regulation of anybody's speech, and the *Sun-Times* editorial quickly jumped from the free speech issue to the more sensationalist dangers of internet weirdoes and the need to protect students from "all the sick prying eyes out there" ("Kids learn lesson" 2005).

Private schools exercise greater control over students' off-campus behavior than public ones. Even so, Kieran McHugh, the principal at a Catholic high school in New Jersey, caused a stir when he ordered all students to stop blogging and take down their MySpace and Facebook pages, social sites which function differently from blogs but which, like blogs, open writers' private worlds to prying eyes. McHugh was concerned about sexual predation, but in a clarification of the blogging ban, school authorities explained that their goal wasn't just to keep students safe from lurking predators, but also to regulate student prose: not all blogs were banned, just those over which the school couldn't exercise direct control (Koloff 2005). McHugh further insisted that his goal was not censorship but "teaching common civility, courtesy, and respect" (Parsley 2005), traits that have little to do with protection from sex crimes. As part of that civics lesson, later the same week the principal expelled a student for calling the football coach a name on his blog. One teacher in a Catholic high school opposed the school's MySpace ban in his own blog because he felt that blogging helped his students develop their writing skills. Adding his own tough-love lesson, the teacher explained, "I'd prefer literate, insightful, bullied kids far more than ignorant, inarticulate, 'safe' kids" (Eden 2005). It was the coach, not a student, who was being "bullied," but that kind of implicit support for cyberbullying could get the teacher, who blogs anonymously, in trouble with the diocese as well.

A number of Washington, D.C., area elite private schools have also clamped down on student bloggers, forbidding them to use their school email addresses to register on Facebook, MySpace, Xanga, and similar sites. This essentially prohibits students from using the sites, which require a school email address for registration (Bahrapour, 2006). One student was actually dismissed for violating a school policy prohibiting the use of "technology... that defames individual members of any community." Administrators from several schools in the and around Washington warned students not only about dangerous stalkers and predators, but also about college admissions officers and potential employers who could read personal information and "inappropriate material" from

students' Facebook and Xanga posts. The Electronic Frontier Foundation similarly cautions student bloggers that,

whatever you post on a public blog can be seen by your friends, your enemies, your teachers, your parents, your ex . . . the admissions offices of schools and colleges to which you might apply, current and future potential employers, and anyone else with access to the internet and a search engine. While you can change your blog post at any time, it may be archived by others. . . . Although a school has little power to punish you for off-campus speech, it can still use your blog against you as evidence of other rules violations. For example, several underage college students were recently punished for violating their school's alcohol policy after they posted pictures of themselves drinking.

[EFF, n.d.]

While it's typically high school students who get in trouble for what they write in their on-line diaries, college students don't exactly get a free pass when it comes to web logs. One student at the University of New Hampshire was banned from class "for writing violent sexual comments about his teacher in an on-line journal" ("Student's Blog" 2005), and a Marquette University dental student was suspended for criticizing unnamed students and instructors online (Twohey 2005). Blogging is an international phenomenon, and so, not surprisingly, schools in other countries have also been taking a tough stand on bloggers. In May, 2005, two Russian students were expelled from their universities for blogging. One of them allegedly posted nasty comments about her professor on LiveBlog.com, Russia's most popular blog host service (mosnews 2005). At around the same time, a Singapore government agency threatened to sue a Singaporean student attending an American university for allegedly defaming the agency on his blog. Anxious to avoid an international incident, and perhaps a caning when he got back home, the student shut down his website, even though it resided on a U.S.-based server ("Singapore" 2005).

Prospective students also need to watch what they post. A creative but indiscreet blogger, outraged that his name had been misspelled in the letter of admission he received from my university, posted some sarcastic comments about the graduate program's director on his web log. Perhaps the student was merely venting and just got caught up in the free-for-all insult style characteristic of many blogs, but the program director read the comments as a serious threat when they came to his attention, and the would-be student's letter of admission was quickly withdrawn. In other cases, subjects of blog attacks haven't much recourse: a *Washington Post* columnist writing about the unpresidential-sounding name of one of the candidates was greeted by insult and invective from conservative bloggers who clearly didn't appreciate the article's gentle satire. Not everyone online is committed to civil discourse, and this instance of the new phenomenon of shock-blogging was simply shrugged off by the *Post*'s editors as one unfortunate cost of doing business in cyberspace.

Job applicants have begun to worry that their network indiscretions are causing the employment office to skip over their candidacies, and bloggers who are already in the work force, older though not necessarily more mature, run the risk of getting fired if they criticize employers or co-workers, whether or not they're doing it from company-owned

computers. Googling “blogger fired” will turn up reports of companies that have dismissed employees whose blogs offended the boss: Delta, Wells Fargo, the bookseller Waterstones, several newspapers, where freedom of the press apparently doesn't include freedom to blog about the press, and a number of high-tech companies one might think to be blog-friendly, like Microsoft, Friendster, and search giant Google.

Google actually owns Blogger.com, a blog-hosting service, but that hasn't stopped the company from canning employees who complain about work on line. Reporters for the *Houston Chronicle* and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* have been fired or suspended for personal blogs critical of the newspapers (Westhoff 2004). One instructor at for-profit Devry Institute was abruptly terminated for what she characterized as digital “water-cooler kvetching” (Spohn 2005), and assistant professors who keep blogs are starting to wonder if their on-line comments, even ones related to their research, could be held against them. When a political scientist at the University of Chicago failed to get tenure, the educational press was quick to point out that, after all, he kept a blog. A U.S. senator fired an aide for blogging about her sex life. Maintaining that sexual hanky panky on Capitol Hill should come as no surprise to anyone, the ex-staffer retaliated by turning her blog into a novel. And speaking of sex, teachers, like their students, need to be careful about what they say on line. A former journalist and part-time instructor at Boston University lost his job after only two weeks for blogging that one of his students was “incredibly hot.”

Blog-firings are common enough that there's even a word for them: *getting dooced*, ‘losing your job over something you said on line,’ was coined by Heather Armstrong after she was fired from her web design job for writing stories about co-workers in her blog, dooce.com. Blogs can also inflict damage on others: a university president lost her job, not because she kept a blog, but in part because of an anonymous blog that repeatedly criticized her administrative style (Barwick 2006).

### **It's a free country . . .**

Blogs are making their way into our dictionaries as they become part of our everyday experience, and as they spread we begin to see challenges to their reliability. Even the courts have started to consider the special character of the genre. In October, 2005, the Delaware Supreme Court dismissed a libel suit by a local politician who sought to unmask an anonymous critic writing in a local newspaper blog. In his opinion, Delaware Chief Justice Myron Steele found that no defamation had occurred because blogs are interactive forums for the expression of opinion, not fact.

In law, only text interpreted by readers as factual can be libelous. Although enough lawyers are blogging for law blogs to warrant their own subgenre (see, for example, *scotusblog*, a blog about the Supreme Court), Judge Steele concluded that no one reads blogs for their factual content, and so the genre cannot be defamatory: “Blogs and chat rooms tend to be vehicles for the expression of opinions; by their very nature, they are not a source of facts or data upon which a reasonable person would rely” (Doe v. Cahill 2005).

Steele, who had never been attacked by a blogger, further found blogs to have no real sting. They are essentially harmless sites where mistakes are immediately correctable:

The internet provides a means of communication where a person wronged by statements of an anonymous poster can respond instantly, can respond to the allegedly defamatory statements on the same site or blog, and thus, can, almost contemporaneously, respond to the same audience that initially read the allegedly defamatory statements. The plaintiff can thereby easily correct any misstatements or falsehoods, respond to character attacks, and generally set the record straight. This unique feature of internet communications allows a potential plaintiff ready access to mitigate the harm, if any, he has suffered to his reputation as a result of an anonymous defendant's allegedly defamatory statements made on an internet blog or in a chat room. [Doe v. Cahill 2005]

Blogs may be getting a bad press in court, but blog readers prefer to judge for themselves. A 2004 survey reports that 86% of them consider blogs useful or extremely useful sources of information. In contrast, conventional news sources actually flunked the information test: 82% of those surveyed found TV news worthless or only somewhat useful for news or opinion, and slightly more than half said the same about newspapers and magazines ("Blog Reader" 2004).

For now, *Doe v. Cahill* protects political speech on line, specifically shielding bloggers from libel charges, but that ruling won't keep anyone from losing their job – getting dooced – for dissing the boss on line or just for blogging when they should be working. Blogs may be easily corrected texts, but the courts have typically sided with employers seeking to dismiss employees for digital posts that can be viewed as insulting, disruptive, bad for morale, or – worst of all, in the boss's eyes – useful to economic competitors.

In extreme cases, bloggers can find their safety threatened. In some parts of the world, bloggers are subject to arrest. This tends to happen in totalitarian countries with histories of acting against any sort of speech officially viewed as insulting, disruptive, bad for morale, and useful to political competitors. In addition to Myanmar's recent suspension of the internet to hide the government's violent response against protestors, Bahrain regularly arrests bloggers and shuts down dissident blogs, which quickly pop up somewhere else (MacFarquhar 2006). China pressured Microsoft to shut down a Chinese blogger writing about "a high-profile newspaper strike" (Barboza 2006), and Yahoo turned the e-records of journalist Shi Tao over to the government, which promptly sentenced him to ten years in jail for revealing state secrets (Zeller 2006; Sabbagh 2006; "Google" 2006). There are online reports of blogger arrests in Iran, China, and Egypt. In November, 2005, Paris police detained two bloggers "for inciting harm to people and property over the internet" (Plunkett 2005). French *blogueurs* were actually divided over the extended violence that occurred in France that Fall, some egging on the car bombers and others urging restraint.

Worse than arrest, bloggers can actually get themselves killed. Steven Vincent, an American freelance journalist who wrote about the Iraq war for the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Christian Science Monitor*, published a web log about his war experiences that he later turned into a book. Continuing his blog, he had begun posting complaints about insurgents infiltrating the Iraqi police. In August of 2005

Vincent was kidnapped in Basra and shot to death, presumably to silence him and shut down his blog (Wong 2005).

### **Blogging rules and regulations**

Despite the fear of disgruntled employees ridiculing the company or outing trade secrets on their blogs; a legal opinion defaming blogs as information-free, or at best, information-lite; and an initial reluctance to recognize that blogging constitutes a new and extremely popular way of writing, the business world has now begun to embrace the web log just as it has warmed to the instant message. Some businesses have even begun to formulate blogging guidelines for their employees. For example, IBM doesn't want its people to use their blogs for business writing: "IBM regards blogs as primarily a form of communication and relationship among individuals. When the company wishes to communicate publicly as a company – whether to the marketplace or to the general public – it has well established means to do so." However, conceding that blogging isn't going to go away any time soon, IBM published a set of rules discouraging rude comments, warning employees not to disclose information useful to competitors, and reminding managers that "A blog is not the place to communicate IBM policies to IBM employees" (IBM n.d.). Below is IBM's "executive summary" of its rules:

1. Know and follow IBM's Business Conduct Guidelines.
2. Blogs, wikis and other forms of online discourse are individual interactions, not corporate communications. IBMers are personally responsible for their posts. Be mindful that what you write will be public for a long time – protect your privacy.
3. Identify yourself – name and, when relevant, role at IBM – when you blog about IBM or IBM-related matters. And write in the first person. You must make it clear that you are speaking for yourself and not on behalf of IBM.
4. If you publish a blog or post to a blog and it has something to do with work you do or subjects associated with IBM, use a disclaimer such as this: "The postings on this site are my own and don't necessarily represent IBM's positions, strategies or opinions."
5. Respect copyright, fair use and financial disclosure laws.
6. Don't provide IBM's or another's confidential or other proprietary information.
7. Don't cite or reference clients, partners or suppliers without their approval.
8. Respect your audience. Don't use ethnic slurs, personal insults, obscenity, etc., and show proper consideration for others' privacy and for topics that may be considered objectionable or inflammatory – such as politics and religion.
9. Find out who else is blogging on the topic, and cite them.
10. Don't pick fights, be the first to correct your own mistakes, and don't alter previous posts without indicating that you have done so.
11. Try to add value. Provide worthwhile information and perspective.

[IBM, n.d.]

Clearly, IBM expects employee blogs to be both factual and informative, not just collections of rants and opinions. Despite the ruling in *Doe v. Cahill*, it appears that the button-down business blog offers clear evidence that yet another electronic genre has been tamed. At the same time that the court in Delaware expressed its skepticism about the power of blogging, *Fortune* magazine identified the blog as the most important business trend of 2005, and a number of business journalists, following this lead, have urged companies to harness the power of the blog in the service of corporate profit. As the business world explores the latest digital text craze, employers have begun to field company blogs. They see no irony in the fact that, at the same time, they are regulating the personal blogging of their employees, even firing them if they find their blogs inappropriate.

Most employer guidelines require company bloggers to identify themselves, which allows for openness and transparency in corporate communications, but also makes it easier to root out malcontents. That's why the Electronic Frontier Foundation, whose motto is "Defending Freedom in the Digital World," recommends that workplace bloggers hide both their own and their company's identity in order to protect their jobs (EFF 2005). But such masking may vitiate the force of a blogger's complaint and reduce its interest value: how many readers are going to follow an expurgated blog that whines, "My boss at Associated Widgets is a big fat no good poopyhead"?

Some employers require disclaimers informing readers that posts on employee blogs don't reflect official policy. Managers repeatedly warn bloggers not to divulge corporate secrets and to observe intellectual property rights. Only two employers specifically okay blogging on company time, but all guidelines remind employees not to let blogging interfere with their work. IBM counsels bloggers, "Don't forget your day job," (IBM, n.d., 6), though the interpretation of "interfere" is never specified (Wackå n.d.).

Plaxo, a software developer, even permits bloggers to disagree with company policy or management, so long as they do so politely. That policy was written by the blogger that Google fired (Pimentel 2005). But Feedster, creator of a popular blog search engine and aggregator, concludes its short list of rules for employees who blog with a warning that even the company whose business is blogging might find it necessary to censor or shut down employee blogs:

Finally, please be aware that the company may request that you temporarily confine your website or weblog commentary to topics unrelated to the company (or, in rare cases, that you temporarily suspend your website or weblog activity altogether) if it believes this is necessary or advisable to ensure compliance with securities regulations or other laws. [Feedster 2005]

### **Blogging for dummies**

Students continue to ignore rules against blogging, and not all employees honor the optimistic blogging codes that their employers set forth. But all is not anarchy. Though blogs continue to proliferate with no end in sight, some order is emerging from the blogosphere. It's clear that blogging, like email and instant messaging before it, is already developing sets of conventions as communities of bloggers self-organize, set up formal or



informal rules of the road, and exert both subtle and overt pressure to steer novice bloggers along the paths of effective blogging.

Adding to the self-policing activities of blogging communities are the digital how-to-blog guides that are popping up almost as fast as blogs themselves. Soon every college writing text will have a chapter on how to blog, but in the mean time, would-be bloggers who require more detailed instructions than the on-line sites provide, who need both illustrations and hand-holding, can consult the *Idiot's Guide to Blogs* and *Blogging for Dummies*, books whose existence attests to the fact that conventional printing still plays an essential role in the digital revolution.

One of the earliest of these blogging guides, *The Weblog Handbook* (Blood 2002), devotes an entire chapter to the moral side of blog behavior. Specifically, Blood advises bloggers not to offend or attack other people. Apparently few bloggers have read this chapter, since offensive language and public attacks seem staples of the genre, holdovers from the early days when the blog, like email before it, remained largely the property of the unruly digital counterculture. Even as the blog becomes civilized, co-opted by the business world and the mainstream news media, blogs retain a certain edginess as a sign of resistance to the taming forces of mass communication.

Continuing to lay out its own recommended code of conduct, *The Weblog Handbook* also sets forth some rules of etiquette for novice bloggers: acknowledge where you found your links; let readers know your posting schedule; warn readers about offensive material in your links; and answer your email. Again, not many bloggers follow these recommendations. Blood offers a code of blog ethics as well: don't publish lies (the Delaware Supreme Court has found that's in the nature of the genre for bloggers routinely to ignore this stricture); provide links to your sources; don't change weblog entries once they're posted (as if anything on the web is static); disclose conflicts of interest (another instruction more honored in the breach than the observance); let your readers know if any of your sources are untrustworthy or biased (a digital version of the old paradox: *I am a blogger. All bloggers are liars*).

Above all, in the elevated language of Blood's ethic, work hard and you will gain your readers' trust and respect. And it doesn't hurt to "reward the worthy, ignore the ignoble, fight tirelessly for what is right, and speak for those who cannot speak for themselves" (Blood 2002, 125). Finally, Blood counsels bloggers to protect the privacy of others (135) and to protect children from predators by never revealing their identity or location (137-38). This is sound advice for bloggers who combine the virtues of Robin Hood, Mother Teresa, and the average superhero. But most people consulting *The Weblog Handbook* want to learn how to blog, and they will see Blood's moral code as beside the point. Even IBM's injunction to "add value," a gesture in the same positive direction, won't turn bloggers into upstanding citizens any more than it will improve the content of their online posts.

A quick read across a variety of blogs suggests that few bloggers stand ready to receive Blood's commandments: personal data, including names and contact information, abound online, as do photos and other identifying marks. In addition, bloggers, perhaps lulled by a sense that they're lonesome diarists writing unobserved at their laptops, make public all sorts of information that could prove troublesome if read by parents, teachers, present or future employers, law enforcement authorities, or rivals bent on revenge. As Emily Nussbaum puts it in her description of teen-age bloggers who both seek and fear

readers: "This is their life to read. As long as their parents don't find out" (Nussbaum 2004).

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Image 55. From the table of contents of *The Weblog Handbook*, by Rebecca Blood [2002]. The book provides instructions on how to blog, but in chapter 6, and elsewhere in the text as well, the author focuses on appropriate blogging behavior.

While bloggers may not follow Blood's advice, or even seek it out, her admonitions to be nice reflect an underlying assumption, one that has some basis in fact: that blogs, like email and instant messaging, can be nasty things. Taking a high moral tone, Blood further urges the neophyte blogger to "use your powers for good" (Blood 2002, 123). Such an exhortation suggests that there is a propensity, or at least a temptation, on the part of bloggers to go over to the dark side, to use the genre in ways that are destructive rather than community-building.

It also assumes that the readers of a blog constitute a community, even if they have nothing in common beyond the fact they are reading a particular blog. Community has become an important on-line goal, perhaps in response to claims by the anti-technology side that devices like computers disrupt local communities and degrade the quality of modern life by isolating individuals from one another and tying them to machines instead.

*The Weblog Handbook* is hardly unique in stressing the importance of the blog as a tool for building communities, not vitiating them. Many of the proponents of digital writing technologies emphasize their potential to reach out and touch someone, to forge connections between people in ways that are not dependent on physical location. It's certainly true that email and the various genres spawned by the web support the formation of groups of families and friends and those sharing recreational or professional interests that were never possible when alliance depended on face-to-face interaction or the slower pace of conventional mail. Such communities of the like-minded can be a cause for celebration when they connect those who are physically, socially, or intellectually isolated. But the connective powers of the web can also be a cause for worry, as when racists, terrorists, and pedophiles don digital masks to use their powers for something other than good. And the communities created on line can be illusions: for example, students with Facebook accounts, and that includes most of the students I know, accumulate collections of "friends" – some number in the hundreds – without necessarily increasing the number of people they can count as actual friends.

## **The blog café**

Reinforcing the notion that digital space is not all that different from physical space, blogs (and the forums that are evolving from some blogs) have been likened to salons or coffee houses in which groups of readers and writers congregate. But only the most dedicated bloggers manage to keep the salon doors open long enough for a virtual community to coalesce. Like email and instant messaging, blogging is creating opportunities for public writing. As a result, more people than ever become writers in search of readers. But while email and instant messaging, once learned, have morphed into essential tools for those of us who live at least part of our lives online, those who try their hand at blogging don't necessarily stay with it for very long. The sheer numbers of blogs suggest to some observers that the web log is taking over the web, but the individual blog, like its predecessor the diary, seems basically an occasional and self-limiting enterprise. I can't imagine a day when I don't send an email. The IM'ers I know go into withdrawal when the server is down. And texters may act like they don't know what to do with their thumbs when their phone batteries die. But the typical blog is updated twice a month, two-thirds of blogs are idle for months at a time, and half of all inactive blogs are one-day wonders, blogs never updated after the initial entry. The Perseus survey expresses some surprise at the number of blogs abandoned after being active for a year ("Blogging Iceberg" 2003). But none of these figures is surprising, considering that few of the best-known conventional diarists wrote every day throughout their lives. James Boswell kept journals only sporadically, as did Thoreau. The diary of Samuel Pepys ran for just ten years. And the work of Anne Frank, the one diarist my students seem to have heard of, was not intended for publication and was cut tragically short.

Lifelong diarists are harder to come by. Hester Thrale, the eighteenth-century literary commentator and friend of Samuel Johnson, kept a private diary for twenty-seven years, and her notebooks remained unpublished until the mid-twentieth century. And Anaïs Nin didn't begin the 250,000 hand-written pages of her diary, drafted with an eye toward publication, till her late twenties, but unlike the typical diarist, once she started, she kept on posting.

So far, most bloggers seem to favor the sporadic model over the daily grind. The demands of regular updating can get away from even the best-intentioned writer, and most blogs don't stay active for long. But the short life-expectancy of most blogs doesn't stop new bloggers from going on line. LiveJournal reports a rate of 405 new blog posts per minute, suggesting that for every blogger who gives up on the effort, new writers stand ready to take their virtual place.

## **Managing the authors club**

With more and more people writing, public concerns about an escalating literacy crisis should be eased. But just the opposite seems to be happening. Instead of welcoming as new members of the authors club those computer adepts who write because they want to, not just because it's assigned, critics slam online content as inferior to analog writing, and they fault keyboards for displacing the human voice as a primary means of human interaction.

Parents find their children's passion for computers isolating. One typical complaint runs, "They do less face-to-face talking, less phone talking, less playing outside than any other generation" (Bahrapour 2006). Teenagers are even talking less on their cell phones, and texting more. But computers have connected us more than they've isolated us. Surveys of adult computer use in the U.S., Japan, and Denmark show that digital communication supports social networks rather than disrupting them (Boase *et al.*, 2006). Email, IM, and web surfing don't replace human interaction, they supplement it, and in many cases they allow people to maintain relationships when face to face contact is not possible.

But it's not simply a lack of fresh air and sunshine, it's the quality – more specifically, the perceived lack of quality – of the digital interaction that provokes some critics, who dismiss the time we spend reading and writing on screen as time wasted on the trivia of IM, email or web surfing. It's time taken away not just from face to face interaction, but also from reading and writing what the critics consider more worthwhile texts, or engaging in salon-quality conversations. That position incorrectly assumes that when we're not on line we throw ourselves into high-culture mode, reading Tolstoi spelled with an *i* and writing sestinas and villanelles instead of shopping lists, and that every face to face encounter is worth a thousand on-line exchanges. But let's face facts: most f2f conversations are not high-minded, and like blogs and instant messages, much of our conventionally-produced reading matter is less than star quality.

As Sherry Turkle (1995) makes clear, there are certainly people who are tempted to withdraw from the face to face world and spend their time on line instead, but as our increased dependence on email, IM and blogging to carry out both personal and professional communication indicates, not all life on the screen is pathological. Yes, rather than walk across the hall or talk across the room, many college students IM their roommates, and my daughter no longer shouts for her brother to come downstairs for dinner, she IM's him instead. But most students still leave their rooms for class, work, and recreation, and anyone who's spilled food or drink on a keyboard has learned the hard way to avoid taking meals alone, on line.

All writing technologies open up new possibilities for fraud, and digital communication certainly presents users with the opportunity for masquerade and deception, opportunities which strike fear in the hearts of parents and school authorities, and pique the interest of psychologists. But most people, whether Thoreau would call them quietly desperate or not, lead lives on the screen that reflect their off-screen selves. Those *selves* may be digitally enhanced, to be sure, but they're really not all that different from the faces we put on when we go out to brave the offline world.

Instead of replacing social realities with an on-line fantasy, a never-ending role-playing game, or a scam, most people are simply extending their everyday connections into the digital world, creating a space where they can meet for those times when meeting any other way is just not practical. It is in this activity that we see emerging the latest in the string of new communication genres, the most recent wave of services called by some observers social networking sites, though I prefer the less-limiting term space pages. As we will see in the next chapter, web sites like MySpace and Facebook are letting today's digital writers create personal pages for self-presentation, networking, messaging, commercial promotion, and almost every other communication need imaginable.