

Blogging in Private: Telling Two Billion People to ‘Ssshhhh’

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Abstract

The action of confessing a secret is a long standing tradition in society, perceived as a way of relieving oneself of the burden of information. However, the act of sharing a secret converts the information from private to public and therefore renders the secret something different from what it was before. The very notion of secrecy implies a reluctance to share the information, which in turn raises the question why so many people choose to share their private thoughts, feelings or experiences through confessional discourse. In the technology-fuelled atmosphere of contemporary society, one of the key platforms for the exchange of confessional narratives is the Internet, as it allows the everyday user to access and share knowledge with the online world in all its magnitude. Yet despite this opportunity for visibility and openness, the Internet is also a place where people choose to hide under the veil of anonymity. This juxtaposition between public and private spheres is highlighted by the production of anonymous self-representative narratives, such as blogs, in which users utilise the perceived anonymity to discuss secretly their private thoughts, feelings and experiences in an open online space that has the potential to be viewed by anyone with access to the Internet. This article looks at the blogging platform and examines why such a public medium has become the home for so many private confessional narratives, and what it is about the platform itself that facilitates and encourages users to share their private lives with each other. The article will also discuss how the concept of secrecy relates to the idea that an individual’s online narrative could be more than just a revelation of a hidden self, but rather part of a wider social performance of self.¹

Keywords: blogging, public, private, anonymity, self-representation, truth.



The action of confessing a secret is a longstanding tradition in society; from childhood friendship to religion, it is perceived as a way of relieving oneself of the burden of information. Although the term ‘secret’ or ‘secrecy’ can be used to denote many things, within

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the context of this article it is considered to be a piece of private, unknown information, and the sharing of this information with others is considered to be an act of confession. The act of sharing a secret converts the information from private to public, as it is no longer confined to the original holder of the secret. This renders the secret something different from what it was before, as it becomes a piece of knowledge that is accessible to, and may have implications on, a wider audience. Although the sharing of secrets is common, the notion of secrecy actually implies a reluctance to share the information, given that a secret is by definition something that is concealed. This article therefore examines what may motivate so many people to share these private thoughts, feelings and experiences with others.

The sharing of secrets can be expressed through numerous media channels, but one of the most common methods is through the writing and telling of confessional stories. In the technology-fuelled atmosphere of contemporary society, one of the key platforms for the exchange of these narratives is the Internet. The information-sharing platforms online allow the everyday user to access and share knowledge, stories, and experiences with a myriad of other users, who are freed from the time, social, and geographical constraints of the offline world. However, the computer mediated nature of this communication means that the presentation of a person online can be separated from the offline life of the individual; for example, users can choose to write anonymously or under a pseudonym. The opportunities for anonymity can create a complicated juxtaposition between the public and private lives of the user and their different contextual representations of themselves. This is highlighted by the production of the anonymous self-representative narratives on personal journal style blogs. On these blogs, users can utilise the perceived anonymity to discuss their private thoughts, feelings, and experiences in an open online space that has the potential to be viewed by anyone with access to the Internet. This article looks specifically at the blogging platform and examines for what reasons this very public medium has become the home for so many private confessional narratives, and what it is about the platform itself that facilitates and encourages users to share their private lives with each other. It will also discuss how the concept of secrecy relates to the idea that an individual's online narrative represents more than just a revelation of a hidden self but actually exposes the opportunities available for users to perform a self that is completely removed from their embodied offline reality and therefore represents a new way for individual voices, opinions, and secrets to be heard.

In the early 1990s there were only a few sites online that would now be considered as blogs; a contraction of the original term web log. However, over the following two decades the

technology has developed rapidly and blogging is now one of the most popular mediums of online communication in the world. The majority of the original blogs were known as ‘filter blogs’, as their presentation of content acted as a filter between the enormous amount of information on the World Wide Web and the individual user. Then in July 1999 the first free ‘build your own’ weblog tool was launched, which meant that even those with no knowledge of HTML (Hypertext Mark-up Language) or web design were able to construct a blog, and the numbers of people blogging increased dramatically. Later that year came the introduction of host site *Blogger*, which was the first company to introduce the flexible blogging format we recognise today. Promoting itself as ‘pushbutton publishing for the people’, *Blogger* instantly began a shift in the way blogs were generated, arranged, and understood, and *Blogger* is still to this day the most popular blog hosting site in the world (Nardi et al 2004: 222). Rebecca Blood highlights one of the key appeals of the platform in her analysis of *Blogger*:

Blogger itself places no restrictions on the form of content being posted. Its web interface, accessible from any browser, consists of an empty form box into which the blogger can type ... anything: a passing thought, an extended essay, or a childhood recollection. With a click, Blogger will post the... whatever... on the writer’s website, archive it in the proper place, and present the writer with another empty box, just waiting to be filled (2000).

Blood’s analysis highlights the potential freedom that the format provides users: to produce and publish content entirely of their own choice. The possibilities that this empty box offered the first users of *Blogger*, and the subsequent blogging community, is what made blogging the popular, multifaceted platform that it is today. It is also indicative of why blogging became so popular, as the medium encourages users to get involved and offers a space in which they can have complete creative freedom. What is apparent from studies into the blogosphere is that a large proportion of bloggers are using this free space to write and share confessional narratives and choosing to share their secrets with the online world. This is predominately seen in the genre of personal journal style blogs, which are generally individually authored and focus on the life of the blogger, discussing their own ideas and experiences.

As discussed above, one of the unique elements of online narratives is the potential anonymity that the computer-mediated environment allows users. Anonymity, the condition of being anonymous or, according to the Oxford Dictionary, ‘of unknown name’, is the classification which precedes all forms of publication. This broad definition focuses on a lack of acknowledgement and therefore includes all forms of hidden identity from pseudonyms to masks. The tradition of attributing ‘Anonymous’ as the source of unaccountable works is why author Cole Stryker states, ‘the most prolific creator in human experience, in every artistic field, was and is Anonymous’ (2012: 19). This attribution of anonymity has changed over time, but

the element of disassociation evident in traditional ‘anonymous’ material is still apparent in the use of anonymity online. Although computer-mediated communication is not the only mode of communication where anonymity is possible, research by Hua Qian and Craig R. Scott notes that ‘computer technology has greatly facilitated anonymity by providing many channels for communication between people separated in time and space’ (2007: 1429). The fact that the interactions are computer-mediated also plays a key role in the user’s perception of their own anonymity, as the sense of separation increases their ability to disassociate their online activities from their offline lived reality, so a blog author who chooses to write anonymously may be empowered to express themselves more openly, without the fear of their narrative affecting their offline life. As John Suler notes:

When people have the opportunity to separate their actions online from their in-person lifestyle and identity, they feel less vulnerable about self-disclosing and acting out. Whatever they say or do can’t be directly linked to the rest of their lives. In a process of dissociation, they don’t have to own their behaviour by acknowledging it within the full context of an integrated online/offline identity (2004: 322).

Here Suler highlights how the possibilities of anonymity may allow users to say or do things they would not feel able or entitled to do offline, which may allow for greater creative freedom. He particularly refers to the idea of a user ‘self-disclosing’, indicating a sharing of private information, and ‘acting out’ which implies a behaviour that may be considered inappropriate in the user’s offline domain, both of which suggest an increased level of agency when the user is writing anonymously.

However, the laws and the technology surrounding accountability for online behaviour are constantly developing, and this is changing the landscape of the online world for users regardless of their anonymous status. It has therefore become imperative to challenge and problematise the traditional understanding of anonymity and render it more complex. Previous definitions have had a tendency to treat anonymity as something that is either present or absent without any consideration for the intermediate area between being fully anonymous and fully identifiable; this creates particular complications when it comes to accountability for online behaviour. In the case of blog narratives, a user’s online persona will not necessarily conform to a binary of anonymous or non-anonymous but may inhabit a grey area in between. For example, a user may not include any identifying information within the narrative but have a clear or distorted photo of themselves on their blog. They may purport to use their ‘real’ name and provide information about their location but not include images or explicitly acknowledge their offline persona. They may represent themselves as anonymous but have online interactions with someone from their offline life, who may or may not be anonymous. Or they may share

private information about themselves that would identify their offline persona if read by people they knew. Although to an outside user many of these blogs would still appear anonymous, and the users themselves may believe their blog is anonymous, these examples demonstrate that there are various ways in which the authors can potentially undermine their own anonymity.

The anonymity of bloggers can also be undermined by external influences, for example, a blog's email could be tracked by its header, or a user's online activity could be used to trace their computer's location through its IP (Internet Protocol) address. This type of research could be done on any blog, but many examples have been focused on anonymous blogs that have discussed the author's work, and therefore the content has had wider implications. One high-profile example of this is the political blog *NightJack*, written anonymously by a serving police officer about his experiences in the emergency services, which having started in February 2008 quickly gained a large online following. The following year *The Times* wrote an article about the blog and within it revealed the identity of the author as Richard Horton (Hirsch 2009). As a result, Horton attracted intense media scrutiny and was disciplined by his employers, Lancashire Constabulary; he subsequently sued the paper after he discovered it had traced him by hacking his email account.

Although there is a risk factor in the production of all blogs, as someone may react negatively to whatever you write, it is influenced by the topic of the posts and level of anonymity for which the author is striving. The risk factor inherent in the use of anonymous confessional narratives is particularly high as their content is presented as being private or secret, and, by being placed in the public arena, the element of secrecy becomes vulnerable. However, as the case of Brooke Magnanti demonstrates, anonymity is still possible, and a secret can still be kept, even when there are several people attempting to undermine your adopted persona. Magnanti, a research scientist and blog writing call girl who began writing in 2003 under the pseudonym *Belle de Jour*, managed to keep her offline identity separate from her online narrative for six years. It was only in November 2009 that, fearing that she was about to be exposed by a journalist, she revealed herself in an interview for *The Sunday Times* (Ungoed-Thomas 2009). Her revelation came as a shock to many, as her anonymity had led to conjecture over her authenticity as both a call girl and as a female writer. Many journalists had postulated that the blog must be a work of fiction, written by an individual or team of male writers, mainly because of the attitudes the blog represented towards sex and eroticism (Moir 2007; Hoggart 2007).

Despite the possibilities of revelation represented by these examples, it appears many bloggers still choose to utilise the computer-mediated platform to conceal their offline identity. What is key to the popularity of this, as a facilitator of confessional secret sharing, is that the author perceives himself or herself to be anonymous and therefore protected from the implications of their offline identity being revealed. As Stefanone and Jang note in their 2007 study:

It seems that [to bloggers] the benefits of using blogs as an interpersonal communication channel outweigh the perceived costs of abdicating ownership or control of one's personal information (2007: 137).

What this suggests is that although users have an awareness of the risks of exposure, they consciously choose to be anonymous and share private information on their blogs anyway, as the benefits of this communication outweigh the potential repercussions. Although their study highlights the dilemma that many authors face, the language employed within Stefanone and Jang's analysis, for example the concept of users 'abdicating ownership' of their information, represents a negative characterisation of the online world as a potentially dangerous place for users. This narrow view only serves to encourage sensationalist media accounts of the online world rather than acknowledging the benefits and possibilities that go alongside the element of risk faced by users.

The intended audience often influences the level of anonymity a user chooses, or attempts to maintain. Qian and Scott's research notes that:

When a blog is targeted at an audience its author does not know offline, the level of discursive anonymity tends to be stronger and the blogger less likely to provide identifying information. When a blogger has a target audience of online others, the blog can serve as an emotional outlet; thus, it can be important to keep one's blog or one's identity hidden from one's family/friends (2007: 1441).

What they highlight is how blog authors often write with their potential audience in mind and edit their self-representation and level of confession accordingly. Many other studies into blogging behaviour, for example by Erin Hollenbaugh and Marcia Everett, support this and continue to demonstrate that there is an increased level of personal information sharing, or confession, when the blogger is representing their online persona as anonymous (2013: 283–302). Qian and Scott note that self-disclosure is always risky, because 'it may invite ridicule or even rejection, thereby placing the discloser in a socially awkward or vulnerable position' (2007: 1431). However, they conclude that:

People are more likely to disclose to a stranger because they feel secure in that whatever is shared under such circumstances is unlikely to be shared with actual friends and acquaintances who may have some material impact on the discloser's life (2007: 1431).

It appears that this relatively simple premise is what has led to the blogosphere's becoming a platform not just for self-representative narratives that tell the author's story but for confessional narratives, in which users go beyond descriptions of their everyday life and choose to share private and secret information with their readers.

The sharing of private information is the reason many people consider blogs to be an online version of the traditional diary, despite the assertion of researchers such as Lena Karlsson that 'The "private" diary publically available on the web seems oxymoronic' (2007: 138). However, the presence of audience and the potential readership of the platform elevate the self-representation and confession of blogs to a different level from that of its textual predecessors. Unlike the isolated act of writing in a diary, a blog author is sharing their narrative within a public space and therefore elevating the narrative to a platform with a potential readership of millions. As highlighted above, this prospective audience is not an inhibitor of confession; on the contrary, the presence of readers and, particularly, the concept of community have been shown to be key factors in encouraging users to share their problems online. As Sarah Pedersen and Janet Smithson note in their research on 'mummy blogging', 'Users feel they are able to confide in anonymous but empathetic "listeners" who share their problem' (2013: 100). In this example, they use the term 'anonymous' to represent the detachment of the reader from the author's offline life and show how this position therefore renders them a 'safe' audience for the author to confide in, as the author is able to accept or dismiss their opinions more readily than if they were involved with them offline. It also highlights the concept of users who 'share' problems, and how a sense of commonality can play a key role in online confession. As noted by Karlsson, 'The lure of diary blog self-representation, for both readers and writers, seems to be the possibility of recognition/ identification' (2007: 150). What this research proposes is that rather than representing a daunting level of visibility, the audience of the online world is perceived by some users as an assembly of potential sympathetic and empathetic listeners, listeners in whom they can trust and find support for their secrets. Although the stereotypical trope of secret telling describes those who have a close physical and/ or emotional bond, such as that between best friends, brothers and sisters, parents and children, or even therapist and patient, the concept of sharing secrets with a stranger is not a new phenomenon. However, the physical distance over which online narratives transport secrets, subverts existing practices, and represents a completely new way of communicating confessions. It is the distance of computer-mediated anonymous communication that makes the audience a viable outlet for the author's

secrets, representing an intimacy beyond the spatial definition of closeness, which cannot be replicated with the characters in their offline life.

However, the distance between the author and the reader of the online confessional narrative can complicate the notion of truth with regard to the secret being shared. The understanding of the blog as representing a 'secret' rather than a fictitious story relies on the perceived authenticity of the author. Although many studies assume anonymity to be a feature that would undermine the authenticity of a blog, research such as Thomas Chesney and Daniel Su's 2010 study found that there was 'no difference in perceived credibility when the blogger was identifiable and when they were anonymous' (2012: 715). The concept of authenticity is therefore not directly related to the level of anonymity, but the credibility of the blog. Karlsson's research instead found that, 'Consistency over time emerges as the most important check-up point for measuring the authenticity of the autobiographical self' (2007: 149). The element of consistency that Karlsson highlights is rooted in the continued representation of self being mediated through the narrative, often judged on the long-term engagement with a blog. The long-term engagement with a narrative can also establish a level of investment from the reader, as the increased familiarity means a higher level of identification and affinity with a blog author, and therefore a higher inclination to accept their narrative as the truth. Karlsson also believes that the tendency to assume that online narratives are authentic is partly due to the way in which users consume the material, stating:

At a time when invocations to the real are abundant in reality TV and other "reality" venues suggesting the ultimate collapse between the real and the fictional, the temporal proximity in the production/ consumption of blogs reinforces the autobiographical contract online (2007: 147).

Her research outlines the way in which the immediacy of online sharing, i.e. the ability to communicate with readers instantaneously, reinforces the idea that the online narrative is representative of the author's offline lived reality. The earlier example of *Belle de Jour* highlights these objective complications of anonymity, as her long-term hidden persona led to conjecture over the authenticity of her online narrative. The desire on the part of some to undermine her anonymity also demonstrates the perception, often based on a small amount of information and a large amount of interpretation, that beneath the anonymous narrative lies an original 'truth' about the individual's choosing to mediate themselves through this form of textual construction. This reflects a narrow-minded understanding of anonymity, which characterises it as a method of deception. Consequently, because Magnanti chose to create an online identity, which was removed from her offline identity, *Belle de Jour's* online confessional narrative was not accepted as fact by some readers and was instead scrutinised and

analysed in an attempt to discover the ‘reality’ or ‘truth’ of the story. As highlighted earlier, this separation of online and offline behaviour does not always prevent the narrative from being read as authentic, as many readers are able to rationalise the desire to remain anonymous; however, the notion of revealing the ‘truth’ behind the text remains a constant pressure on anonymous blog authors.

Although many traditional conceptualisations of self-representative narratives, and the blogosphere, still rely on the concept of an original ‘truth’, other research has found the concept of a performative self more accurately depicts the opportunities presented by the medium. The idea of performativity was first used by philosopher John Langshaw Austin who described how a performative speech utterance could *do* something, as well as *say* something (1962). The linguistic element of performance that Austin highlights, is one of the many ways in which individuals perform their selves in everyday life, and which theorists have outlined. As the renowned sociologist Erving Goffman stated:

The self [...] as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue (1959: 245).

Through the work of theorists such as Judith Butler, the concepts of performativity and performing a self have taken on an interdisciplinary meaning, now denoting all non-verbal forms of expressive acts that combine to construct identity (Butler 1999).

This understanding of how individuals are routinely performing a self, and the implications this has on the search of a ‘true’ self, challenges the characterisation of anonymous online narratives as unauthentic. The blogging platform could instead represent another social sphere in which individuals could perform themselves. In the last twenty years, the idea of using modern technology as a platform for performance has, in Chiel Kattenbelt’s opinion, become widely acknowledged within the field of performance studies. As Kattenbelt states:

A parallel world of bits and bytes has emerged adjacent to the world of atoms [...] with new possibilities and opportunities of constructing one’s identity and presenting or staging oneself in front of others, albeit under different conditions (2010: 36).

Here he acknowledges the rise of an area of performance studies that is both strange and familiar, constructing traditional performances within a new and developing context. In his book *Digital Performance*, Steve Dixon argues that not only do new media and Internet technology allow for the creation of an ‘immense interactive database’ of performance art, they can also function as a platform for performance collaboration and as a medium of performance distribution (2007: 3). He highlights two aspects of social media that contribute to the creation of digital performance: the use of Internet technology to facilitate computer mediated

communication and the use of self-representational media such as blogs and home pages, which have been theorised as a ‘virtual performance of the self’ (2007: 3). The research demonstrates how home pages and blogs constitute a digital re-imagining of Goffman’s notions of performative presentations of the self, with ‘the subject being progressively erased, redefined, and re-inscribed as a persona or performer within the computer monitor’ (2007: 3–4).

This use of Goffman’s framework indicates the capacity for online self-representations to change and develop over time, enabling users to present different and multiple selves that may bear no resemblance to each other or to the lived reality of the user. As Marie-Laure Ryan describes:

Other body images are operated by the physical body, but the gestures of the physical body do not correspond to those of the virtual one: while one body slays dragons, flirts with a used-car salesman who poses as a hooker, or explores an enchanted forest, the other one types on a keyboard or squeezes a joystick (2001: 306–07).

She describes the possibilities offered by online performances of the self to extend the experiences of a user beyond their lived reality. This also represents the problem of making assumptions of ‘truth’ based on the textual constructions of reality depicted in an online narrative. If we move away from the assumption that personal journal blogs are merely ‘online dairies’, and instead view the blog narratives as the disembodied performances of self that are outlined by Dixon and Ryan, the blogging platform can be seen as manifesting the opportunities available for users to perform a self that could be completely removed from their embodied offline reality.

The complexity of this relationship between online and offline experiences challenges the understanding of confessional narratives as representing a private or secret side of the author. The merging of a public and private self is epitomised in the proliferation of confessional narratives, and the secrets they seem to reveal complicate the intrinsic understanding of secrecy. However, as discussed above and as suggested by John Suler in his work on online disinhibition, the online persona of an individual may appear to represent a sense of self that is not evident in their offline life; he describes how:

When a person is shy in person while outgoing online, neither self-presentation is more true. They are two dimensions of that person, each revealed within a different situational context (2004: 325).

This concept of multiple dimensions reflects the ideas discussed in this article about how confessional narratives do not necessarily reflect a more or less ‘true’ version of the individual. Although we consider them part of a private self, our secrets may not represent a hidden truth at all but merely another dimension of our performative self. Oscar Wilde famously said: ‘A

man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth', a concept which is still widely attributed to the online world (2011: 71). However, what this article suggests is that instead of one single reality or 'truth', there may in fact be a series of *truths* that are part of an individual's self-representation, or a series of different performances of self. Consequently, the purported 'secrets' that are being shared, may not actually be secrets in the traditional sense of the word, but a merging of the internal and external performance of an individual, and of their public and private spheres. The blogosphere, therefore, represents a unique stage for users on which to perform their private selves and could provide a platform for voices that are not heard by the offline world.

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