

# Blogging as self therapy?

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## Abstract

America Online's 2005 survey reported the startling finding that almost fifty percent of bloggers blog as a form of self therapy—a finding that went relatively un-noticed within the psychotherapeutic and psychological communities. Given the rather significant global population of bloggers and readers, and the seemingly intractable problem of mental illness worldwide (according to the World Health Organisation, the global burden of mental illness accounts for more than the burden of all cancers put together), the possibility of blogging as self therapy deserves greater attention. Research investigating the health possibilities of blogs holds particular promise, at least for those disposed to writing and those working with patients who write. This paper addresses the question of how one might blog as a form of self therapy by constructing a portrait of a research participant blogging as self therapy, based on an interview conducted with the participant in May 2007.

## Introduction

Writing has the power to change the ways we think which, in turn, can affect our entire social world—(James Pennebaker 2002, p. 290).

According to America Online's (2005) survey of bloggers, almost fifty



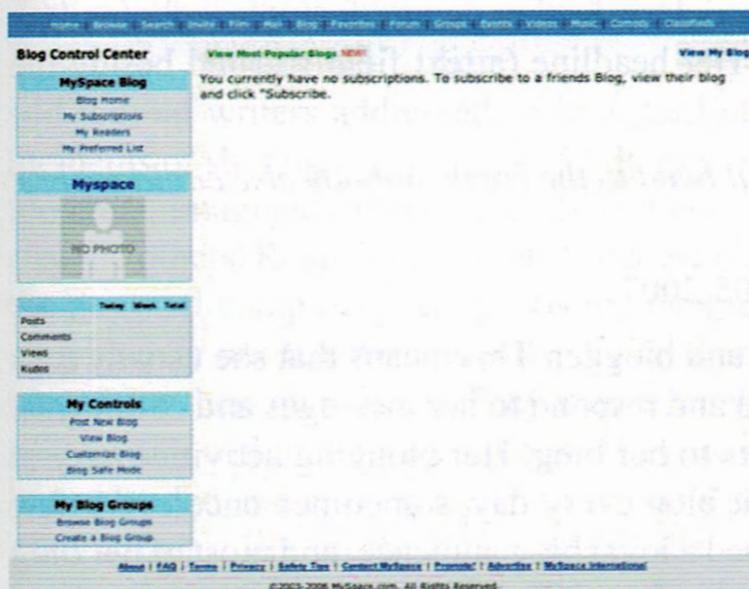
percent of survey respondents blog as a form of self-therapy. According to the recent Pew Internet and American Life Project's (Lenhart & Fox, 2006) report *Bloggers: A portrait of the internet's new storytellers*, "eight percent of internet users, or about 12 million American adults, keep a blog. Thirty-nine percent of internet users, or about 57 million American adults, read blogs" (p. 2). Needless to say, when one starts counting in bloggers and readers from other regions like Europe, Asia, and the Pacific, all this points to a significant global population of bloggers and readers. Imagine

*MySpace.com login page. Screenshot retrieved 4 December 2006 from <http://myspace.com/>.*

if almost half of these numbers could be writing online for psychosocial health gains. Such a scenario is not to be taken lightly by the mental health professions, at a time when the global burden of mental illness accounts for more than the burden of all cancers put together.<sup>1</sup> Even if a far more modest number of bloggers were able to gain therapeutic benefits from blogging, this in itself could constitute a serious assault on the up-to-now widespread and seemingly intractable problem of mental illness worldwide. Research investigating the health possibilities of blogs thus holds particular promise, at least for those disposed to writing and those working with patients who write.

Given the prevalence of blogs today, the term itself must be familiar to most readers. In just a short space of time, blogs have become ubiquitous in our contemporary media landscape. What exactly is a blog or weblog to use its full name? A weblog for our purposes can be defined as an online journal or diary organised typically in reverse chronological order, consisting of user generated content in the primary form of writing. From our perspective, blogs are a particularly fertile field for mental health research because of the established fact that creative expressive writing can produce health benefits. “Since the publication of Pennebaker’s pioneering work in 1989, it has become widely accepted that disclosing emotions by putting upsetting experiences into words can be healthy” (Booth and Petrie, 2002, p. 163). The only problem with this impressive body of empirical writing cure research accruing since 1989 is that it has all been largely lab based. As writing cure pioneer James Pennebaker (2002) himself says,

Given the impact that writing studies are having in the media and the large number of people who keep diaries, it is incumbent on us to begin exploring how writing affects people outside the lab... real world projects will evaluate how writing works with a group of self selected people—people who are naturally drawn to a writing intervention (p. 291).



*MySpace. Blog Interface. Screenshot retrieved from <http://myspace.com/> 4 December 2006*

Blogs present just such an opportunity for health research in real world settings. Are bloggers not precisely people drawn to a writing intervention? But more, are there not also features of blogging aligned with the potentials of a writing intervention (such as the so-called online disinhibition effect and the communicative intercast consisting of comments, links and subscriptions between blogger-readers)? While the AOL survey suggests promising news, it is extremely broad in its scope, leaving clinicians with the question: How does one blog as a form of self therapy? This paper attempts to write an answer by constructing a portrait of a research participant blogging as self therapy (based on an interview conducted with the participant in May 2007). Direct quotes (italicised) from the ninety minute interview are cut into the text in order to include a voice within this portrait.

## **Blogging and traditional diaries**

To protect the identity of the blogger, let us make up a name for her—Linda. Linda is a woman in her early thirties residing in Auckland, New Zealand. She studies undergraduate psychology at a local university. She has two children (both under 10) to a man we shall call Santo. She has a good social support network (from what one can observe in her blog) and makes an effort to keep in touch with friends and family both online and off. Linda's blogging activities take place primarily in the online social networking community MySpace. MySpace is currently the world's most populous online community with numbers in excess of 180 million. Linda's MySpace profile, like most pages on MySpace, has been customised or "pimped" (to use MySpace speak) with a patterned background, and at the moment of writing, plays the song Anything by Martina Topley-Bird. Her display picture features a photograph of Linda with one of her sons. Her headline (a text field situated beside the display photograph) today says,

*I'll crawl to your name, I'll bend to the earth, nobody else could ever compare.*

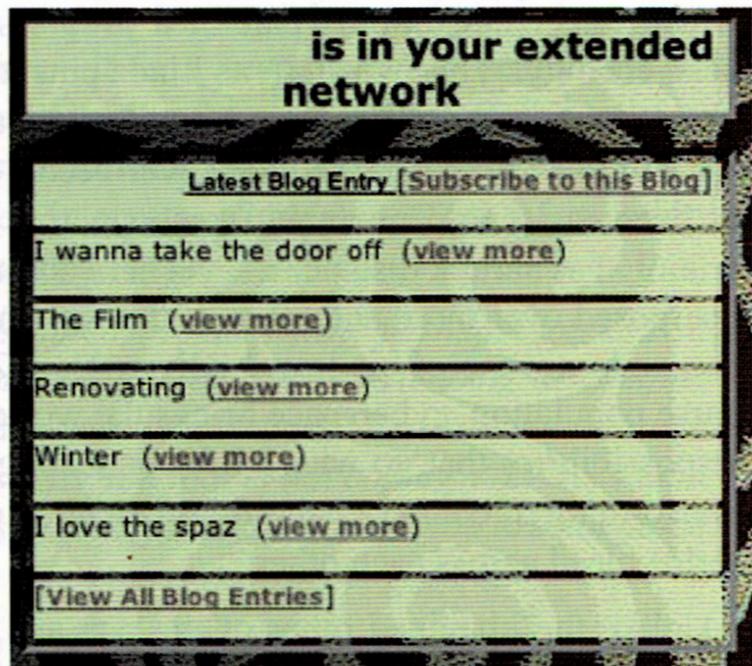
She last logged in today, 30/05/2007.

Linda is a regular MySpacer and blogger. This means that she usually logs in to MySpace every day to read and respond to her messages and comments. While logged on, she often posts to her blog. Her blogging activities vary in intensity—sometimes she might blog every day, sometimes once every few days. Over time she has developed a loyal blog audience, and most of her blog posts inevitably receive comments from her MySpace friends, particularly those who subscribe to her blog.<sup>2</sup> Before blogging, Linda used to write in the pen and paper way. It would seem then that she was already acquainted

with writing as a way of coping with the vicissitudes of a life. Indeed she says herself that her relationship with writing began “nearly 20 years ago” (presumably in her early teens). A predisposition to writing and keeping diaries likely contributed to Linda’s decision to try blogging initially. Blogs are, however, different from traditional diaries and journals.

*Blogging is like keeping a diary under your bed, only the whole world knows its there.*

This strange statement of Linda’s perhaps best captures the paradox of blogging as a form of diarying. Concurrently more social than has ever been possible before (accessible potentially to anyone around the world connected to the internet) and as intimately personal as a diary hidden beneath one’s bed, the blog presents an ancient form (diary or journal writing) renewed and transformed. The MySpace blog is a socialised diary. Sociality inheres in such a practice. Blogs are part of the wider and very recent socialisation of the web... what some call Web 2.0 or social media.<sup>3</sup>



*Detail of Linda’s Blog. Screen shot retrieved 6 June 2007 from <http://myspace.com>*

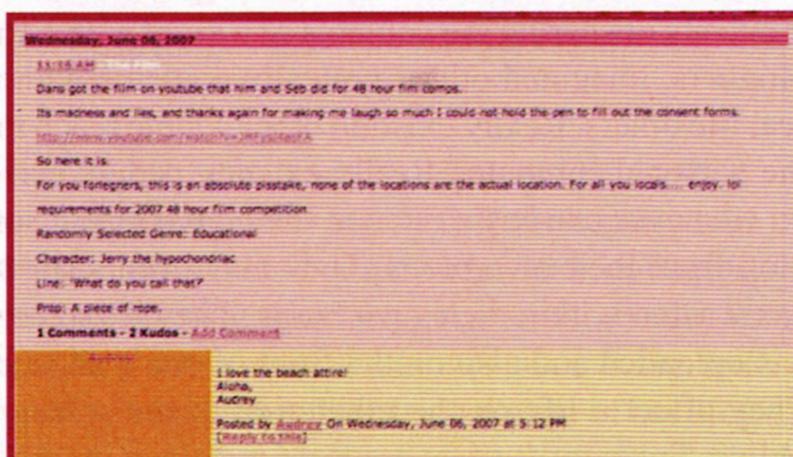
While traditional diary and journal writers addressed an imagined other (certainly with exceptional incidents of sharing the contents of a diary with a trusted real life friend), with bloggers, imagined others typically coincide with the autonomous bodies of real life others. Really existing other people reach through the mirror screen of the personal computer. Really existing people leave comments and feedback on whatever one has written in the digital diary. Sometimes they link to one’s blog from their own blogs. They may even write something about what one has written within their own blogs. They leave comments on the photos one has uploaded and also on the front of one’s page in the “comments” section. They affect a life on the other side of the screen through such interactions online. Frequently, there are even meetings in “real life”.

## Social dimensions of blogging

*The one person I did get to know using EJ, is now my chiropractor. He was the first 'virtual' who I went as I put it 'IRL' with, or 'in real life'.*

Already early on in her blogging life, Linda crossed the virtual-world divide with another blogger who was part of her blogging circle in the "EJ" (Easyjournal) community (she tried Easyjournal and Blurdy before moving to MySpace). What is emphasised here is that blogging (and various other forms of virtual living such as MySpace) should not be naïvely dismissed as purely virtual, but understood as part of a progressively unfolding mixed reality social ecology.<sup>4</sup> This "virtual", as Linda puts it, was just the first. She goes on to meet with many others from New Zealand and abroad through her current blog home—MySpace. Has there ever been a time in human history when it has been easier to connect with others across the globe? Rapid air transport certainly has shrunk distances... yet here is something pervasive (cyberspace superposed over more and more of the world) that does not even require the time and expense of air travel. Given New Zealand's remote location and sparse population, cyberspace brings the world into the home, opening up all the possibilities that go with a life connecting with other lives—desire, sex, love forming of course a natural horizon—an edge where the virtual and real worlds bleed across each other.

Unlike the imagined other of the pen and paper diary or journal writer, Linda's others are autonomous others interfacing through the elaborations of virtual lives on MySpace. In a fashion not dissimilar to how one dresses and grooms before setting out to work in the morning, the MySpace profile is also dressed and groomed ("pimped") to become a changing representative proxy for the MySpacer. The blog is one dimension of this wider virtual life. Other aspects of the emerging social media landscape of MySpace include lists of favourite movies, music and books, static and moving images as well as songs. Dressed to reflect the difference of a life, the MySpace profile acts



*Detail of Linda's Blog showing a comment from a reader. Screenshot retrieved 6 June 2007 from <http://myspace.com>*

as a sort of social magnet in cyberspace, constellating around itself other like-minded profiles and people. These others are part of the attraction of MySpace blogging for Linda. They offer a promise of listening, empathy and understanding, and thus contribute to the perceived therapeutic effect of blogging within MySpace.

*There is nothing like a sounding board, a place where perhaps one person in a million might raise your spirits by saying 'I so get what you mean', or 'it's ok to feel that way'.*

It is clear from Linda's remark that what she seeks from others (at times of distress) is something that makes her feel better (raises her spirits). This something is very specific—it is a response that demonstrates an understanding of the content expressed in the post and/or offers a validation for the experience her blog post describes. Linda finds responses of this sort helpful/therapeutic because they intervene to break a sense of isolation (a sense of being alone with a struggle).

*I think, that if you felt isolated in some way, perhaps you are in difficulty with a personal relationship, or are experiencing discomfort in your job, knowing that there are others in your same situation can help alleviate the concept its only you that is not coping... I have found that people tend to think in isolation, so to "discover" you are not alone can make you feel better.*

What better to modify a sense of isolation while struggling in a romantic relationship or on the job than sociality itself? If we consider that a traditional psychotherapist might provide say an hour (and a fifty minute hour at that) of admittedly skilled social intercourse once a week, it is not difficult to see how the 24-7 availability of potentially 180 million MySpacers offers something rather substantial and potentially longer lasting than a psychotherapeutic relationship (which of course ends at the end of treatment) to a blogger writing about the ups and downs of a life. Considering that Linda has been writing for almost 20 years, writing can reasonably be considered a self-therapeutic activity one might incorporate into a lifetime.

If there is a critical factor that helps Linda to successfully use her blog in this manner (i.e. to mediate and cope with the vicissitudes of life), it must surely be a sense of confidence or trust in the culture of the online community and its people. Such a confidence allows her to blog about anything and to feel reasonably assured of the "safety" of her audience. As she states,

*I blog randomly, that could be about an event, or things my children say that I don't want to forget, or I could blog my frustrations about a situation, or my grief, as in with the death of my long term partner to suicide.*

This confidence can at least in part be attributed to her ease with writing (something that comes with writing for almost 20 years). It also derives from a process of exploration and discernment—Linda tries out the Easyjournal and Blurty communities before deciding on MySpace as a blogging home. This is to say that some investment is required on the part of the blogger in exploring and identifying a community with a good “fit”. Subsequently, effort is also required on the part of the blogger in contributing to the community. Typically this is achieved by developing relationships with others through their blogs and MySpace profiles.

As with real life relationships, there is usually an expectation of reciprocity in MySpace relationships—I read and comment on your blog and expect you to do the same for my blog. Thus it is not surprising of course to find that Linda comments in her friends’ blogs, and, to a degree, writes for her audience.

*I read other blogs too, I gauge what others might like to read on what I like to read myself. In its own way blogging is somewhat of a craft for me as well as a release. I have regular readers and I do consider them when I write. I apparently have a distinct narrative style and I will say I ‘work’ at maintaining that.*

Writing in a blog for Linda is not simply a means of dealing with difficult situations. With the audience comes a degree of social responsiveness (keeping an audience in mind with the overall goal of maintaining the relationships built with audience members in an ongoing way). Linda treats blogging/writing as something of “a craft” as well. The multitude of blogs that Linda’s is a part of is like a sea of different voices. Is what Linda describes here not the process of acquiring or developing a “voice” within the multitude?

The cultivation of a voice is something well known to published writers. It is what enables a reader to say, yes this novel of so-and-so has her characteristic x. Similarly, with the blog, it is what enables a reader to identify the characteristic x to be discerned across a blogger’s multiple posts over time. For the writer even, the blog presents a portrait of the movements of a life as well as a permanent record of the expressions evoked in the everyday encounters of that life. Looking over a blog, a writer is able to observe over time this growing voice, its tendencies, its tones, its complaining and celebrating.<sup>5</sup> Such a possibility recalls a similar process in psychotherapy

whereby a patient's history is evoked through speech and observed (analysed) over time within the psychotherapeutic relationship.

## **Blogging and catharsis**

Linda was specially selected as a research subject because she already appeared to use her blog effectively in the wider picture of coping with a difficult and disempowering romantic relationship, subsequently with separating, and then with the suicide of the ex-partner. When asked directly for her thoughts on the notion of blogging as self therapy, Linda had this to say...

*It makes sense to me, to map a journey in expression through writing, when I was young I read somewhere about writing people a letter when you wanted to tell them something but were too afraid to say it, not necessarily to send, in fact they all ended up in the bin, but I always felt better after "getting it out on paper", so to speak.*

Clearly, Linda is familiar with cathartic writing. At a very basic level, her theory of writing for health recalls Freud's cathartic procedure. What Linda describes is a method of tension reduction through cathartic/expressive writing. Linda's approach can also be aligned with Pennebaker's (1990) writing cure research, demonstrating beneficial short term (up to 6 months) effects from expressive writing exercises. Pennebaker in fact specifically employs the Freudian cathartic method. As Pennebaker explains, Freud and his colleague Breuer "discovered that their patients benefited from talking in detail about the thoughts and feelings they harboured about their upsetting experiences", a process allowing for a connection of the repressed thoughts of the traumatic event with the conscious associated emotions, such as anxiety (1990, p. 166). Journal writing and blogging then, as Linda has discovered, can similarly allow writers to benefit from writing in detail about the thoughts and feelings associated with upsetting experiences.<sup>6</sup>

Linda's thoughts on blogging as self therapy produce an image of a younger Linda learning this cathartic procedure for dealing with/reducing the tension arising from having something to say to someone and being too afraid to say it. Interestingly, later on in life, Linda describes her relationship as one in which she found it difficult to say some things to her partner.

*I was in a relationship that I found difficult to express my inner thoughts to my partner, we were not an ideological match, this frustrated me. Blogging enabled me to purge, vent, express whatever to an audience without retribution, or emotional investment in what I said.*

She specifically states that she started expressive writing in her teens as a way of dealing with difficult things. Similarly, Linda started blogging predominantly as a way of dealing with difficulties in her relationship. Her descriptions of her relationship evoke an image of a stifling and controlling partner.

*He is predominantly the reason my blogging began, I needed to find a place to express myself anonymously and freely where I felt I was not being 'vetted' by him.*

Blogging offered Linda the ability to use the cathartic procedure learned in her youth as a means of dealing with her sense of frustration. Unlike the previous scenario of the young Linda writing and then throwing the writing away into a bin, Linda the blogger shares her writing with real life others through the medium of her online blog posts. Admittedly, Linda did not address her frustrations with her partner directly—she found it impossible in the context of their relationship. Yet this difference already offers something more than traditional writing—the feedback and interaction of real life others in response to her writing of a life.

### **Personal space, voice, and identity**

Making the shift from the private world of pen and paper expressive writing to blogging was by no means insignificant and Linda expressed some hesitation in making the transition.

*I was initially very apprehensive about the global audience, and I purposefully had only readers I didn't know in real life as I found I would self censor what should have been a streaming flow of consciousness.*

This apprehension is evident in the careful way in which Linda explored and tested a number of virtual communities as potential blog homes. Her first blog began in Easyjournal ([www.easyjournal.com](http://www.easyjournal.com)); then she “moved” to Blurty ([www.blurty.com](http://www.blurty.com)), before again moving (with a group of bloggers she met in Blurty) to MySpace ([www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com))—home to her current blogging and virtual life.

Such a cautious approach is to be commended, as cyberspace, like any real life society, has its share of dangerous citizens. Further, given what is already known as the online disinhibition effect (that is, the tendency when

online to experience disinhibition in the expression of thoughts, desires and emotions), some care is always advised when revealing personally significant information or engaging in blogging for cathartic/therapeutic purposes. The danger of course includes unwelcome feelings of excessive exposure, unwelcome or intrusive interest (stalkers), and even the sharing of one's personal information beyond the blog (it is relatively easy for any of one's readers to cut and paste from one's blog).

Establishing a safe place to blog in MySpace seemed to alleviate Linda's apprehension, opening up the way for her to blog "randomly". Being able to blog randomly is associated with a sense of freedom for Linda, something akin to being able to speak one's mind, or, to return to the motif of voice, to have and use one's voice. The random is, however, also associated with something else of significance—what she calls "a streaming flow of consciousness". Speaking one's mind then includes the ability to speak not only the known known and known unknown, but also the unknown known and unknown unknown. Linda's approach to writing uncannily recalls the fundamental Freudian injunction to speak whatever comes to mind. Freedom is freedom of association, the ability to speak a mind, or voice a heart, open to the mistakes, slips, and other random workings of the unconscious—without "recrimination". From the evidence of her blog, it appears it also involves the freedom to say that one does not really want to completely say something.

*Sometimes when I don't want to be literal but I do need to express myself I might have a stab at poetry... it's a way of expressing myself cryptically.*

Against the backdrop of a controlling and difficult romantic relationship, Linda turned to blogging as a means of dealing with the tension, frustration and distress of not being able to speak her mind or have a voice. With her background of expressive writing, coupled with her learning of writing as a cathartic mechanism, it seems keeping a blog within a social network did function to relieve tension. As mentioned before, it should be clear that blogging became much more than simple cathartic outbursts. In an important way, blogging functioned for Linda also as the elaboration of a personal "space" (a kind of living space—lebensraum) or quite literally a my-space—something inextricably linked with the growing discovery of voice and freedom. In her own words,

*the internet provided a sort of safehouse I could speak freely for the first time.*

Her initial blogging activities largely concerned the relationship and allowed her to elaborate a personal identity, voice, and space outside the constraints of that relationship. Perhaps blogging functioned also as a supportive activity that contributed to her leaving what she identified as a destructive relationship.

*I blogged progressively about the breakdown of our relationship and subsequent activities after we separated, up till the time of his death. Blogging about him dying was a part of this process.*

Santo provided much of the impetus for Linda to begin blogging. One of the most difficult or traumatic situations Linda has blogged about concerns Santo's suicide. The topic arises early in the interview with Linda and features prominently throughout. After a difficult separation period (which included a situation where Santo apparently hacked into Linda's emails on MySpace—in the context of our discussion, this can be seen as another intrusion or encroachment on Linda's personal space/lebensraum), Santo's dead body was found early one morning. Linda posted the news to her blog either the night of, or morning after, the discovery of his suicide. In the immediate wake of this event, Linda used her blog frequently.

*When he died I needed something to mark the days, and the progress of my emotional journey... it was something to do, and a way of taking the thoughts out of my head.*

Blogging, it seems, helped as a consistent cathartic activity Linda used to get through on a day-to-day basis. She also points out, however, that more than simply marking the days, blogging after Santo's death also allowed her to look back over time on an emotional journey through the event and its aftermath.<sup>7</sup> In the face of the traumatic non-sense of a suicide, Linda also used other communications technologies (landline and mobile phone, text messaging, instant messaging) to link with her support network both within and beyond MySpace. She did not just write at this time; she also talked a lot with those close to her (online and off).

### **Blogging in a mixed reality world**

*I have a close friend/family network, and yes I spent many many hours in conversation with people, as much for myself as for them as they were probably struggling more with his decision than I was.*

Blogging, while functioning as a significant activity in the maintenance and evolution of a life, is not undertaken exclusively in relation to other more traditional channels of social intercourse. Linda is nothing like the extreme and

over-hyped cases of Japanese otaku (geek) teenagers locked in their bedrooms whose “real life” activities and spaces only serve the greater purpose of ever-on connectivity and engagement in cyberspace. This is clear in how she has developed and maintained a network of close friends and family that she can call on in difficult times. It is also clear in how she uses technological and non-technological means to speak and connect with others. Linda is perhaps exemplary in this regard as a “mixed reality” citizen, someone as at home online as offline.

*I find different forums of communication open me up to different listeners, be that my real life friends, my family, my internet world, all of the above comprise the compartments of myself... and in speaking to them all, all compartments are essentially taken care of.*

Unlike those who valorise the so called “real” world over cyberspace, naïvely dismissing the virtual as inauthentic or somehow unreal, Linda approaches her virtual life (through blogging and MySpacing) as she does her real life, that is, with a concern for authenticity and speaking with an honest voice across both spaces. She says for instance that it is

*very difficult to manage several blogs, it feels a little false writing in more than one.*

She is even more specific about her MySpace profile (within which her blog is embedded).

*It's important to me that MySpace is a true reflection of self, minus the tangible parts that come with me being 3 dimensional. Integrity and honesty are important qualities to reflect. I don't like and don't want to indulge in deception.*

It may be tempting to question such a refreshingly honest and expressive approach in cyberspace, particularly with all the media scaremongering about paedophiles and stalkers in cyberspace. Linda however is not a naïve blogger or netizen (net citizen) by any means.

*As with anything, I believe people must act with their better discretion and common sense, whether it be in a nightclub, or a chatroom. I have met my fair share of charlatans, but I had the same chance of finding them on Parnell Rise on a Friday night. I can only say you “get good” at the internet, you learn to trust your nose and I have seldom been disappointed by virtuality.*

Mainstream media in the past three years have focussed excessively on cases of stalking and sexual abuse supposedly facilitated by online networking

sites like MySpace. Yet if one were to tally up the number of actual cases of sexual abuse resulting from MySpace contact, it would still be nowhere near the number of actual cases of sexual abuse already happening in real world communities without the mediation or facilitation of the internet. Yet these many real life cases hardly feature in the news. It would probably be more accurate to go further than Linda to claim that one has more chance of meeting charlatans in real life than on the internet!

To return to Linda's concern with authenticity and honesty ("true reflection of self"), it has been interesting to observe a shift that has occurred in online dating, evolving from its exciting and disinhibited beginnings. When online dating first made its appearance as a new social phenomenon, a concerning question emerged: how closely does an online dating profile match a real life person? Charlatans of all sorts, perhaps fuelled by the so-called online disinhibition effect, felt free to create all manner of fictions about themselves on online dating profiles—posting photos of professional models as representative of themselves, making up facts and figures in the "about me" sections, and generally "bigging" themselves up. What they failed to account for of course was the inevitable encounter in real world settings. They failed to account for online dating as an intrinsically mixed reality encounter—that is to say, they failed to understand that people expect to meet in real life should online interactions go smoothly. When they meet, people expect some degree of congruence between the virtual and real world self.

MySpace, although not an online dating community per se, is very much a part of a progressively unfolding global mixed reality social ecology. For Linda, blogging and more generally, MySpacing, is very much part of a mixed reality life. That is to say, Linda experiences her life world as a dynamic mixing of virtual and real life streams. As she says,

*My virtual/real world have become indistinguishably interconnected. I have made many real life friends through MySpace, flattered with a MySpace friend, and begun a new relationship with another. The internet allowed me access to like minds, people who shared my interests but who in the real world I would never have met because I don't mix in their circle, shop at their supermarkets, work in their industry.*

Linda is by no means alone in experiencing her life world as such a dynamic interplay of virtual and real world living. In such a mixed reality scenario, the possibility of meeting "in-real-life" (IRL) mediates the way in which a blogger such as Linda approaches the construction and elaboration of a virtual self in the form of her MySpace page and blog. It does so in much the same way as happens with the online dating scenario. While undoubtedly

prettied up (“pimped”), exaggerations, distortions and deceits carried too far on one’s MySpace page and blog are liable to be quickly discovered by other MySpacers one meets IRL. Once discovered, there is the further risk of these exaggerations, distortions and deceits being shared around the community. Ultimately the risk is of being publicly exposed, losing friends, gaining a bad reputation and so on.

Because of what we can call Linda’s ethical approach to the new conditions of a mixed reality world (i.e., her concern to maintain a congruence between virtual and real world selves), it seems she has benefited tremendously through her engagement with blogging and MySpace. In fact she is currently in a romantic relationship with someone she met on MySpace—someone who presumably got to know a lot about her through her blog and MySpace life before meeting IRL. Also as she describes, she has shared a house with a MySpacer, hosted foreign MySpacers in her Auckland home, and expanded her social circle in ways she would never have been able to prior to the internet.

## **Blogging and traditional psychotherapy**

By and large, the interactions from her MySpace network have also been supportive and encouraging.

*Off the top of my head I can’t say I ever got a non-helpful comment. In terms of etiquette people seem to be empathetic and sincere, and sensitive in their responses.*

The psychotherapist reader may at this point raise the criticism that while supportive and encouraging, the interventions of Linda’s readers may not possess the skilled resistance of a therapist/analyst. Further, a psychotherapist might feel that Linda can selectively cultivate friendships and even the kinds of feedback or comments she desires, avoiding any challenging or discordant communications.

Certainly it is true that it is easy enough to find new friends out of the 180 odd million MySpacers, and just as easy to block or delete friends with a few mouse clicks. Also, yes, there is probably a way in which Linda cultivates only the kinds of feedback/comments she desires (by, say, responding/commenting back favourably), rejecting feedback or interactions she does not agree with or want (by, say, disagreeing in a comment back or simply staying silent in her blog). Linda herself says

*blogging is different in that you are talking to an audience who aren’t versed in therapy and perhaps can only offer lay advice or guidance.*

However, this does not detract in any way from Linda benefiting psychosocially from blogging. It does not detract from her use of the blog as a social forum for cathartic writing and its associated tension release. Nor does it mean that she is never exposed to the difference and resistance incarnated always in really existing others. As is clear, blogging takes place for Linda as part and parcel of a mixed reality world in which it is normal to meet those one has met online IRL.

MySpace blogging is certainly no replacement for traditional psychotherapy or psychoanalysis. This should not stop us, however, from constructing new understandings of the link between certain forms of human signification/expression (e.g. blogging) and potentially therapeutic or life-affirming effects. In any case, Linda has in fact also engaged in traditional counselling and psychotherapy. When asked if she had at any time seen a counsellor or psychotherapist, Linda says,

*I did actually, but pre-suicide. I was at University at the time and was diagnosed as suffering with stress and was referred to a campus counsellor who I saw for about 6 months. I have previously seen therapists and enjoyed the experience.*

Going back to Pennebaker's writing cure research, Pennebaker is explicit that writing is not a cure for mental or physical ill health. It is instead "best viewed as a form of preventive maintenance" and "should not be used as a substitute for therapy" (Pennebaker, 1990, p. 114). The benefits of writing are decreased inhibition and the provision of a new understanding and resolution to thinking about trauma and other life crises, enabling people to move beyond these events (pp. 89, 95). Pennebaker's view is that therapy is more appropriate for people who are unable to cope with high levels of distress, whereas writing maintains the health of those who are coping well with their lives (p. 197).

Such views construct oppositions that may exist more on paper than in the reality of an engagement with writing. Oppositions such as that between therapy (which incidentally is predominantly a speaking activity) and writing, or mentally ill and psychologically resilient, or preventive maintenance and corrective psychotherapy are more productively thought within the context of the totality of a life. Is it not conceivable that one has periods of mental illness and psychological resilience over the course of a lifetime? And is it not possible that one engages in activities that might be classed as preventive maintenance as well as in psychotherapy at different times over the stretch of one's life? Further, is the text not to be found in the psychotherapeutic engagement, and the voice not to be found in the written blog? Finally, is the

unconscious not to be found in a talking practice that enjoins the speaker to say whatever comes to mind, as well as in a writing practice that emphasizes writing in a stream of consciousness?

Using Linda as an example, it is possible to show that one can productively use a blog in a continuing way to achieve outcomes normally ascribed to psychotherapeutic engagement—outcomes such as finding and developing a voice within the social multitude, successful deployment of cathartic writing during periods of high tension/stress, grieving through a suicide—and call upon the skills of a psychotherapist at times of greater need. The one issue that stands out is the repetition of the scenario of not being able to say something difficult to someone directly (this scenario appears in Linda's youth as well as in her relationship with Santo). This conceivably is something one might not expect the lay reader to notice and point out to Linda. It is, however, a thing one does expect a psychotherapist to observe and encounter.

One wonders if the counsellors and therapists Linda visited ever mentioned this or if Linda is already herself aware of this. One also wonders if her new romantic relationship is one in which she can own and use a voice in the way that she wants and is able to in her blog on MySpace. Presumably her new partner is already aware of and accustomed to this voice, as they began as friends on MySpace (he thus had ample opportunities to read through her entire blog). Now if the issue of a voice is a central one for Linda, then what the blog has done in exposing this voice directly to her romantic partner is quite a feat. It opens up a path for Linda to experiment with saying things directly to her partner in person (having the opportunity already to witness the way in which he responds to her voice as elaborated in the blog). One wonders if a therapist would have been able to introduce her partner to Linda's evolving voice in the same powerful way that a blog on MySpace has been able to.

## **Conclusion**

On that note, we come to the end of the portraiture project. In summary, this paper has constructed a detailed image of a writer engaged in blogging/social diarying on MySpace in response to the vicissitudes of a life. This construction writes an answer to the question of how a blog might function as a form of self therapy. The image has been constructed with careful attention to the things Linda said in the course of an interview. Direct quotes from Linda were used to include her voice within this portrait. The quotes also offered opportunities for considering a range of issues relating to blogging within an online social networking community like MySpace. Blogging as a kind of self help or self therapy remains a fruitful area for contemporary

mental health research. At the very least, our construction of blogging as self therapy for a subject suggests that for someone predisposed to writing, and sufficiently invested in developing and maintaining relationships with other blogger-readers, blogging can provide the symptomatic relief of cathartic expression. Further however, in Linda's case, it seems also that the blog can be used as a point for self reflection and even encountering the unconscious (this seems largely dependent on an approach to writing that privileges a stream of consciousness). Lastly, blogging appears capable of offering someone like Linda the opportunity and safety to develop and use a voice within the multitude of voices comprising the social symbolic universe.

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## **(Endnotes)**

- <sup>1</sup> Data developed by the massive Global Burden of Disease study conducted by the World Health Organization, the World Bank, and Harvard University, reveal that mental illness, including suicide, accounts for over 15 percent of the burden of disease in established market economies, such as the United States. This is more than the disease burden caused by all cancers (NIMH, 2001).
- <sup>2</sup> On MySpace, one can subscribe to a friend's blog, meaning that one elects to receive alerts whenever something new is posted to that blog.
- <sup>3</sup> According to Wikipedia, social media "describes the online technologies and practices that people use to share opinions, insights, experiences, and perspectives" and can take many different forms, including text, images, audio, and video. These sites typically use technologies such as blogs, message boards, podcasts, wikis, and vlogs to allow users to interact" ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social\\_media](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_media)).
- <sup>4</sup> Mixed reality simply means the mixing of virtual and real or actual lifeworlds or spaces. A mixed reality social ecology is a social environment where virtual life (online dating, flexible learning, networking, making friends, gaming, shopping) and real (actual) world feed back and forwards into each other.
- <sup>5</sup> The history of a blog can also function therapeutically as a resource to draw upon at any time, much as a personal library functions as a resource to call upon in the investigations emerging from the vicissitudes of a life. To illustrate, a blog post about say a happy event (the birthday of one of the children, for instance) can be recalled during times of distress as a self-soothing strategy. As a further illustration, a blog post describing how one has successfully dealt with a difficult life situation in the past can be a helpful reminder when confronting similarly difficult situations as a life unfolds.
- <sup>6</sup> It should be noted that blogging presents a significant difference from the writing contexts of Pennebaker's experiments. Pennebaker's subjects wrote in a controlled manner for a set period of time without any interaction with peers/other writers. Blogging, as we have already seen, offers an important social dimension to the writing experience. Incidentally, it should also be noted that the social dimension offered by blogs highlights the dyadic bias of the traditional psychotherapeutic relationship (it is confined to the therapist—patient dyad without involving the subject's social world directly).
- <sup>7</sup> In an important way, the blog posts around Santo's suicide begin to function as a sort of memorial. Linda in fact posts numerous poems dedicated to Santo in her blog and in this way the blog assists in the overall grieving process.