



'Blog This': surfing the metropolis and the method of London

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This article examines the ways in which a group of London bloggers or on-line journal keepers constitute their city. They claim that their strategies for knowing London are derived from techniques for knowing the Internet. In particular, bloggers adapt the activity and culture of on-line surfing. The article investigates the method of 'blogging' alongside and against the interpretative strategies deployed by urban theorists and sketch writers. It is intended as a contribution to urban anthropology, anthropology of the Internet, the anthropology of knowledge, and the ethnography of London.

We are, all of us who are Londoners, paying visits of greater or lesser duration to a Personality that, whether we love it or very cordially hate it, fascinates us all.

Ford 1998 [1905]: 3

In 1905 Ford Madox Ford published a long essay entitled *The soul of London*. There, he devotes himself to examining how his city can be known. While acknowledging that London is a product of centuries of labour – a constructed or built environment – Ford insists that the city possesses the attributes of human character. Londoners know and treat their metropolis as a 'Personality'; the city absorbs their interest in the same way that well-known figures (such as 'the distinguished men of our social lives' [1998 [1905]: 3]) draw public attention. Like them, London is the subject of endless conversation and gossip, of moralizing, reminiscence, and speculation. Indeed, Ford claims that Londoners are defined by this compulsion to describe their current view or opinion of the city's character. But there is a further twist to the fascination that London exercises. Unlike the dignitaries of his comparison, this person can never be encountered whole or approached directly (1998 [1905]: 9). Rather London is distinguished by the fact that its external form cannot be straightforwardly taken in or known. The city, Ford holds, is 'illimitable' (1998 [1905]: 15). There is therefore also a problem of scale: London and Londoners do not appear as persons of the same order.

Of course all of this should be of great interest to anthropology. As Gell (1998: 9) highlights, the discipline is partly defined by its historical relativization of the concept of 'persons' (inspired by the very willingness of our ethnographic subjects to collapse

the distinction between persons and things, to let a material object appear as a person and do person-like work). Although usually dealing with artefacts of more graspable dimensions (e.g. ritual drums and flutes, fetish figures or items of ceremonial exchange), anthropologists' familiarity with such claims should make them best placed to examine the ways in which things (and places) such as cities are known (see Reed 2002). This is somewhat different from the conventional focus of urban anthropology – a sub-discipline largely devoted to the analysis of the phenomenon of urbanism (cf. Gmelch & Zenner 2002; Hannerz 1980; Low 1999) that only emerged as a coherent field of study relatively recently (in the 1970s) – but it is none the less one that deserves attention.

Certainly, social or cultural anthropology should be better equipped to address these claims than much urban theory, which, despite its criticisms of urban sketch writing, also operates by reifying the city as a human-like actor, an entity or being imagined as existing independently of the people living there (see Eade 2000: 5). Indeed, the dynamic behind the knowledge formation of urban theory remains the same as that behind the work of essayists such as Ford. In both, the idea that the object of study is boundless, beyond usual comprehension, provides the momentum for knowing. Urban theorists ground their work in the assumption that the city is constantly changing and that there is always another context for understanding it. This movement is replicated in the pace of their knowledge production; hence the common rush of theorists to define the city in its present state or to anticipate its redefinition. In recent years, they have been moved to declare that cities are now more complex, intricate, and varied entities (e.g. sprawling and spatially open, cross-cut by flows of people, commodities, and information that link across geographical distance [cf. Castells 1989; Davis 1998; Dear 1999; Harvey 1985; Sassen 1994; Soja 2000]), demanding more complex, intricate, and varied responses (Amin & Thrift 2002: 1-3). There is a reported sense in which urban theory and its techniques of knowing are lagging ever further behind the changes to its object of analysis (Sudjic 1992: 297). In this peculiar temporality, knowledge of the character of particular cities must also feed into knowledge of their general type; for urban theorists, the city has an abstract as well as concrete personality.

I am interested in exploring further how London, as an artefact and generator of knowledge, comes to be understood. In this regard, urban sketch writing and urban theory cannot provide me with tools for analysis; rather, their claims must serve as objects of ethnographic inquiry. I want their arguments to stand as juxtaposed methods for knowing a city or as kinds of interpretative strategy (one of the consequences of imagining that their knowledge lags behind ever-accelerating and complicating urban environments is that urban theorists find method increasingly unstable and divisive; they are constantly advocating new methodologies for better capturing the state of the modern or postmodern city). In this article, they sit alongside my principal ethnography of London webloggers.¹ A weblog or 'blog' is a form of webpage distinguished by its calendar structure and frequently updated links-driven format, which archives entries chronologically (Blood 2002: ix). Since the first automated weblog-publishing systems emerged on the Internet in 1999, allowing relatively unskilled individuals to run these sites easily and free of charge, interest in weblogging has soared. Today, the number of weblogs is in the millions (the majority authored in North America), with over a thousand new ones created each day. But when I started working with members of a UK directory of weblogs in 2001, 'blogging' was relatively unknown in Britain and largely dominated by individuals working in the new media companies based in

London (at that time the directory registered about 150 weblogs). Often professional coders or web designers, this small group of men and women in their late twenties or early thirties were still able to read every weblog on the directory and to meet up regularly in city pubs and restaurants (see Reed 2005). Their blogs took the form of an on-line journal or diary, conceived as the next iteration of the homepage; entries were structured around 'I' narratives presenting the day-to-day thoughts, feelings, and observations of a single individual with a continuous identity and coherent history. As well as being united by geographical location, skill-level, and mode of employment, directory members contributed to many of the same mailing lists and communicated with each other via texting and instant messaging.

By the time I concluded fieldwork in 2004, this level of connection and contact was no longer feasible. Directory membership had risen to over 600 weblogs, making it impossible to read and know well all of them. Increasingly, new members came with only a cursory knowledge of coding and design skills, working in unrelated industries and located across the country. The age profile of bloggers dropped dramatically as teenage diarists increased in number. In addition, the number of UK weblogs outside the directory had grown exponentially, their uses fast proliferating (among other examples, there are now blogs devoted to political punditry and activism, to news and reviews commentary, fan culture, and intercompany notes). Developments in weblog technology had also led to greater inclusion of digital photography and the emergence of the 'photoblog' (Cohen 2005). My ethnography therefore covers a specific historical period when it was still possible to talk of a single on-line journal culture, of London blogging.

One of the things that immediately interested me about these bloggers was the fact that, unlike urban theorists and sketch writers, they did not set out or aim to communicate knowledge of the city. Rather, bloggers claimed that London knowledge was thrust upon them; it was an unexpected outcome of their on-line activity. Individuals never asserted any urban expertise or specially attuned city-gaze. In fact their method or interpretative strategy for knowing London borrows from non-urban practices, relying on the mundane techniques of Internet use. It is their proficient knowledge of the World Wide Web that provides a model for their unqualified knowledge of the city. That one should lead to the other is a reversal of a commonplace assumption: the idea that the Internet dis-embeds people from engagement with particular places. As Miller and Slater (2000: 4) point out, this notion is connected to the popular idiom of 'virtuality', which depicts the Internet as a world apart, operating in parallel to the off-line world (including the life of cities) but disconnected from it. As well as exploring how bloggers understand London, I am therefore concerned to examine how they know the Internet. Like the city, this knowledge-generating artefact is taken to be the source of dramatic social and political developments.² It is also often presented as illimitable, too vast, complex, and ever-changing to be grasped directly or sensed whole.³ Yet, as with London, bloggers are certain that the Internet is there, waiting for them to recognize its existence and describe its personality or character.

Blogging London

As the bloggers on the UK directory frequently told me, weblogs first emerged out of on-line surfing culture, among a diffuse group of people drawn together by their fascination with the Internet and by a desire to share what they found there. Indeed, early blogs, before the arrival of automated weblog-publishing systems, were developed

by computer-skilled individuals (in North America and Britain) who wanted to catalogue or record the addresses of interesting webpages. Instead of sending selected URLs by email to friends and colleagues, a time-consuming and intrusive activity, they started to create sites where they could post and update their list of hyperlinks. If acquaintances wanted to know which webpages a surfer had found and was recommending others to visit, they could simply go to his or her log of the Web (hence 'weblog').

In these early blogs, a typical post would contain a hyperlink with brief commentary on why the webpage or website was interesting or on how it was found. The subject of entries ranged from the technical (inspiring examples of coding or design) and informative (news about Web developments and products, on-line stories) to the weird (search requests, fetish sites, strange products for sale), humorous (games, bad pornography, memes, joke software) and wonderful (photography, Web art). I still regularly found such posts on directory weblogs throughout my fieldwork (in the examples below, hyperlinks are underlined).

Spammimic- the best encoding tool ever? I love it.
December 14, 2000. 9.12am

This kept me entertained for quite a while last night. It's a gorgeous graphic adventure set in a world of huge tree stumps. Gnarly.
July 29, 2003. 2.35pm

More strange art comes from some obviously warped German flash artists, who've provided a much needed reconstruction of The Hindenburg disaster using an ear of corn. Oh, the humanity.
May 18, 2003. 10.34pm

In the eyes of bloggers, what unites these posts is the fact that the linked material is all found on the Internet; in many cases, that is the *only* place it can be encountered. Indeed, it is the identification of the essential Web character of these sites that for them makes the entries so pleasing.

Of course, this activity of blogging depends on individuals having cheap and easy access to the Internet and the time to surf. So the earliest and longest-running blogs on the UK directory belong to those whose work takes them on-line regularly or who started blogging as students at university (where Internet access is often free). When I met Teddy, for instance, he had run a weblog for three years, ever since he started working in London as a coder for the website of a national newspaper. Like many others, his weblogging is inextricably tied to the fact that he is required to be on-line throughout the working day. Alongside the other files on his desktop computer, Teddy keeps a browser window open so that he can surf the Web and update his blog as and when he desires (on average he posts between three to eight entries a day). If things are slow in the office, he will start to 'roam'. Equally, he may devote half his lunch hour and tea breaks to surfing. When he comes across a webpage or website that appeals, Teddy just clicks the button on his browser that says 'Blog This' and a window pops up into which he can immediately post the hyperlink and upload any remarks he might care to make. As residential Internet access became cheaper and much faster (and tightening office surveillance meant that work-based blogging was often harder [Reed 2005: 229]), Teddy and other directory members also began increasingly to blog at home.

Directory bloggers emphasized that the exercise of surfing was all about randomly selecting hyperlinks and seeing where the choices took you. Although it involved making certain decisions ('I'll go there') and asking certain questions ('what's behind

here?'), for them the activity was characterized by a marked lack of determination. Even when individuals go on-line for a specific purpose (a work task, for instance), they state that they soon find themselves following a hyperlink that takes them off-course. In fact, as Miller (2000: 18) points out, the activity of surfing can be disconcerting. He recalls the number of times when as an Internet researcher he went on-line with one mission in mind, only to find himself investigating something else. Simply by clicking on a proffered hyperlink or chancing upon an unexpected website, his original intention could be diverted; so much so that he frequently found it difficult to retrieve the point where he started. This kind of experience is crucial to blogging. In a sense the weblog is an outcome of these digressions and encounters. Directory members stress that they never hunt or search for entry items; rather, they claim that the sites and pages to which they post links and about which they make comments are found accidentally. Individuals talk of 'stumbling across' or 'bumping into' material. One weblogger informed me, 'I just blog about things I happen to find, the blogging isn't the reason for it, it's the product of it'; again, the assertion of happenstance or absence of intention is vital.

While the webloggers I knew insisted that they did not purposefully search for material to make the subject of posts, they did identify in themselves the development of a certain blogging sensibility. Teddy, for instance, related how he now half-anticipates his 'Blog This' moments.

A lot of times I'll be browsing on the Web and something will jump out at me and I will put it in. Yeah, I think it's part of my mind now, to look out for it. I'm not conscious of it while surfing, but there's a part of my mind which is sort of sitting there, obviously looking for material. And then it just comes out at me, jumps out at me.

For directory bloggers like Teddy, such moments are occasions when the Internet reveals itself to them as an entity that exists independently of their actions: that is, when it leaves its impressions ('jumps out') and thus compels them to click the 'Blog This' button. On one level the weblog is just a record of an individual's surfing choices, what one blogger called 'my trail through the Web', but on another level it is a guide to what the Web is and the only kind of knowledge of it that they believe is possible. As Blood (2002: ix) observes, the first webloggers presented their blogs as 'filters of a Web that could no longer be completely catalogued'. Although the particular hyperlinked and posted websites and webpages do not equal or metonymically stand for the Internet, which is held to be too vast and dynamic to be captured thus, they do, by the effect they have upon the blogger, in some way instantiate or demonstrate its presence. These are the things that the Internet, by its very proximity, makes them remember and through the weblog share with others.

As originally conceived, then, weblogging is heavily premised on the common notion that the Internet is a separate domain. On-line activities parallel but remain cut off from events off-line. Weblog posts record the experience of the surfer, what happens to him or her, in that virtual environment. Rachel, who works for a web development company in London and has one of the oldest weblogs on the directory, told me that when she started blogging she and other members invariably considered themselves as 'net citizens'.

There was Rachel that just did my thing in London and worked here and did whatever, and then there was on-line, and that was a completely separate thing. When I first started off it was very easy to separate those two things, with the Web explorations which were all about coming across other sites and things on-line. You know it was sort of an on-line existence and then an off-line existence and the two had nothing to do with each other.

As an object of knowledge and site of 'exploration', the Web was taken to be a self-enclosed entity; in many ways it appeared to them as the kind of disconnected, placeless place described in much early Internet theory and literature (bloggers were familiar with science fiction such as Gibson's *Neuromancer* [1984] and regularly referred to the idea of 'cyberspace'). But Rachel and other bloggers soon found that this separation was impossible to sustain. Increasingly, their lives off-line began to intrude into weblog posts.

What's evolved over time though is that now there's definitely a conscious kind of 'yeah I live in London, I breathe smoggy air'. You know everything from actual location, from place to sort of social geography and the people that I meet influence what I write about. Because the difference between off-line and on-line experience has become blurred.

Instead of being exclusively a log of the Internet, a record of the marks left upon Rachel as a surfer in that world apart, the weblog developed into a journal of her life as a single woman living and working in the city. To varying degrees, the same kind of transition is described by all the early directory bloggers I met.

This shift in the *raison d'être* of blogging is for them legitimated by the response of weblog 'visitors'. Invariably bloggers found that their readers are more likely to acknowledge posts that are about their day-to-day lives in the city (a successful blog can receive over 1,500 hits a day; as well as sending emails, visitors can leave remarks in the comments box below each posted entry [Reed 2005: 231-2]). Not only that, they found that individuals are more likely to visit the weblog again. The shift is also reinforced by the discovery that the vast majority of these regular readers are actually other London webloggers. In fact a kind of parochialism emerges in the posting and reading of directory blogs. Members find that they are less inclined to visit weblogs from overseas and that the entries they post are more inclined to reference their geographical locality. As one blogger put it, 'although it's the World Wide Web, in my case it tends to be the London Web because that's what I know. I live in London, I work in London, I go out in London, it's pretty London-centric'. For him, the Internet appears as just another place where the city can be found. In contrast to many contemporary urban theorists, who seem to argue that cities are becoming harder to locate, rapidly losing their materiality in the collapse of the distinction between urban and rural and the introduction of transnational flows and networks, bloggers are surprised by the force and distinction with which urban setting or environment asserts itself. To paraphrase Miller and Slater (2000: 1), they discover that for them being a Londoner is integral to understanding what the Internet is, and that using the Internet is becoming integral to being a Londoner.⁴

That move away from the assumption of net citizenship is more widely reported in the early history of on-line cultures. The practice of flaming, for instance, was originally conceived as a quintessential virtual world activity (Dery 1994), taking place on an international plane. However, flame wars soon developed into events between national or even more local associations of users (such progressions, where the Internet appears to reinforce rather than supersede existing off-line ties, led Wellman [2001: 229] to suggest that cyberspace might better be termed 'cyberplace'). Bloggers themselves suggested that this outcome was partly due to the format of weblogs. The automatic organization of posts into calendar form, with the latest ones at the top of the page and the time and date of entry recorded, invited them to begin journal-style entries. Individuals could not help relating the chronology of posts to the chronology of events in their off-line lives. In fact many often recalled the moment when they made their first

non-Internet-related entry. 'One day I was idle at work', Teddy told me, 'and I thought I'd do a bit of surfing and maybe find something to blog about, but then I thought buggger that, I'll tell them what happened last night'. This move is sometimes accompanied by a sense of growing disillusionment with what the Web has to offer. Indeed, several bloggers talked of becoming tired of on-line surfing. They complained that there was too much repetition on the Internet, too many dead or recycled sites,⁵ and that it was increasingly hard to come across pages that made an impact or had not already been linked and commented upon in other weblogs. This feeling that the Internet was losing some of its appeal and its power to fascinate was only heightened by the introduction of off-line references. In comparison to accounts of life in London, blogging about Web affairs could seem irrelevant; as one blogger observed, 'It just doesn't give a sense of being based in anything'. Instead of filtering the Internet, individuals talked of taking the outside world, 'the things I do, the things I think and the events that happen to me', and putting them on-line.

In a sense what bloggers claim is that London becomes the object of their surfing. Their weblogs begin to present the trails of individuals through the city, offering accounts of where they have been, what they did, and all the things they saw and heard there. Typically journal entries catalogue their responses to travelling by train, bus, and tube, or on foot, back and forth to work, out for an evening, or on the weekend. Although these journeys tend to be more routine and predictable than the wanderings of Internet surfers, for the bloggers I knew they share a level of indeterminacy. As daily commuters, for instance, directory members know what their destination is and how to get there, but what they cannot anticipate is what will occur along the way. Bloggers insist that, much like their on-line surfing, they do not deliberately look or hunt for material in the city to post about. Rather, blog subjects are said to come instantaneously, without forethought, simply as a consequence of the senses being activated. This emphasis on the unexpected event that catches the attention and thus demands a posting is for them crucial. Just as such moments once indexed the character and agency of the Internet, so they are now taken to provide evidence of the personality and sustaining vibrancy of London.

A blogworthy happening may be dramatic or mundane. What really matters is that it leaves a suitable impression. Many bloggers found inspiration for their shift in posting in the response that webloggers in New York gave to the events of '9/11'. As they point out, this incident, which so theatrically interrupted the course of everyday life in that city, compelled New York bloggers (often for the first time) to acknowledge their off-line existence. The terrorist attacks sparked an outpouring of posts about what it was like to be there and witness what happened (the smell of smoke everywhere, the fear for weeks afterwards whenever another aeroplane was heard overhead). As one directory member explained to me, 'If there was any doubt about whether a blogger was a New Yorker that was immediately dispelled'. The event seemed to be read as an occasion when that city demanded to be collectively noticed, to have its inhabitants register its presence. Of course directory bloggers did not have a comparable moment of catastrophic revelation, a happening that impinged on all their lives in quite the same way. However, they could rely on the more quotidian drama of London life. Muggings, for instance, usually sparked long blog posts, as did burglaries, traffic accidents, and fires. Less seriously, bloggers also regularly posted about the frustrations of transport delays, overcrowding, queuing, rude, abusive, or disagreeable behaviour.

The vast majority of their journal entries, though, dealt with smaller, outwardly more ordinary events, those that could easily pass unnoticed by others. Again, the significance of these moments lies in the fact they have grabbed the interest of this individual. Much like the webpages and websites that caught the attention of Internet surfers, bloggers were drawn to examples of the eccentric, amusing, sad, intriguing, poignant, bizarre, and silly; or to what one directory member simply labelled as the 'music of what happens' (in the examples recorded below, some posts retain the use of hyperlinks; instead of being the stimulus to commentary, these now act to illustrate the urban experiences recounted).

This morning a man sat in his car over the road from my house, the car door open and the [Dallas theme tune](#) was just starting to play on the car stereo. The jangly part at the start covered the time it took to lock my door and as I started to walk up the road the beat kicked in. A different tune to start the day on but it set me off with a smile.

12 July 2002. 11.30 a.m.

Heard in passing.

'Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to a terrific Tuesday on the [Central Line](#). Your next stop is White City, where the local temperature is approximately twenty degrees centigrade and conditions are summery. Thank you for travelling with us this morning, and we look forward to serving you another time'.

Yes, the tube drivers are at it again.

21 August 2003. 2.52 p.m.

At about midnight last night I went to close the door and saw a fox wandering along the road – it saw the movement I made as I stepped outside and stopped and looked at me. I think we must have spent about 5 minutes just looking at each other, then it just stood up and wandered off. It was a wonderful, still sort of moment, and it just made me feel very peaceful.

13 May 2001. 10.08 a.m.

Things I saw on the way to work: a woman, dressed like she was going on a trek through the Sahara, clutching a stuffed toy monkey. A man without shoes. A strange woman who shouted 'Hello' at me.

9 September 2000. 9.30 a.m.

In addition, individuals included posts about arranged experiences, their response to attending a gig or nightclub, watching a film or play. As one blogger explained, 'I'll write about that as an experience, as my reaction to that experience. But I might just as easily write about something that I saw waiting at the bus stop'. For him, like other directory bloggers, what really matters is that an effect is properly recorded.

In all this the city appears invisible yet reassuringly at hand. While webbloggers assert that it is impossible to know London whole and complete, the sensations that they daily receive demonstrate for them that it is there, alive, and working behind the scenes. For the things that bloggers stumble across, those events that jump out at them in their daily lives somehow register or evince that being. As a person, London is taken to absorb the actions that take place within it (or are enacted upon it), transforming them into aspects of its personality or character. So, directory members can claim that the city is everywhere, the author of everything. The weather is London, being stuck on the train is London, coming across a fox in the street is London, as is being sworn at by a drunk or forced to listen to the racist rant of a taxi driver, a squashed rat found in the road, a fly poster that makes you laugh, rambling carriage announcements by tube drivers, the mad woman on the bus, buddleia growing out of cracked paving stones, the music coming from a passing car that alters your mood. For bloggers, each one of these events becomes another example of the city acting upon them and thus making them feel its presence.

In describing their relationship to London, directory members often draw on literal or metaphoric migration stories. Life in the city is invariably evoked through contrasts with other kinds of places (the majority of bloggers I knew arrived in the city from elsewhere in the UK; some also came from overseas, in particular continental Europe, New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, and North America). When I met Mary, for instance, she told me that she came to London several years ago, having grown up in a small town near Glasgow. There, she explained, it was impossible for her to stop bumping into people she knew. The town had a cinema and an ice-rink, but by the time Mary was 16 she was tired of the local scene. As she explained, everything appeared just too familiar: 'There was nothing particularly new about it that really grabbed me'. After a few years working in Glasgow, she got a job in the IT section of banking and moved down to London. Immediately, Mary told me, she felt invigorated. Not only did she never have to visit the same high street twice, she found that the city constantly caught her attention. 'I mean every so often,' she elaborated, 'something will happen. I'll be walking down the street with some work colleagues and something so bizarre will happen that I'll say, "That's it! That's why I love living in London". It wouldn't happen anywhere else'. For her and other migrating bloggers, the fact that the city keeps having an effect, surprising its visitors and inhabitants, is what makes the place so unique.

In the same way, those directory members actually raised in London often claim that they could not live anywhere else. As one blogger asserted, 'If you put me in the country I'd go mad'. For them, the city is the only place that can keep them animated. Isobel, for example, works in a bookshop and runs her weblog from home. She has spent her whole life in London and explained to me what it was that kept her living there.

I've got a very low boredom threshold and I think that's one of the reasons. I like a lot of stimulation from outside. Even when I am most tired I find it very difficult to switch off seeing and hearing things. I can be sort of hyperactive at times, in need of constant motion and liking to flit from here to here. London allows you to be as spontaneous as you can possibly be where other places won't allow you to be like that. You know I want to see things and I want to experience everything. The city is great for that, it feeds me all this input, something is constantly happening. I guess it allows me to keep myself unboored.

Indeed, Isobel notices that when she does not go out in the evenings or on the weekend she has little to blog about. For her, the wonderful thing about living in London is that it never ceases to impress. Whenever she thinks she has 'seen it all', the city throws up another distracting event.

Such accounts cannot help but remind one of the kind of stories early urban theorists liked to tell each other about the modern city. Recall the classic comparison drawn by Simmel (1964 [1903]: 410), for instance, which distinguishes the metropolitan experience from country and small-town living on the basis of an intensification of nervous stimulation. Entering the city, individuals confront an excess of differences, of momentary influences that replace each other at a bewildering pace. Passers-by, goods on sale, incidents in the street, and the dizzy number of signs and advertisements all constitute stimuli to which subjects must somehow respond. In contrast, the rhythm of events outside the metropolis is taken to be slow, regular, and predictable, but also claustrophobic, repetitive, and constraining (1964 [1903]: 419). The same comparison informs the work of the Chicago School of urban theory. Figures such as Park and Wirth, drawing directly on Simmel, describe the city as an inversion of folk society (see Hannerz 1980: 59-61). There, uniformity of habit and ways of thinking and working give

way to multiple customs, alternative worlds, and complex divisions of labour. It is no longer possible to know everyone. The contrast, then, is between two qualitatively different experiences of day-to-day living. The metropolis offers individuals excitement and liberation from the pettiness, conformity, and tedium of small-town existence, but at the cost of loss of attachment, solitude, and worn-out, exhausted nerves.

However, for directory bloggers, the mass of stimuli that for them defines London opens as well as closes connection. The isolation that they may feel from other inhabitants of the city must be weighed against the sense of belonging that urban stimulation generates. For it is only because of these intense impressions that identification with the city is said to be possible; what makes bloggers and other city residents know they are Londoners is simply the fact that London acts upon them in that way. This is the case even for those directory members who come from overseas (as one of them told me, 'If you've been here two years you are as London as you can get really'). Indeed, one of the repeated themes is that anyone can be from London. Bloggers are continually impressed by the events that for them demonstrate this mix of origins.⁶ Isobel talked of liking the fact that there are a 'huge number of different cultures all feeding into the same place'; Mary frequently contrasted this situation to what she saw as the bland cultural and racial homogeneity of her Scottish hometown. The dynamic composition of population is also taken as further evidence of the growing and developing character of London. In weblog posts, it sits alongside observations about alterations to the physical fabric of the city: the constant opening or closure of shops and restaurants, the bulldozing or erection of houses and office blocks. Recording these changes is another way of demonstrating what kind of state London is in and thus who and where bloggers are.

Simmel (1964 [1903]: 410), of course, argues that access to such impressions produces over-stimulation. The metropolitan person is so bombarded by difference that after a while he or she is drained of the energy to produce a reaction. In order to survive, individuals must develop a protective organ, suppressing the emotional responses to stimuli that they might otherwise show. Out of this defensive strategy come what for Simmel are the quintessential urban attitudes: indifference or a blasé manner, reserve, suspicion, and stylized self-presentation (1964 [1903]: 414-16; and see Donald 1999: 11). For Wirth (1938: 12), these dispositions act to immunize the city dweller from the impossibility of meeting the conflicting claims and expectations of the rest of the population. They mediate that 'dangerous experiment of living at the same time in several different contiguous, but otherwise widely separated, worlds' (Park 1952: 47); an urban predicament later described by Goffman (1959) as an issue of 'impression management' (see Hannerz 1980: 235). Here, city living is the art of building and maintaining multiple images of oneself, keeping up separate roles, each directed at a different audience.

For directory members, however, the problem is not so much an inability to cope emotionally with innumerable differences, or a failure adequately to balance roles, but rather a powerlessness satisfactorily to record, chart, and filter the reactions they do have. Their problems of impression management are less about the presentation of self between subjects in the city (see Goffman 1959) and more about how to acknowledge properly the performance that London makes. Blogging is seen as a response to that dilemma. Time and again individuals told me that without their weblog the stimulations they daily received would be forgotten. Many identified the reported pressure regularly to update their blogs with fresh entries as an important motivation to keep recording (the bloggers I knew tended to add new posts at least once a day; a site with irregular postings risked being viewed as inactive and thus losing visitors). Even with a

weblog, the number of events not recorded far outweighs those they manage to post. Indeed, bloggers always have anecdotes about the happening that got away, lost somewhere between answering the doorbell and telephone, attending a meeting, or chatting to friends in the pub.

Another obvious comparison to directory members' practice of browsing or surfing London is the much-referenced literary tradition of *flânerie* or reflexive drifting (one of the methods for knowing the city that urban theorists and urban sketch writers self-consciously draw upon). Here, Simmel's desire to examine how the outside of the city becomes the inside of mental life leads to the development of a whole technology of sensory, emotional, and perceptual immersion. By wandering across the city, without overall purpose or direction, the *flâneur* is held able to establish a form of intimate knowledge that exceeds the powers of theory or cognition (Amin & Thrift 2002: 9). Typically expressed through poetic and literary invocation, the activity rests on the willingness of the drifter to remain open to whatever comes along. In this process, value is attached to 'objective chance', a category of contingent happenings, and to the measurement of the external environment's impact upon the wanderer's state of mind (Sheringham 1996: 86, 92). For some, the *flâneur* has the capacity to become an instrument of the metropolis, the means by which it finds expression (1996: 105). As a visionary subject, he or she is said to interact actively with the city, to be more than a passive or detached observer.

In this regard, there is an element of correspondence with the ethos of blogging. Directory members definitely regard themselves as being in a two-way relationship with the city. Isobel, for example, regularly stresses the interconnection between her mind and urban surroundings. 'I think of London and me as inseparable', she told me; 'when I write I'm interested in the world around me and that is where the stimulus comes from. It doesn't come inside my head on its own, I'm not living inside of my own head, it's very much an external stimulus thing'. Indeed, bloggers consider that they have a London state of mind, one that somehow indexes the city's personality. Weblogging is held to develop that mental life, to make them realize the kind of subjects they are. In particular, they point to the fact that the calendar structure of blogs forces them to look forward to what will happen next; it is the indeterminacy or open-endedness of their lives in the city that excites them and informs their self-definition. Thus Rachel can talk of being a 'work in progress', someone who (like the city) is constantly evolving or 'updating' in response to changing circumstances and the stimuli she daily receives. After a while, happenings seem to prompt automatically the thought of a post in the minds of bloggers. Some individuals even talk of developing a 'sixth sense', an anticipatory sensibility for the bloggable event (almost as though they had internalized the 'Blog This' function). Teddy, for instance, noticed how his reaction to occurrences gradually changed: 'I'll be going out for an evening and the evening will be going horribly badly, but in my head I'll be thinking, "this will be great, I can write this up later, I must blog this"'. Another directory member spoke of his mind becoming like a stick of flypaper, capturing more and more impressions as they buzzed around throughout the day. In fact individuals find that they begin to collapse the moment of stimulation with the moment of posting; Mary observed that 'sometimes I'll see something happening and as its happening the words sort of start forming in my head' (towards the end of my fieldwork some directory members began making preliminary posts about street events straightaway, either on the notepad of their palmtop computer (PDA) or by texting a message to themselves on their mobile phone). While many start

blogging idly, they soon discover that the practice builds a momentum of its own, making the action seem automatic and impossible to contemplate ending.

But, unlike *flânerie*, which holds that the city is perceptible only to a select few (i.e. 'those with the antennae to receive it' [Sheringham 1996: 87]), bloggers believe in the implicitly democratic nature of their vision. According to them, everyone in London is bombarded with stimuli. They differ from other Londoners only to the degree that they have found a vehicle for filtering and displaying the impressions they receive. This medium, the weblog, is available to anyone with access to the Internet. Further, directory members do not engage in the aimless wanderings of the *flâneur* (except perhaps when surfing the Web). Rather than setting out to drift in a deliberately reflexive manner, individuals claim to blunder across events during the normal course of life affairs (the point, as one blogger explained to me, is that 'you should be doing stuff and then something happens and you think, "Oh yeah I can post about that"'). While members do post entries about incidents they observe and conversations they overhear, they also present themselves in the middle of situations (as the frustrated commuter, the annoyed neighbour, the victim of crime, or the subject of humour). Finally, although they identify an impressionistic method that might sound familiar to advocates of *flânerie*, there is a crucial distinction to be made. Unlike urban theorists and urban sketch writers, bloggers do not imagine it is a strategy that they have chosen, enacted, or authored; instead impressionism is taken to be the method of London (just as it was the method of the Internet), the means by which that out-sized person externalizes character and communicates knowledge of its presence.

Although directory members believe that the city impacts upon its inhabitants in much the same way, they emphasize that the reception of impressions usually falls upon the individual (as one blogger explained, 'It's the story of my eyes'). This makes London knowledge unique to each person, a dividing rather than uniting force. Indeed, their fellow Londoners usually appear in blog posts as strangers, constituted as another form of urban stimuli. While these figures can register an effect in bloggers, that impression does not seem to elicit a connection between them; the only relationship it draws out is that between on-line journal keeper and his or her city. In fact directory members celebrate sites of disconnection as peculiarly 'London places' (in this they are not of course alone: as well as a guiding principle of early theories of the modern city, the idea informs the literature and histories of London [see Ackroyd 2001]). In addition to city streets, they select the bus, tube, and train as typical stages for the bloggable event. These are understood as locations where people exist in close quarters but fail to acknowledge one another, where they pass by at a rapid rate. In these situations strangeness becomes more effecting the more regularly a person is spotted. Thus Rachel told me that for two years she kept bumping into the same man on her way to work. He would arrive at the same tube station as her at the same time, wait on the same platform, and invariably enter the same carriage. In all that time, neither of them spoke. Other bloggers point out that specific areas of London may also appear as strangers; individuals claim to know only pockets of the city very well. Travelling by tube, for instance, often means that Londoners have little sense of the topography between stations (one blogger told me that tube travel was rather like 'teleporting'; as he stated, 'London is so big and has such an unreal sense of scale that I cannot hope to ever know how things link together'). That lack of knowledge, about the connections between persons and between places, is disappointing, but also enabling. After all, not knowing how the city fits together is what makes their kind of London knowledge possible.

This does not stop them, however, from dreaming of uncovering relationships. The idea that connection, order, and system are obscured from them in London provides a further motivation for blogging. Indeed, at times their ambition appears to tap into a different London literary culture, one whose genealogy stretches back to the nineteenth century and whose impact continues to influence urban theory. I am thinking of the well-documented drive to legibility that informs the writing of London novelists since Dickens (cf. Donald 1999; Moretti 1998; Williams 1973). In these works, London is also described as a site of randomness, shock, and disconnection, full of disorientating crowds, but the point of the depiction is ultimately to highlight that strangers *are* connected and that their actions have consequences on others (Donald 1999: 2). Hence the classic denouement of such novels, where the narrator dramatically reveals that previously unrelated characters do in fact share ties (through secret love, kinship, law, money, trade). In this London knowledge, individuals are ultimately united and the truth of the city is seen to lie in the order that the mass of stimuli only serve to hide (one of the great figures of this labyrinthine city is the detective, someone who is employed to unravel complexity and decipher clues of relationship [Donald 1999: 69-70]). The same impulse informs movements in urban theory such as network analysis, where the ambition is to chart the multiple and involute ways in which subjects in the city are tied together. According to Hannerz, these networks 'give an idea of what is potentially knowable and what would be needed for something approaching completeness in the description of relationships' (1980: 181). Like Dickens, these analysts wish to show that individuals, groups, and institutions conventionally defined as separate are in fact intersecting.

In equivalent fashion, directory bloggers sometimes find themselves speculating about the lives of the strangers they encounter. Individuals can feel gripped by a passion to know more about these persons (one woman told me of the mad desire she once developed to know what kind of coffee the train passenger sitting next to her was drinking; another member described the decision he made one weekend to walk his route into work – a four-hour adventure – in order to see and hence connect the kind of areas his tube line passed beneath). On occasions their curiosity is partly sated (Rachel eventually discovered that the man she kept bumping into was actually French when one day she heard him answer a mobile phone call), but more commonly it remains an aspiration that is continually frustrated.

In fact the only relationship that bloggers consistently uncover across the city is that which exists between them. Time and again individuals told me that visiting other directory weblogs led them to realize that their lives in London intersect in interesting ways. Knowing that another blogger regularly visits a certain shop, walks down a certain street, or takes a certain numbered bus adds a new dimension to their weblogging activity. They say that their reading of members' posts is frequently interrupted by gasps of recognition: 'we must walk past each other everyday!', 'I was there on the same night!' or even 'she lives next door to me!' Indeed, these moments are often the spark for directory members to get in touch and arrange to meet (so a post about coming across a pair of handcuffs locked and hanging from a park fence made two bloggers realize that they were neighbours, and a posted photograph of a mural underneath a railway bridge prompted three members to start weekly gatherings in a local pub). Further, the on-line journals that individuals keep mean that they can actually satisfy their urge to develop growing knowledge of each other's lives (see Reed 2005: 235-6). In this regard London does appear to alter its method, from an entity exclusively understood through

the stimuli it sparks to one occasionally revealed through the connections between bloggers that it can no longer hide.

Conclusion

Directory members, as we have seen, transfer their techniques of knowing the Internet into techniques for knowing London. In fact for them that city becomes a more enchanting object of knowledge than the entity that inspired it; so much so that individuals occasionally reverse the flow of analogies. One blogger, for example, told me that if one conceives the Internet as a city, then weblogs have the visibility of a 'man in the crowd'. He explained that unlike successful chat rooms or bulletin boards, where the contributor stands on a stage (the analogy he actually chose was the Colosseum or Forum in ancient Rome) and 'eyes are upon you', the weblog attracts only passing glances. It is like a busker, open to public view but randomly noticed. The same idea is conveyed through deploying another urban idiom. Several bloggers I knew compared their weblogs to graffiti on city walls. Again this kind of parallel highlights the fact that weblogs tend to receive a casual perusal. Their visitors usually stay for just a brief period, reading a single post or clicking on a single hyperlink before moving on (a high number of them arrive at the weblog through search engine requests and leave quickly when they do not find what they are looking for). The exception to this rule is other webloggers, who may visit a favourite blog on a regular basis to check the latest updates. Nevertheless weblogs are rarely read from start to finish. While having an audience is undoubtedly important to directory members (see Reed 2005), I believe it is the act of blogging itself that ultimately provides them with the motivation to continue.

Bloggers state that even though their posts often make no specific point and appear anecdotal in form, without a clear beginning or ending, they manage to provide a complete picture of something. For them, the stimulation received, like the post that records it, has coherence, whether judged as an effect of the Internet or as an effect of London. This belief clearly parallels the knowledge practice of Ford (1998 [1905]) and other urban sketch writers. Benjamin (1979), for instance, another major influence on urban theory, produced a number of literary or journalistic travel writings in the first half of the twentieth century that aimed to depict the character of various European cities. While he believed, like Ford, that no over-arching perspective on them was possible, Benjamin asserted that the fleeting and fragmentary nature of their personality might still be captured through what he called *Denkbilder* or 'thought-images', snapshot reflections of urban life (Gilloch 1996: 38). Using this method, he put forward preliminary characteristics for those places he visited. Thus Naples was distinguished on the basis of its 'porosity' (Benjamin 1979: 169-71), what to him appeared as the permeability of boundaries between old and new, sacred and profane, public and private, and Moscow by a principle of coexistence, the old juxtaposed beside the new but not, as in Naples, merged with it (1979: 202-4). Rather than attaining distance in the hope of providing a scientific description of the city, Benjamin argued that the sketch writer must seek proximity, show attentiveness to those things that might enable enlargement and illumination.

The posting culture of directory members does seem to invest in a revelatory potential similar to that of Benjamin's *Denkbilder*. Like it, bloggers seek engagement with the city through closeness and the immediacy of personal experience; their London knowledge crucially depends on where they stand and when – that is, on the claim of having been there. Again, like Ford and Benjamin, bloggers find themselves faced with what seems

daunting, incomprehensible size, an elusive entity that escapes satisfactory description. However, the snapshots that bloggers provide do not lead them to speculate about explanatory characteristics or abstract qualities (such as 'porosity'). Instead what their posts reveal and chart is simply London's presence, those locations and times when for them the metropolis makes an appearance. Unlike urban theorists and sketch writers, who presume to know that the city is there and hence devote their energies to interpreting the object, bloggers seem to assume that their task is to demonstrate that the object exists. Indeed, those 'Blog This' moments are remarkable and revelatory not because they distil the quality of the city into a single image, but because they are the only means that individuals know of measuring its impact. As a being attributed with character and personality, London for them is no more (or less) than the marks it leaves.

NOTES

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¹ My ethnography is based on fieldwork conducted with a group of journal bloggers who belong to one of the main directories of UK weblogs. It began when I started reading weblogs and thought of contacting directory members to organize individual interviews off-line. Gradually I was invited to join the mailing list and to attend their London pub gatherings; members also encouraged me to start my own weblog. From there, I began to visit individuals at home and work. As well as continuing to meet up with bloggers off-line, I sustained conversations through email and instant messaging and through weblog exchanges.

² Many early studies of on-line activity share this notion of the Internet as an agent of impressive social transformation. Rheingold (1993), for instance, envisaged that the technology had the potential to undermine political hierarchies and re-invigorate democracy; Poster (1990) explored its capacity for changing views of reality; and Castells (1996) identified the Internet as the centre of a new 'information age'.

³ As Wilson and Peterson (2002: 451-2) point out, much attention is also paid in Internet studies to the rapid rate at which new technologies emerge and old ones become obsolescent. Indeed, they argue that the speed of technological revolution makes it hard for the Internet researcher ever to get 'an ontological footing'.

⁴ In their ethnography of Trinidadian on-line culture, Miller and Slater (2000: 21) stress the extent to which the Web is presented as a site to perform 'Trini-ness' (2000: 85). Instead of feeling disconnected and apart on-line, people find themselves 'being Trini' (this is especially the case for those living away from the Islands). Morton (2002) identifies the same development among a Tongan diaspora.

⁵ Miller (2000: 2) points out that the Internet is strewn with unfinished or abandoned sites, what he terms 'debris', through which surfers must increasingly wade.

⁶ Vertovec (2006: 21) observes that the 2001 Census for London identified residents from 179 different nations; a finding that led him to claim that the city is now a site of 'super-diversity'.

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« Blog this » : Navigation dans la métropole, la méthode de Londres

Résumé

L'auteur examine la manière dont un groupe de blogueurs ou d'auteurs de journaux en ligne londoniens constituent leur ville. Il affirme que leurs stratégies pour connaître Londres s'inspirent des techniques employées pour connaître Internet. En particulier, les bloggers ont adapté l'activité et la culture de la navigation en ligne. L'article étudie la méthode de « blogging » parallèlement et en comparaison avec les stratégies interprétatives déployées par les théoriciens de l'urbanisme et les planificateurs. Cet article se veut une contribution à l'anthropologie urbaine, à l'anthropologie de l'Internet, à l'anthropologie de la connaissance et à l'ethnographie de Londres.

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