

Web Technologies of the Self: The Arising of the “Blogger” Identity

Ignacio Siles

Department of Communication Studies, Northwestern University, USA

Drawing on Michel Foucault’s theories of subjectivity, this paper conceptualizes early blogging and online diary writing as “technologies of the self,” that is, procedures through which practitioners enacted certain identities as Internet users. This study combines archival research, close analysis of websites, and interviews with their creators. It analyzes how the most defining practices associated with the emergence of these websites in the second half of the 1990s enabled the performance of specific modes of identification for their users, expressed by concepts such as the “online diarist” and the “blogger.” The study broadens our understanding of technologies of the self by considering the role of websites as artifacts in processes of self-formation on the Internet.

Key words: Blogs, Co-construction, Identity, Materiality, Michel Foucault, Online Diaries, Subjectivity, Technologies of the Self

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The “blogger” identity has enjoyed wide circulation in both public culture and academic discourse. In a typical account, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) (2005) described the blogger as a “digital citizen,” thus associating it with the possibility of cultural and political participation in public life. Similarly, scholars have lauded the notion of the blogger as the ideal embodiment of a new capacity to transform important aspects of social life. According to Benkler (2006), for example, “[B]loggers [are] able to identify some thing that grate[s] on their sensibilities [...] and eventually generate a substantial intervention into the public sphere” (p. 264). In Benkler’s heuristic, the blogger is tied to a renewed form of agency made possible by the promising combination of human sensibility and the advent of certain technological systems. Extending the increasingly long list of revolutions associated with the Internet, the blogger identity is thus invoked to illustrate the potential that this technology, in the hands of a certain type of *user*, holds for society. As these accounts exemplify, definitions of what a blogger is and what kind of subject it identifies have significant implications for our understanding of culture and the role of technology and its users in its development.

However, despite the privileged position of weblogs (also called blogs) in the study of the contemporary media landscape, scholars have not sufficiently theorized the use of these websites as a technology of identification. How and why did the notion of the “blogger” arise? What kind of person did this concept aim to define? To answer these questions, this paper examines how the blogger identity emerged in the second half of the 1990s. Rather than considering this identity as given, this paper

historicizes the process of its early constitution by situating the rise of blogging and online diary writing within the “general and very rich framework of the practices of the self” (Foucault, 1984b, p. 369). To this end, this essay conceptualizes these online activities as what Foucault (1988) referred to as “technologies of the self,” and shows the extent to which the early popularization of these technologies was tied to the enactment of particular types of user identities. Following Stuart Hall (1996, p. 6), identities can be defined as “points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us.” According to Hall, identities are “produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies” (1996, p. 4). This essay analyzes how individuals in the second half of the 1990s developed and occupied certain subject positions as specific kinds of Internet users through the performatory practices of blogging and online diary writing.

It is important to note that this study focuses on blogging and online diary writing during their early period of formation — what Foucault (1984a, p. 83), drawing on Nietzsche, defined as “the moment of [a phenomenon’s] arising” — and, therefore, does not contemplate other practices and notions more recently associated with blogging (e.g., writing political commentaries or journalistic pieces). By focusing on this period, I hope to develop a framework that can be used to examine other practices and meanings that characterize the appropriation of blogs in the present day. Future research is planned to analyze how blogs and the identities of their users have coevolved since the period explored in this study.

In addition to historicizing the emergence of the blogger identity, this study broadens our understanding of technologies of the self by carefully examining the role of materiality in processes of self-formation. Researchers have drawn on the Foucauldian notion of technologies of the self to investigate a variety of practices of computer-mediated communication (Abbas & Dervin, 2009; Bakardjieva & Gaden, 2007). However, although scholars have provided great insight into the dynamics of self-elaboration of technology users, little has been said about the role that artifacts play in the production of certain modes of identification. For instance, in an early issue of this journal, Aycock (1995) used a Foucauldian perspective to analyze self-fashioning dynamics in an Internet newsgroup. He concluded that “the Internet is largely a domain of words without things, which nevertheless are represented by those who post there as being utterly referential.” Therefore, to complement Foucault’s approach to technologies of the self, this paper examines how the materiality of online diaries and weblogs was a key in the emergence of the identities of their users.

Recent scholarship in science and technology studies (STS) and software studies helps to further theorize the notion of materiality. Researchers in STS have analyzed how social relations, practices and interactions between multiple groups and actors of various sorts shape artifacts in different ways (Bijker, Hughes, & Pinch, 1987; Oudshoorn & Pinch, 2003). From this perspective, technologies are cultural artifacts that materialize or temporarily freeze contingent social relations and processes in singular contexts. Scholars interested in the study of software have focused on the analysis of materiality in the case of digital technologies. In this body of work, materiality refers to the physical features of technology that are mobilized by its producers to create meaning. According to Hayles (2005), materiality “is an emergent property created through dynamic interactions between physical characteristics and signifying strategies” (p. 3). Taken together, these two strands of research invite an examination of the technical codes, formats, standards, protocols, and affordances through which meaning is produced and inscribed on a website by its creators. Building on scholarship in these fields and a Foucauldian approach to subjectivation, this article shows that investigating how users perform identities on the Internet requires considering how artifacts and practices of the self mutually shape each other.

Technologies of the Self

The constitution of the modern self occupied a central place in the work of Michel Foucault. In the volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault further developed his understanding of the constitution of the self as subject and the dynamics involved in its elaboration. In *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault (1990) introduced the concept of “subjectivation” to define four dimensions involved in the formation of the self as subject: (a) the ethical substance (*substance éthique*) or the part of the self concerned with moral conduct (e.g., feelings, intention, or desire); (b) the modes of subjection (*assujettissement*) through which “people are invited or incited to recognize their moral obligations” (Foucault, 1984b, p. 353) (such as divine law, natural law, or rational rules); (c) the self-forming activities performed on the self that aim to transform it; and (d) the *telos* or “the kind of being to which we aspire when we behave in a moral way” (e.g., free, immortal, or master of itself) (Foucault, 1984b, p. 355). A history of ethics, Foucault suggested, thus consisted of a study of the “models proposed for setting up and developing relationships with the self, for self-reflection, self-knowledge, for the decipherment of the self by oneself, for the transformation that one seeks to accomplish with oneself as an object” (Foucault, 1990, p. 29).

For Foucault, the privileged mechanism in the constitution of the self (i.e., subjectivation) is what he referred to as technologies of the self. These are the procedures and practices, available in all civilizations in different forms, through which individuals constitute, develop, and maintain a singular identity with a particular purpose (Foucault, 1984b, p. 369; 1989, p. 134).¹ According to Foucault (1988, p. 18), “[T]echnologies of the self [. . .] permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.”

In his later work, Foucault elaborated on the different technologies of the self that characterized Greek and Greco-Roman philosophy and early Christian spirituality (Foucault, 1988, 1989, 1990). He devoted significant attention to writing as a technology of the self, an important technique for the purposes of this study. Foucault traced the long-standing history of the self as “a theme, or object (subject) of writing activity” back to antiquity and the emergence of Christianity (Foucault, 1988, p. 27). In Greco-Roman culture, he argued, self-writing accomplished an *ethopoietic* function — it served as an “agent of the transformation of truth into *ethos*” (Foucault, 1997, p. 209, emphasis in the original). Foucault analyzed two forms of ethopoietic writing: *hupomnemata*, that is, notebooks or “material record[s] of things read, heard, or thought” (1997, p. 209) and correspondence, the texts or letters sent to others that provided “occasion for personal exercise” (1997, p. 214).

By technology, Foucault (1988, p. 18) referred primarily to “a matrix of practical reason,” a sort of applied knowledge that implies a particular mode of self-transformation. Although in his previous work he employed the term technology to define material forms (such as prisons) and concepts (such as the soul), the notion of “technologies of the self” is closer in meaning to *techne*. In this sense, despite the prominence of this concept in Foucault’s later work, the role of artifacts in the process of subjectivation has been comparatively less theorized in the literature on technologies of the self.² Foucault explicitly highlighted the distinction between these two conceptions of technology. He wrote: “What interests me more is to focus on what the Greeks called *techne*, that is to say, a practical rationality governed by a conscious goal. [. . .] The disadvantage of this word *techne*, I realize, is its relation to the word ‘technology,’ which has a very specific meaning. A very narrow meaning is given to technology: one thinks of hard technology, the technology of wood, of fire, of electricity” (Foucault, 1984c, pp. 255–256). This paper seeks to extend the Foucauldian notion of technologies of the self by considering how materiality (or what Foucault calls “hard technology”) partly shaped the process of

subjectivation of early online diarists and bloggers. It is argued that an analysis of technologies of the self requires examining the mutual shaping of artifacts and practices of the self.

Methods

This study combines archival research, close analysis of websites, and in depth-interviews with their producers. I began by collecting a directory of online diaries and weblogs created between 1995 and 1999 — the period when these websites first emerged — by drawing on lists elaborated by early users and secondary sources on the history of blogs (Blood, 2002a, 2002b; Rosenberg, 2009). Other websites were found through references and hyperlinks on previously identified sites. I accessed these websites by using their archives on the Web or through the Internet Archive's "Wayback Machine." I purposefully selected a set of 21 websites (11 diaries and 10 weblogs) for the analysis. I conducted a close textual and structural analysis of both the content and the materiality of these sites by drawing on two techniques utilized for archival research on the Web (Foot & Schneider, 2010). First, I categorized websites, that is, I identified the main technical features and the chief discursive strategies employed by users for referring to the self; second, I annotated and organized these categories according to Foucault's analysis of subjectivation. I was thus able to ascertain various models for fashioning the self put forth by users through their content and website creation practices and to assess the role of artifacts in the enactment of these models.

I conducted 22, semistructured interviews with creators of these websites between August and December 2009. Most interviewees were selected by using the same sampling techniques employed for the identification of early diaries and weblogs. I initially contacted 40 users, 16 of whom accepted to be interviewed. In addition, six individuals were interviewed using a snowball, sampling technique. Interviews were designed to arrive at a better understanding of users' conceptions of the self and the practices that characterized the early appropriation of these sites. Respondents were encouraged to elaborate on their conceptions of "bloggers" and "diarists" as singular types of Internet users and their understanding of the evolution of these categories over time. I conducted most interviews in person, although some took place by e-mail or telephone. Conversations were audio-recorded and transcribed in their entirety.

Finally, I conducted archival research of a set of handbooks and manuals published in the early 2000s to help new users learn how to create and update blogs. Most of these handbooks were written by early users — some of whom were interviewed — based on their experiences. I performed a textual analysis of these documents by identifying discursive strategies to define the blogger identity and techniques for producing blogs.

The analysis unfolded in a grounded theory fashion (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I conducted three stages of data coding. In the first round (open coding), I examined the data collected through the analysis of websites, archives, interviews, and handbooks. I identified major concepts and organized them into main categories. In the second stage (axial coding), I sought to explain the relationships between these categories. I drew upon Foucault's analysis of subjectivation as a framework to help construct these categories and explain their relationships. Finally, in the third stage (selective coding), I integrated the data into a framework organized by core categories, that is, the dynamics of subjectivation enacted by each group of users. This process continued until theoretical saturation was reached. At this stage, I returned to the raw data to confirm the main dynamics identified through this approach. The triangulation of various data collection methods (website analysis, interviews, and archival research) and of different data sources (website archives, interview transcripts, and published materials) helped to ascertain the validity of the analysis (Denzin, 1978).

Web Technologies of the Self

An assessment follows of online diary writing and blogging as technologies of the self through which Web users produced and enacted certain identities during the second half of the 1990s. Before delving deeper into the investigation of these processes of subjectivation, some brief remarks are in order about the particular context in which the production of online diaries and weblogs took place. This study centers on the United States, although some users were located in Canada and the U.K. Throughout the 1980s, computers became an important component of households and work places in the United States. The first half of the 1990s was characterized by the fervor that surrounded the early popularization and commercialization of the Internet (Streeter, 2010). A collective vision or *imaginaire* developed around the Internet and the World Wide Web that blended tropes inflected by 1960s countercultural values (such as “the electronic frontier”), policy oriented notions (such as Al Gore’s “information superhighways”), and terms derived from science fiction work (such as “cyberspace”) (Flichy, 2007). This *imaginaire* further diffused in public culture after the launch of *Wired* magazine in 1993 and the increasing attention paid to the network by the mainstream media.

By the mid-1990s, the Internet was increasingly imagined as a medium with commercial potential. Various organizations thus started to explore the Web as a commercial outlet by hiring advertising agencies to develop their sites (Ankerson, 2010). In this particular context, amateurs also ventured into “cyberspace” and created websites with singular material and content features. One such type of amateur production was the online diary.

Writing a diary online

The creation of online diaries dates back to at least 1995. Two main practices characterized the creation of these sites. First, users appropriated the online diary primarily to describe and reflect on certain events in their ordinary life. For its practitioners, online diary writing afforded what Lejeune and Bogaert (2006) call a way of practicing life. For example, Carolyn Burke, an early Web user in Canada with a background in Philosophy and Linguistics who is credited by many as the first online diarist, explained her reasons for keeping a diary as follows: “People wonder how I can write a diary in a public place. Heh. It is so quiet and lonely here that the voices of the people I was just having dinner with echo in my ears unanswered. Easy” (Burke, 1996). For Burke, the diary represented a response to and an intervention into daily life.

Second, users turned to online diary writing as a means of introspection. Daily events thus provided an occasion for exploring what users constantly referred to as their “inside” or “inner world.” Steve Schalchlin, a songwriter in Los Angeles who created a diary devoted to discussing the daily experience of living with AIDS, described his website as providing “an inside view, a window of what it is like to be sick” (personal communication, August 19, 2009). In a similar way, according to a user writing under the pseudonym of “Poots” (1998): “i am in touch because i go deep down. i stop and think. i feel. i look inside, and beyond the shells i can see myself. the picture is not always a clear one, but i always see it, when i look, and i always feel what it feels like to look like me” (punctuation in original).

Thus, early online diary writing rested on two fundamental traits of typical characterizations of modern subjectivity. On the one hand, users envisioned ordinary life as the ground for the establishment and development of selfhood (Seigel, 2005; Taylor, 1989). On the other hand, individuals conceived of themselves as “creatures with inner depths; with partly unexplored and dark interiors” (Taylor, 1989, p. 111). Building on these premises, the practice of writing a diary online and the artifact enacted through this practice provided writers with a means of managing a particular relationship to the self. This model for self-fashioning can be assessed in relation to various dimensions of the process of subjectivation elaborated by Foucault: (a) the adoption of introspection and self-writing as techniques

for producing knowledge about the self and enabling its transformation; (b) the use of the “heart” or the “soul” as the ethical substance involved in online diary writing; and (c) the definition of the “online diarist” as the singular kind of being produced through these techniques. These dimensions constitute the main categories identified through the grounded theory coding.

Online diarists turned to writing about daily life and their “inner world” as a key technology of the self, that is, as a procedure for managing a relationship with the self. As such, these practices may be understood as introspection in the Foucauldian sense, that is, “not so much as a decipherment of the self by the self as an opening one gives the other onto oneself” (Foucault, 1997, p. 217). In fact, writing for an audience of readers and other diarists was a crucial part of online diary writing. Users aimed at sharing aspects of the self to readers of the diary, whether anonymous or not. For instance, in December 1995, Mary Anne Mohanraj (1995), a writer who had recently finished an English major, asserted: “Good morning, everyone! Funny, I’m already doing much better at this diary thing than I ever have before — I guess because I feel like I’m actually talking to somebody.” Out of this public disclosure of the inner world, users expected to gain a new understanding of themselves. Steve Schalchlin envisioned exchanges with readers of his diary as an opportunity for enhancing his self-formation. As he stated on his site: “Don’t hesitate to send me [an] e-mail if you or someone you knows [sic] needs a sympathetic ear. [. . .] It enriches me, that’s for sure” (Schalchlin, 1996b). Practitioners expected that online diary writing would reveal hidden dimensions of the self. For users, this new capacity for self-knowledge derived from the constant search of ideal ways of communicating the self to others. Poots described it in the following manner: “I am practising [. . .] to find the right words, phrases and means of communication which will eventually, form a body of knowledge about myself. About the inside of me, the part that I don’t even know. Ideas [. . .] swimming around my head, spewed out on paper to become a description of who I am” (Poots, 1996b).

Self-writing in online diaries became a means for early users to gain a new grasp of concealed aspects of the self that could lead to self-transformation. Writing about the benefits of this practice, Burke (n.d.) noted: “I’m learning expressiveness, coming out of my shells, meeting quantified [sic] leapers, and generally enjoying the hell out of living without secrets. There are a few left . . . time will spill those out.” In this account, Burke seems to expect that the secrets of the self that are illuminated by diary writing would eventually become evident not only to her readers, but also to herself. Once these hidden dimensions had been revealed through their public disclosure on the Web, online diary users were faced with the challenge of incorporating them into their behavior and self-understanding. Thus, Poots (1996a) argued, “It is easy to write your thoughts for all the world to see. What is difficult, is accepting them yourself.”

Early online diary users located the source of the capacity to write and explore their inner world in a singular part of the self. Users referred to this ethical substance as the “heart” or the “soul” of the writer. Practitioners linked these concepts to notions of authenticity and sincerity. According to Schalchlin, “When you write from the heart and tell the whole truth, it becomes more universal than if you try to write and generalize bullshit [. . .] Just telling the truth [is] disarming and empowering” (personal communication, August 19, 2009). Moreover, users tied the notions of the “heart” and the “soul” to liberal conceptions of individuals as distinct from each other. For Poots, the diary afforded a means to articulate the most defining aspect of selfhood: uniqueness. She asserted: “[M]y life isn’t exciting, but i do think i have an exciting, if at least, original way of perceiving things and putting it into words. i write from the soul. not the heart, not anywhere else. the goal is to express concepts and philosophies which are uniquely mine” (2000, punctuation in original). Users held liberal views of the self that emphasized the value of individualism and the capacity to express original ideas.

Finally, users associated the most defining practices of creating a diary on the Web with a new kind of being, commonly defined as the “online diarist.” As *diarists*, users conceived of themselves as authors

who wrote about the same type of content that characterized offline diaries. As *online* diarists, users claimed to be artists who created a new aesthetic form for public expression. Schalchlin (1996a), for instance, defined the online diary as “a real life serial being played out before your eyes with the author making it up as he goes along. [. . .] Are we talking about this being a new artform altogether?” After two years of keeping her site, Burke (1997) had adopted a more authoritative stance that allowed her to classify online diarists: “There are really different sorts of diarists around nowadays. [. . .] 1) those who ‘made up the idea out of the blue’ [. . .] ; 2) those who saw the phenomena as a reader of online diaries and really thought they should become an online diarist too; 3) those who wanted to put their existing diary writing efforts online.” Schalchlin and Burke thus defined online diarists by both the adoption of practices of the self traditionally thought of as part of offline diary writing and the capacity to extend these practices online through the creation of a singular type of website.

In summary, online diary writing functioned as a Foucauldian technology of the self that helped its practitioners to manage a particular relation to the self, based on the constant exploration of its interiority and grounding in daily life. According to practitioners, online diary writing offered a privileged opening of their inner world to others, helped them discern new aspects of themselves, and afforded a new capacity to transform themselves as a result of these processes of public disclosure and self-discovery. As a point of attachment to a subject position, the online diarist identity provided users with a model for making sense of the self as an autonomous, conscious, stable, and authentic entity. For users, the online diarist thus constituted an intrinsic reality, as opposed to the Foucauldian notion of the self as “a set of variables of [discourse] [. . .] a place or position” (Deleuze, 1988, p. 55). In his cultural history of network computing, Streeter (2010) shows how romantic forms of selfhood have shaped the use, definition, and regulation of the Internet over the past decades. Streeter argues that “romantic individualism,” which he defines as a view of the self as an intrinsically expressive entity that constantly seeks self-transformation, allowed early developers of the Internet to imagine themselves and their relationship to capitalism and society. From this perspective, the “online diarist” may be considered an enactment of romantic individualism that reveals how this particular form of selfhood also shaped the early appropriation of the Internet among amateurs, outside of the professional computer culture.

Materiality played a crucial role in supporting the performance of the online diarist identity. On the one hand, the online diary operated as a materialization of established practices of self-understanding and personal change. Creators of these sites reproduced various features that have traditionally characterized diaries, particularly the notion of “pages” where personal thoughts and events in their lives could be recorded every day. On the other hand, users sought to extend these practices of the self by creating singular artifacts that could allow them to share their writing and interact with an audience.³ As this technology of the self stabilized, another set of techniques developed and became known as “blogging.”

Blogging as a technology of the self

The second half of the 1990s was marked by the excitement about the commercial potential of the Internet in the United States. From late 1998 to 2000, the dot-com bubble reached a stage of “euphoria” where stocks and prices climbed to new highs, reaching their peak in March 2000 (Ankerson, 2010). In this context, a group of Internet users, many of whom were involved in the technology and Internet development fields, created a singular type of website to filter the Web’s most interesting content, rather than present mundane events of daily life or thoughts about their personal life. Early users referred to these websites as “weblogs” (or, after 1999, simply as “blogs”) and defined them primarily as frequently updated lists of annotated hyperlinks on issues mostly related to technology, the Internet, and Web design. For Laurel Krahn (1998), an early Internet user who created a weblog in August 1998, this

kind of site represented “a list of links. Collection of Quotations. With recommendations and reviews thrown in the mix.” Users developed a particular format for their websites to facilitate the constant updating of information and make content easier for others to read. Unlike online diaries, where users usually created a new “page” for each day’s writing, many weblog users placed the most recent content on the top of the site, forming what they called a reverse chronological order.

Two important practices or *techne* were involved in the creation of weblogs. First, users attributed great importance to the selection of hyperlinks. The majority of the content on weblogs came not from an examination of the self’s interiority, but rather from an exploration of external sources of information online. Lawrence Lee (1998), an early weblog user interested in Web design and development who created his site in November 1998, described the art of finding appropriate hyperlinks as follows: “[I]t’s a mix of luck, experience and finding some new toys . . . a lot like fishing.” Second, weblog users turned to writing short comments as the ideal companion to hyperlinks. These annotations sought to provide useful information to help readers make an informed decision about the merits of following a hyperlink. According to Jorn Barger (1999b), a computer programmer who originally coined the term “weblog” in December 1997 to refer to these sites, “Ideally, [a] comment should make it clear what you’re linking to, and why, so that people can make their own choice whether to follow it or not.” Thus, users envisioned hyperlinks and comments as a means to build meaningful online navigation sequences for other users.

Like online diaries, weblogs crystallized a set of practices of the self. The role of early blogging as a technology of the self can be discussed in relation to the aspects of the process of subjectivation articulated by Foucault: (a) the adoption of linking and annotating content online as techniques for discovering and revealing the self; (b) the modes of subjection through which users were motivated to recognize the possibilities of blogging for self-transformation; (c) the ethical substance or part of the self involved in blogging (i.e., the user’s “personality”); and (d) the singular type of being that practitioners associated with the new concepts of the “weblogger” or “blogger.” This discussion will summarize the main concepts and categories identified through the grounded theory approach.

First, practitioners argued that blogging afforded a set of techniques for discovering the self and revealing it to others. On the one hand, blogging practitioners expected that linking and writing comments would unveil to themselves hidden aspects of the self. For instance, one year after the creation of his pioneer weblog, Barger (1998) wrote: “One thing I really like about keeping a weblog is how it mirrors aspects of my personality I couldn’t see any other way.” Barger used the metaphor of the mirror to foreground the role of blogging in producing a new image of the self through its illuminating technologies. On the other hand, weblog users envisioned the selection of hyperlinks and comments as a window for others into the self. Cameron Barrett (1999), a Web designer and influential early weblog user, wrote: “You see, [my weblog] is about me. It’s about who I am, what I know, and what I think. [It] is a peek into the subconsciousness that makes me tick. [. . .] [It] is an experiment in self-expression.” Thus, whereas online diarists usually provided readers with an explicit description of their “inside world,” weblog users often preferred to reveal an oblique view of the self through the selection and annotation of external Web content.

Second, early users defined linking and annotating content on the Web as rules that would help them achieve the goal (or *telos*) of personal change. Many users suggested that, by following these rules as rational principles of online behavior, practitioners could fashion the self in productive ways. Rules for blogging may thus be understood as Foucauldian modes of subjection. These modes of subjection are nowhere clearer than in handbooks and technical manuals written by early users and software developers. Handbooks reveal how the experiences of early users were transformed into normative standards for others to constitute the self. For instance, Rebecca Blood (2002a), one of the first female weblog users, argued in her *Weblog Handbook* that constant blogging could contribute to “build better writers” (p. 28), “build critical thinkers” (p. 30), “build reputations” (p. 32), and “deepen

[...] creativity” (p. 61). Handbooks specified the norms and rules required to become a “better” and more “creative” self through blogging. Above all, authors argued, self-transformation required constant practice and self-discipline. In his manual, software developer Biz Stone compared blogging to a spiritual manner of living. He wrote: “Blogging is an information-saturated lifestyle filled with contemplation and expression [...] [Its] cumulative effect is smartening” (Stone, 2004, p. 116). For Stone, the regular observance of blogging would help practitioners to enhance and shape the self.

Third, weblog users suggested that blogging revealed a specific part of the self. Users referred to this ethical substance not as the heart or the soul involved in diary writing, but as “personality.” Whereas online diarists tied the ethical substance to notions of authenticity and sincerity, early blogging practitioners employed the concept of personality to denote an encompassing blend of qualities that characterized each user. In her influential handbook, Blood (2002a) suggested that “random observations, selected links, [and] extended diatribes [...] resolve into a mosaic revealing personality, a self [...] It is the writer’s unique fusion of interests, enthusiasms, and prejudices — her personality — that makes a weblog compelling” (pp. 30, 59). Users considered the weblog as a material imprint of personality that distinguished this artifact from other types of websites. For Barger (1999a), “Part of the reason I’ve been encouraging more weblogs is that I’m sick to death of scanning *impersonal* lists of headlines, and want to be able to get the same coverage via a handful of *personal* sites” (emphasis added). This view of the blogger identity holds important links with capitalism. As with other material goods, users envisioned the weblog as a symbol not only of identity but also of a way of being, an “information-saturated lifestyle,” as Stone (2004, p. 116) described it in his handbook.

Finally, as the link between blogging and conceptions of the self that have been thus far analyzed stabilized, weblog users put forth new concepts to define what seemed to them a novel type of identity as Internet users. Dave Winer, a software developer and influential early user, asked in July 1999: “Is the person who does a weblog a weblogeer? A weblogster?” (1999). More precisely, by 1999 users began referring to themselves as “webloggers” (or “bloggers,” when they adopted the term “blogs” as a short for weblogs). This self-definition tied a set of practices of Web appropriation with a new kind of being. For example, according to Jorn Barger (1999b), “A weblog [...] is a webpage where a weblogger (sometimes called a blogger, or a pre-surfer) ‘logs’ all the other webpages she finds interesting.” In the same way, Winer (1999) suggested, “A weblog [is] a collection of links, updated frequently, often several times a day, that represent the interests of a single web person.” In both cases, the technologies of blogging (both the practices and the artifact) are associated with a particular type of subject, a sensible, unique individual who is able to transform her personality into meaningful online navigation sequences for her readers. Thus, the practices of linking and writing short comments accomplished what Foucault defined as an ethopoietic function: They helped users transform knowledge of the Web into *ethos*.

The constitution of this new identity was also tied to the rejection of other technologies of the self, particularly diary writing. Foucault’s work on ethics seems limited for an analysis of this kind. As Butler (2005, p. 23) argues, “It seems right to fault Foucault for not making more room explicitly for the other in his consideration of ethics.” Yet this process was of crucial importance in the case of early weblogs. The arising of the notion of the blogger rested on its advocates’ strategy of situating online diarists into what Butler (1993) calls, in the case of gender, a “constitutive outside.” For Butler (1993), this outside is inhabited by “those who do not enjoy the status of the subject but whose living [...] is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject” (p. 3). According to John SJ Anderson, a molecular biologist who created a weblog in 1998, “There was a big journal/diary community prior to weblogs. [...] We felt that we were doing something different than what they were doing. We may not have been able to articulate really strong [a] point-by-point list of what was different about it, but they were definitely [the] other” (Personal communication, October 16, 2009).

Bloggers distinguished themselves from online diarists in two main ways. On the one hand, they focused on exteriority rather than interiority as a source for grounding the self (Blood, 2002a, 2002b). On the other hand, they also took pride in the technical knowledge necessary to configure their websites. As members of the Internet and software development fields, many early bloggers had proficient knowledge of advanced programming languages. According to authors of a blogging manual, “The process of writing valid [code] requires more effort and expertise than non-valid code [...] saying something about the author’s skill with page design” (Bausch, Haughey, & Hourihan, 2002, p. 53).⁴ Thus, for these users technical skill represented a marker of identity.

In sum, early webloggers proposed a model for developing a relationship with the self based on the creation and annotation of hyperlinks to other sources of content on the Web. Practitioners argued that these techniques could lead to self-discovery, self-transformation, and the revelation of the user’s personality to readers of their sites. Users tied the blogger identity to central notions of liberal subjectivity that conceive the self as intrinsically stable, free, creative, and unique. Artifacts played a crucial part in supporting the performance of this identity. Weblogs functioned as an online embodiment of *hupommemata*, a material means to “capture the already-said, to collect what one has managed to hear or read, and for a purpose that is nothing less than the shaping of the self” (Foucault, 1997, p. 211). Early users also envisioned the weblog as a material marker of identity that signaled their technical proficiency, provided a window into the self, and allowed them to distinguish themselves from other user groups. These notions are typical of capitalist economies where material possessions are often considered privileged indicators of essentialist conceptions of identity.

Concluding Remarks

The analysis of early online diary writing and blogging shows their role as key procedures in the elaboration of singular identities. Foucault’s theories of subjectivity have helped to understand how users produced and enacted the identities of the online diarist and the early blogger through certain technologies of the self and singular processes of subjectivation. Yet the cases examined in this paper also require us to reconsider the role of materiality in processes of self-formation, a dimension of analysis often neglected by scholars interested in the notion of technologies of the self.

This study reveals the mutual shaping of technology as practical reason and technology as materiality. That is, the emergence of the identities of both online diarists and bloggers rested on the mutual articulation of particular techniques of the self (technology in Foucault’s sense) and websites with certain material features to support them (technology as artifacts). The notion of technology thus helps destabilize the distinction between practice and artifact. This analysis resonates with research on “coconstruction” in STS. Studies along this line have sought to “go beyond technological determinist views of technology and essentialist views of users’ identities” (Oudshoorn & Pinch, 2003, p. 3) and thus suggest that the identities of both users and technologies are mutually defined. This paper contributes to this body of work by showing how materiality and practice are bound together in processes of coconstruction. From this perspective, the rise of online diaries, weblogs, and the identities of their users must be thought of as a mutually defining process in which both artifacts and self-fashioning techniques were an outcome of the other.

On the one hand, practices of the self such as writing about ordinary events, sharing introspective comments, posting hyperlinks, and annotating these links, played an important part in the constitution of online diaries and weblogs as artifacts. Online diarists, for instance, tried to extend the centuries-old practices that defined diary writing into a new phase of development on the Web. To this end, users adopted self-forming practices often thought to be of a private nature and adapted their websites for

the public performance of these practices online. In the case of blogs, users envisioned the website as an embodiment of techniques devoted to discovering and revealing the self through the selection of external data. The performance of the self through blogging also found an important material expression in the use of the reverse chronological order as the format of these websites. From this perspective, technology as artifact is a crystallization of Foucault's technologies of the self. Sterne (2003, p. 376) defines technology in this sense as a materialization of embodied knowledge: "[T]echnology is a repeatable social, cultural and material process [. . .] crystallized into a mechanism or set of related mechanisms. [. . .] [P]eople design and use technologies to enhance or promote certain activities and discourage others."

On the other hand, technologies of the self can also be envisioned as an outcome of technologies as artifacts. That is, the establishment of online diary writing and blogging as self-fashioning techniques rested on the configuration of online diaries and blogs as certain types of websites with particular kinds of material features. For example, as a genre with a set of established purposes and affordances, the offline diary provided a model for expanding practices of the self into the Web context. Although it departed from its offline counterpart in that it aimed to transform the process of introspection into a relatively public performance, the online diary retained its form as a "series of dated traces," which has characterized this artifact throughout its history (Lejeune, 2009, p. 179). In a similar manner, as a key feature in early weblogs, hyperlinks allowed bloggers to manage a relationship with the self that was based on the constant search for external information and its continual interpretation. The establishment of the weblog as a type of website distinct from online diaries was also crucial in the constitution of the blogger identity in that it provided a material marker that distinguished early users from their constitutive outside.

Furthermore, the stabilization of weblogs as a singular kind of artifact played a crucial role in the formation of the blogger identity in its contemporary form. As the affordances of weblogs standardized, users appropriated them to combine a variety of practices that had characterized other technologies of the self, most notably diary writing (Siles, forthcoming). Thus, although the distinction between diaries and weblogs was central in the emergence of the latter, once weblogs stabilized (circa 1999), online diarists and early bloggers turned to them both to write comments about daily life and share annotated hyperlinks.⁵ In this sense, technology as artifact affords the possibility to relate various practices of the self and, therefore, helps individuals to occupy multiple subject positions. As users appropriated the weblog as a flexible artifact for integrating techniques of the self previously separated, the blogger identity gained new modes of identification that had been considered foreign. Consequently, after 1999, the blogger identity encompassed technologies of the self that were associated with both online diary writing and early blogging. This transformation of the notion of the blogger is a reminder to conceptualize identification as "a construction, a process never completed — always 'in process,'" as Hall suggests (1996, p. 2).

This paper has sought to broaden our understanding of technologies of the self by arguing that the emergence of user identities on the Internet must be thought of as a process of mutual configuration between particular types of artifacts and certain practices for fashioning the self. Theorizing the relationship between technology and identity in this way opens new possibilities for future research. First, it problematizes the concept of the "Internet user" as given and invites an examination of its constitution as a crucial part of the larger historical development of the Internet. Second, it pushes an investigation of how the identities of the blogger and the blog have coevolved over time, and how their process of coconstruction might have varied in different contexts at distinct points in time.

As the popularity of blogs as a means for sharing various types of content on the Web has increased, the blogger identity has gained new modes of identification. Present-day characterizations of the blogger thus encompass a broad repertoire of meanings and practices, such as writing journalistic pieces and

discussing political news. Blogging has also been tied to the notion of “microblogging,” which usually involves a combination of hyperlinks and short comments about the self. These recent developments raise important research questions. How have ideas of blogging as grassroots journalism or political discussion shaped the definition of its practitioners and the websites that support its practice? How do conceptions of the blogger vary according to different contexts? The formation of the identities of the blogger remains an ongoing process, and the sociocultural consequences of this transformation are yet to be explored.

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Notes

- 1 Concurring with Hall (1996, p. 13), Foucault “would not commit anything so vulgar as actually to deploy the term ‘identity,’ but I think [. . .] we are approaching [in this work] something of the territory which [. . .] belongs to the problem of ‘identity’.”
- 2 By this I do not mean to suggest that materiality was left unexplored in Foucault’s work, but rather that, given Foucault’s attention to technology as practical reason, the role of materiality has received minor attention in the literature on technologies of the self.
- 3 Scholars have questioned the notion of offline diary writing as a private activity by showing that diaries have often been read by readers other than their writers (Lejeune, 2009).
- 4 For McNeill (2009), the definition of blogs in opposition to diaries also rests on a gendered, stereotypical reading of diary writing as a cultural practice.
- 5 See Siles (forthcoming) for an extended discussion of how weblogs, online diaries, and personal journals merged at the end of the 1990s; see also McNeill (2009) for a consideration of why certain users have resisted this process of merging.

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About the Author

Ignacio Siles is a PhD candidate in the Department of Communication Studies at Northwestern University.

Address: Department of Communication Studies, Northwestern University, Frances Searle Building, 2240 Campus Drive, Evanston, IL 60208 USA. Email: isiles@u.northwestern.edu