

## A Blog – a Place of Expressing Yourself or rather Creating a Virtual Identity?

**Andrzej Adamski**

Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University,  
Theological Faculty, Institute of Media  
Education and Journalism, PhD  
St. Dęwajtis 5, 01-815 Warsaw, Poland  
E-mail: a.adamski@uksw.edu.pl



**Abstract.** *‘Writing a blog’ – these words pertain to the communicative situation which, since it raises a number of questions, is only seemingly simple. For instance, what is the difference between a blog and a traditional daily? What kind of relation exists between a blogger and a reader? And finally, does a blog represent the reflection of an author’s real identity; or maybe it is the network environment that makes a blogger create his or her new identity, very often a fake one? The author will attempt to answer the above questions in the present study.*

**Keywords:** *blog, blogger, identity, genre, reader, representation, traditional diary, virtual reality.*

While entering the cyberspace we do not pay attention to our virtual identity as well as to the impression we make on other people who we communicate with via the internet. In numerous cases we know those people from the real world. However, the first impression connected with a particular person and how we perceive him/ her is based on his/ her virtual identity: after receiving an e-mail, after communication on chat, forum or a blog.

## **A diary, or not?**

What is a blog? The most popular definition says that it is 'an online diary'. It must be stated that this definition is not complete. Polish scientist Maria Cywińska-Milonas starts her provocative study about blogs with the assumption: 'a blog is not an online diary, to be specific' (Cywińska-Milonas, 2002). Another Polish scientist Marta Olcoń-Kubicka shares a similar opinion and she claims that a blog cannot be identified with a traditional diary written on the website rather than in a notebook (Olcoń-Kubicka, 2003).

Making notes with a simultaneous intention of making them accessible to the wider audience change their nature. To some extent, it results from the very nature of the Internet.

Research conducted in the 1970s shows that there appear more remarks being the result of disagreement and less comments, which reduce the tension in groups who communicate via the Internet. Furthermore, what we write about is not necessarily what we would say directly. On the web we make the impression of being cooler, more sensitive and quarrelsome than usually. It results from the limitations of these means of communication. Additionally, we make an impression of people who are not prone to do any favour to others – so common in everyday life. It is also reflected on a blog communication. Although a blog retains some elements of a traditional diary, the channel of communication as well as the interaction with the reader generate a completely new quality. The principal difference is in the very nature – a blog is private-public whereas a diary is only private. Today it is obvious that blogging pertains only to diaristic forms. It is highlighted that keeping a blog helps to join a public debate and reach particular audience. Among numerous online forms of communication blogs remain distinctive due to their dynamics and the personal nature, although they maintain elements of the public discourse and interaction with receivers. It causes that the present blogs are viewed as the way of coming into existence of an individual on the Internet.

## **Problems with identity**

Identity crisis is often discussed nowadays. A contemporary human being frequently needs to discover and respect his/ her identity. It is even more significant as certain rules, values, codes and morals, which are typical for the social or cultural environment, are commonly omitted. The appearance of the Internet, with its specific way of communication, has influence on shaping one's identity as well. It is believed that three basic prototypes of identity exist: identity characteristic of pre-modern societies, where social roles as well as value systems define an individual's place in society; identity characteristic of modern societies (exposed to the huge media influence) – such an identity is more mobile, versatile and individuals are more conscious about it; finally, post-modern identity – unstable, fragile and prone to focus on itself on the web.

Human identity appears to be an extremely complex phenomenon. Sociologists claim that the very term 'identity' encompasses, first of all, the idea of sustaining particular human features, the ability to be somebody both, in real and virtual worlds. Factors such as self-consciousness of an individual, the awareness of keeping his true identity despite changing life conditions, the awareness of participation in various social groups, self vision and the ability to compare himself with others, are included in the very sense of identity.

## **Sensitive anonymity**

Writing blogs belongs not only to one of the forms of auto-presentation, but also creation of one's identity. It happens in several ways. Authors oftentimes describe various aspects of their life: professional, domestic, related to interests. An author is to choose the nature of his/ her blog: professional or entertaining.

It is an author who decides how long he/ she is intending to write and when he/ she is planning to stop posting to his blog. An author decides whether he/ she wants to reveal his/ her personal information, or not. Such a decision is of particular importance for bloggers, although they hardly remain anonymous. Anonymity on the Internet refers to

two dimensions. The first pertains to the identity understood in terms of 'policing', namely who exactly is using a particular pseudonym, nickname, etc. The second aspect relates to the identification of an individual in a group. In this case we can talk about pseudonymity as well as membership to any online community. Full anonymity indicates on a situation in which an individual 'does not exist' (is not recognizable in a group, present in its inner hierarchy).

With regards to Polish researcher Michał Podgorski, anonymity is an essential issue in keeping a blog (Podgorski, 2006). It helps to present feelings, reflections and such a side of one's personality which, for numerous reasons, cannot be revealed in reality. The Internet, at the same time, helps to confront our reflections with other people's opinions without running the risk of any consequences, which could be taken outside the cyberspace. In that regard, an anonymous (or written under the nickname) blog generates numerous opportunities as it allows a person to free himself/ herself of limitations, which accompany various 'performances' acted out in front of other people. An author of a blog, practically, can free himself of conformism towards social groups, in which he/ she participates. 'I' restrictions, which coexist with virtual performances, are incomparably slighter than those, which we can encounter in social life. Consequences of potential failure are also less possible. 'I' of a blogger can be presented on the web in a broader and more direct way than in reality.

An animated debate on a blogger's right to keep anonymity took place on the Polish Internet in the context of so called 'Katarzyna's affair'. This affair was reflected in the Polish media –according to *NewsPoint* Company it triggered 1358 publications (Maj, 2009).

Katarzyna is one of the most popular figures among the Polish bloggers. She started her blog in the turn of 2002 and 2003, after so called 'Rywin-gate affair'. Her blog gained a huge number of readers due to her perspicacity, inquiry, investigatory skills, deep analysis and accurate, though oftentimes radical, comments on the political life in Poland. For the whole time, however, Katarzyna signed only her nickname as she did not want to reveal her personal data. The case of her true identity

became an issue of the media inquiry. Edited by Axel Springer daily, 'Daily. Poland-Europe-World', on 22 May, 2009, revealed information which helped to guess Kataryna's identity. According to Kataryna, the editorial staff tried to blackmail her, however, with no result. They gave her a choice: either she would reveal her personal information and by the same token, she would be employed as a publicist of 'Daily', or her data – without her permission – would be printed by 'Fact', a tabloid, which belongs to the same editor as 'Daily'. These events triggered a heated debate between those who defended the right to privacy on the Internet and publishing under a nickname and professional journalists, who claimed that they take a full responsibility for their texts by signing them with their name and surname. Kataryna brought a suit against the editor of 'Daily' which finally resulted in reaching a compromise outside the court. The conditions of an agreement are not known (Klimowicz, 2009, Kowalik, 2009, Ratuszniak, 2010).

### **Blogger, who are you?**

The latest research on the Polish blogosphere, conducted in 2011 by Polish researcher of the Web Marek Jeleśniański, indicates that people aged between 20–25 constitute the group which is the most eager to read blogs. Specialistic (and/ or film) blogs are the most popular ones. Among the most often searched topics are politics and society (57%), technology (38%), business, economy and law (32%), culture and religion (31%).

Female bloggers, however, constitute 55% of total. The vast majority of bloggers is well-educated (30%). Topics connected with politics and social matters are discussed on blogs by 30% of the interviewed. Nearly 30% of bloggers post to their blogs once in 2–4 days. Only 33% of bloggers consider themselves online journalists. About 62% of bloggers do not run advertisements. For 87% of the interviewed readers the content of a blog seem to be crucial. Bloggers pay attention to it while creating posts to their blogs. It must be noticed, however, that over half of the interviewed does not require objectivity from a blogger. Authors of online diaries (in a way) appreciate the aforementioned

fact – the primary factor which encourages them to write is found in the possibility of presenting their own opinion (67%) (Jeleśniański, 2010).

The last result is worth mentioning. It confirms that for numerous bloggers, a blog is a place of expressing themselves. According to Ash – presumably the first Polish blogger – one of the main factors favorable to the popularity of blogs is the everlasting need of expressing oneself and reporting one's life (according to him life is a sequence of events which are easily transformed into a sequence of posts) (Marecki, 2003). For this reason many writers choose blogs instead of traditional websites: because a blog has an incorporated structure based on the time flow. We write about our thoughts at the particular moment. Thus, such a structure is universal. Nevertheless, if we would like to create our own website, we need to think its structure over, examine our life and identity as if from 'bird's eye view'. This work requires considerable self-consciousness. On the blog, however, we can write about anything, depending on our current inner state.

### **A blog as a place of auto-creation?**

Many authors highlight that one of the principal motives for keeping a blog is found in the possibility of presenting one's thoughts, emotions, feelings and experiences – namely, the possibility of expressing oneself. Blogs oftentimes play a therapeutic function. Nevertheless, it cannot be forgotten that blogging makes public interaction possible, in other words, it permits receiving a turning signal. Interactivity is one of the main factors, which distinct a blog from a traditional diary. Thus, writing a blog is one of the primary ways helping an individual to come into existence, create something personal and express his/ her opinion. We can accept American scientist Sorin Predy's opinion that: „every blogger is an egoistic individual. The need to talk to so many people, conceals in fact the overwhelming desire to be heard (Predy, 2010). A certain sense of self sufficiency and a little bit of nerve, give the bloggers an aura that resemble to the ancient orators: Time cannot harm us!”

However, is it really about expressing oneself? Or maybe scientist Marta Olcoń-Kubicka, who claims that new blogs appear on the Internet due to the option of ‘testing’ carefully developed creation of one’s personality, is right? (Olcoń-Kubicka, 2003). Undoubtedly, posting publicly to a blog gives an author a chance to develop certain identity, which is shaped on the basis of his own experiences and revolves around his personal habits and inclinations. Such an identity, in other words, specifically developed vision of one’s ‘I’, is presented to the wider audience for approval and evaluation. On a blog, however, we rarely deal with auto-creation relying on inventing facts from an author’s life. Creation is rather achieved by the selection of information published on a blog. Sometimes, however, one may – as stated above – allow himself to be honest only on a blog and nowhere else. As a result, as American researchers David Kline and Daniel Burstein notice, “blogging’s ultimate product is empowerment. A weblog creates a fluid and living form of self-representation, like an avatar in cyberspace that we wear like a skin. (...) Or, to put it another way, ‘I blog, therefore I am’” (Kline, Burstein, 2005).

A number of typical external elements of a blog have an impact on a blogger’s image. Namely, they encompass a nickname, a name and a layout of a blog. The layout functions as an equivalent of one’s appearance in reality. The first impression and the first assessment of an author’s personality correlate with the assessment of his home page. Additionally, blogging services allow publishing a brief note about an author – so general, however, that it is impossible to identify him/ her. A significant element of managing one’s image is so called ‘blogroll’, namely links to other recommended blogs. A new blogger oftentimes is evaluated through the prism of other opinions, which he or she identifies with. Moreover, attention is caught by the so called ‘cloud of tags’, in other words, topics and key words that are written in various fonts and sizes and published on a blog. A number of viewers of a blog may also influence an assessment of a particular blogger.

## Conclusion

Blogs represent relatively new form of expressing oneself on the Internet. Although blogging suggests certain similarities to writing a diary, a blog definitely remains something more than just a traditional diary kept on the web. Writing a blog is one of the forms of auto-presentation as well as creation of one's image. A possibility of choosing to keep a blog under a nickname and, consequently remain anonymous, or a real name and, by the same token, reveal one's true identity, occurs to be a significant aspect. Paradoxically, authors agree that anonymity does not encourage creating false personality on the web – it rather helps to free and reveal one's real and frequently deeply hidden 'I'. In this sense, writing a blog constitutes an element of creating one's personality – it permits expression, honesty and expressing feelings, which, for some reason, are difficult to be expressed in reality.

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## **Tinklaraštis – saviraškos erdvė ar virtualios tapatybės konstravimas?**

Andrzej Adamski

### **Santrauka**

Straipsnyje analizuojami raiškos tinklaraštyje ypatumai. Nagrinėjant Lenkijoje garsų tinklaraštininkės *Katarinos* tapatybės paviešinimo *atvejį* provokuojama diskusija apie teisę į privatumą internete bei žurnalistinį profesionalumą publikuoti asmenvardžiu pasirašytus rašinius. Pastebėjus, kad tinklaraštis, kaip

ir komentarai internete, rašomas nepritariant, prieštaraujant, bet ne ieškant sutarimo tarp skirtingų visuomenės grupių, pabrėžiama, kad šis komunikacijos kanalas dėl adresanto ir adresato sąveikos sukuria naują turinio kokybę. Būdamas išoriškai panašus į tradicinį dienoraščio žanrą, tinklaraštis padeda tinklaraštininkui įsitraukti į viešus debatus ar pasiekti tikslinę masinę auditorijos dalį. Iš kitų raiškos formų tinklaraštis išsiskiria dinamišku asmenišku pobūdžiu. Teigtina, jog būtent dėl to tinklaraštis vertinamas kaip pats asmuo.

Konstruojant tapatybę įtaką turi visos elektroninės komunikacijos priemonės. Paprastai išskiriamos 3 identiteto prototipų grupės: ikimodernių visuomenių, kuriose tapatybę apibrėžia socialiniai vaidmenys ir vertė; modernių visuomenių, kurių tapatumą formuoja žiniasklaida ir kitos socialinės institucijos (šiuo laikotarpiu atsiranda tapatybės savimonė) bei postmodernių visuomenių, kurios išsiskiria individualiu, tačiau nestabiliu, trapiu ir virtualiu tapatumu. Apžvelgus tapatybės konstravimo raidą, daroma išvada, kad svarbiausi identiteto konstravimo veiksniai yra sąmoningumas, gebėjimas išlikti, keičiantis aplinkos sąlygoms, gebėjimas dalyvauti įvairiose socialinėse grupėse bei gebėjimas lyginti save su kitais individualais.

Teoriniai svarstymai veda prie išvados, kad tinklaraščių rašymas yra ne tik autoriaus prezentacija, bet ir įvaizdžio kūrimas. Tapatybės konstravimas vyksta atrenkant skelbtiną informaciją. Nors dauguma tinklaraščių yra anoniminiai, elektroninių kanalų anonimiškumui būdingi 2 aspektai (pseudonimo susikūrimas bei priklausomybė grupei), kurie leidžia atpažinti autorių. Konstatuojama, kad tinklaraščio užtikrinamas anonimiškumas bei platforma SAVO nuomonei išsakyti yra svarbiausi motyvaciniai veiksniai kurti asmeninį tinklaraštį, nes jis leidžia subjektyvią „aš“ raišką be jokių visuomeninių pasekmių – internete „aš“ gali būti išskleistas plačiau ir tiesmukiau nei realybėje.

**Esminiai žodžiai:** reprezentacija, skaitytojas, tapatybė, tinklaraštis, tinklaraštininkas, tradicinis dienoraštis, virtuali realybė.

## About the author

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Andrzej Adamski is an associate professor at the University of Stefan Cardinal Wyszyński in Warsaw. His work focuses on computer-related crime as well as privacy personal data protection in information society; it also explores the subject of media's influence on pop culture and personal spirituality. Professor is also the Chairman of the editorial board, journal of scientific research "Culture, Media and Theology".