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Computers and Writing: Lessons in Literacy from the New Orleans Blogosphere and the Composition Classroom

Essay by Daisy Pignetti, June 4, 2008 in response to Principles of a New Media Literacy

In 2006 I wrote a piece about the burgeoning New Orleans blogosphere for the launch of Placeblogger.com. The crux of that essay, and of the site itself, was to call attention to the value of local voices when representing the lived experience of a particular place. I argued that after witnessing the breakdown of communications on local, state, and federal government levels, not to mention the loss of composure on the part of the news anchors and talking heads, there was no better way to raise awareness of the reality of post-Katrina New Orleans than through alternative media genres. Now approaching the three-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, the list of NOLA bloggers has grown to over 300, representing a myriad of neighborhoods and highlighting the voices of those who refuse to move elsewhere, thereby reaffirming these locals' passion for their beloved Big Easy.

Dan Gillmor defines the principles of a new media literacy for journalists as skepticism, judgment, understanding, and reporting. NOLA bloggers embody these principles, quite transparently, with many of their entries, photos, and videos repeating the sentiment of being neglected, misunderstood, and misrepresented. They use their blogs to share their painful memories and their daily triumphs. Building on the trust quotient their virtual community has established, they use listservs and wikis to organize face-to-face efforts and to reach out and teach others how to access information.

The statistics collected by the Pew Internet and American Life Project document that since the tragedies of September 11th the number of networked citizens has increased, and those with access now have greater means to push the boundaries during a breaking story. As we create an infinite archive from which worldwide audiences can learn about crisis communications, we may eventually be able to prevent loss instead of only documenting it. For instance, I wonder how the Katrina response might have differed now that a number of New Orleanians are using services such as Twitter and Brightkite to broadcast their actions and locations. The established channels (Red Cross, FEMA, and news agencies) would obviously have to be aware of and monitor these sites when a disaster arises; otherwise, these utterances would continue to go unheard by the powers that be that control the necessary resources. The scenario is an intriguing one to consider.

I do think that every medium has its limits; e.g., documentary films and mass media coverage of national and natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina can only expose so much because they often interview small populations of survivors, clip their responses into sound bites, and/or edit out the long pauses that come when victims try to speak of the trauma and loss they suffered. Blogs and other Web 2.0 hosting sites allow users to document both immediate and extended chronicles, but the same affordances that make these technologies valuable can also transform them into echo chambers. For example, NOLA bloggers are quick to reveal their biases when "writing the wrong" in the comments section of an uniformed outsider's post on whether or not the city should receive federal assistance; however, their own individual blogs do not always reach an audience beyond the already interested and informed Gulf Coast.

Thanks to the aggregator at Placeblogger.com, I realize that New Orleans is not unique in being

a city that uses technologies to define itself; however, I believe that these NOLA bloggers speak more freely and with greater urgency. Although they may not receive the national exposure they deserve, their writing exposes a range of opinions that might otherwise go unnoticed. Much of the importance of these permanently archived postings is that they can be read by those who actively search the Internet in order to better understand the rebuilding efforts. Indeed, these postings provide a deeper, truer reading of what is going on in New Orleans than what the nation is reminded of only every few months by celebrity remarks and anniversary specials.

As Dan Gillmor asserts, being skeptical and transparent are vital qualities of new media producers and consumers; however, I must contend with his point that we are starting from a deficit and that teachers who advance critical thinking are risking their jobs. As a member of the vibrant computers and composition community, I would be remiss if I didn't call attention to the empirical research published on the topic of digital literacy, primarily in online journals such as Computers and Composition Online and Kairos.

Granted, those of us in higher education often face opposition from tenure and promotion boards when we integrate digital technologies into our scholarship, but more and more universities are assuming that their students enter the classroom technologically literate and willing to write in public spaces. As a result, writing programs across the nation are asking their first-year and upper-level undergraduates to analyze the content and design of webtexts and to reflect on how their ability to use computers to improve their learning has evolved. Microblogging tools and social networks allow those new to teaching with technology to learn—alongside their students—valuable lessons in hypertext linking, concise word choice, and active reading as well as the positive and negative consequences of public writing and collaboration. In addition, some faculty members utilize the many open source downloads available online and the applications that digital cameras and mobile devices come with in order to create with their students a wide range of multi-modal compositions.

As a teacher, blogger, and Internet researcher, my career is focused on engaging students and remaining relevant. By enacting these principles of a new media literacy—as the New Orleans bloggers continue to do—we have the ability to enhance our understanding of what it means to be part of a democratized media. As members of an open network, I encourage us all to enter into dialogues and take risks, for it is only by doing so that can cultivate the "trust meters" Gillmor describes.

Daisy Pignetti's *research consists of qualitative inquires into why people write online, particularly in the aftermath of disaster, and what psychological benefits "documenting the daily" through new media genres may have for both the producer and consumer. She shared interview data from her dissertation project on the post-Katrina blogosphere with the Berkman Center last year as part of the 2007* Oxford Internet Institute *Summer Doctoral Programme.*
This fall she will receive her PhD in Rhetoric and Composition from the University of South Florida and begin as an Assistant Professor in the Department of English and Philosophy at the University of Wisconsin-Stout.

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