

PASSION AT WORK:  
BLOGGING PRACTICES  
OF KNOWLEDGE WORKERS

*Lilia Efimova*



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# Passion at work:

blogging practices of knowledge workers

*Lilia Efimova*



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E-mail: [info@novay.nl](mailto:info@novay.nl); Internet: <http://www.novay.nl>

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# PASSION AT WORK: BLOGGING PRACTICES OF KNOWLEDGE WORKERS

Passie aan het werk: hoe bloggen kenniswerkers?  
(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)

PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor aan de Universiteit Utrecht  
op gezag van de rector magnificus, prof.dr. J.C.Stoof,  
ingevolge het besluit van het college voor promoties  
in het openbaar te verdedigen op

maandag 22 juni 2009 des middags te 4.15 uur

door  
Lilia Efimova  
geboren op 7 oktober 1975  
te Moskou, Rusland

Promotoren:           prof.dr. P.R.J. Simons  
                              prof.dr. R. de Hoog

Co-promotor:         dr.ir. E. Faber



[Empty canvas.](#)  
Mathemagenic,  
27 November 2004

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It's harder than I imagined, to be alone. I suppose I might get used to it, like an empty canvas you slowly begin to fill. [[The Samurai's Garden](#)]

And then feel it emptiness, almost scary, as white space is promising and teasing, never telling you what is about to appear. Then drafting, trying out and retreating, looking for motives that would take over the emptiness, would engage white in a slow dance with colours. And then feeling it coming, searching for the right shades and strokes, slowly, as walking on ice, being afraid of a wrong move that could spoil the picture that is starting to emerge... Then getting confidence, diving into it and letting your passion to drive you through as this is the only way to turn empty canvas into life... And then...

...then looking back not being able to believe how far the invitation of an empty canvas could take you...

---



# Preface

My journey towards this book started long ago, in my childhood. It was my mother who taught me to follow passions: to dream about things worth pursuing and then to go for them. Without this foundation I probably would not have dared to study an emergent technology which, at the point I started this work, still had a very unclear future, to use unconventional research methods, or to cross boundaries in order to get where I wanted to be.

However, passion alone is not enough. This work has been supported by the company I work at, Telematica Instituut, which is currently working on reinventing itself under a new name, Novay. Doing PhD research outside of conventional academic settings is a challenge, but it also provided opportunities to learn from working with others in multidisciplinary projects and to make choices that would not have been possible otherwise. In particular, I would like to thank Janine Swaak for coaching me through the early steps of learning how to be a researcher and being a role model in many other ways, and Marcel Bijlsma for shielding me from the project demands towards the end of the PhD, so I could have time and space necessary for converging.

While working on a PhD is a lonely endeavour, it is also not possible without others. My PhD work was supervised by Robert-Jan Simons and Robert de Hoog, who believed that eventually something valuable would emerge from fuzzy pictures presented in various drafts, who asked questions that forced me to define and defend my choices and guided me through the process of developing confidence as an academic. I am glad I could work together with Jonathan Grudin, who made my internship at Microsoft Research a great learning experience and shared insider knowledge about scientific communities I wanted to belong to. This dissertation has many traces of my collaborations with other researchers: thank you, Sebastian Fiedler, Aldo de Moor, Stephanie Hendrick, Carla Verwijs and Andrea Ben Lassoued for the inspiration, complementary expertise and the pleasure

of getting things done. Anjo Anjewierden, this work would be much poorer without your ability to create tools that make blogging patterns tangible and your attention to detail. I am also grateful that I had support of colleagues back in the office: thank you, Edward Faber for being there for me to work out ideas and to get through the process at the toughest times, and Ruud Janssen for picking it up at the finishing stretch, inspiring comments and emotional support.

What appears as a single book is in reality a tapestry woven to include insights that come from an extended network. I could not have done it without bloggers who shared their ideas, commented on work-in-progress, volunteered their time to be interviewed or just were there as an audience to write for. I am glad that with many of you we could go beyond being "imaginary friends", and I am thankful for many opportunities to share food, thoughts and fun. Taking the risk of choosing just a few names of many I want to name here, I would like to thank Ton Zijlstra and Elmine Wijnia for providing many opportunities to observe your learning trajectories from a close distance, Jack Vinson for the insights on the ever-changing KM blogger community and making me realise how long I blog every time I see photos of your boys, Nancy White for letting me see truly networked work from your house and eat berries from your garden, and Monica Pinheiro, for sharing ideas, uncertainties and *Pastéis de Belém*.

In addition to those who contributed their ideas to this work it was also enabled by the broad support network. Thank you, PhD researchers at Novay, in the blogosphere and on Twitter for making it less lonely, Andy Boyd for convincing me that the corporate world can wait, Marjan Grootveld and Olga Fernandes Steen for providing company during all those unscheduled breaks, Ardennen crew for sharing offline fun across countries and locations, and Hanneke Pieters, for creating friendship that does not need appointments. I would like to express my gratitude to my family and friends in Russia for being there for me and not asking too many questions about my dissertation, and to Roel, Esther, and the rest of the family here in the Netherlands, for making me feel at home far away from home.

Finally, this work would not be possible without the love and patience of Robert and Alexander, and their ability to sleep through the sound of a clicking keyboard in the middle of the night. I guess you will be very happy to have me back from this journey.

*Lilia Efimova*

*May 2009*

*Enschede, Netherlands*

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# Introduction

From the beginning of my PhD research, I was interested in explaining the complexities of knowledge work that could not be simplified to "creating, sharing and applying knowledge," and in exploring interplays between an organisational authority and personal passions at one's workplace. Writing my weblog, *Mathemagenic*,<sup>1</sup> as well as reflections and conversations that came as a result of it, brought a realisation that studying blogging provides a good case to explore both knowledge work and the role of personal passions in it in a more focused way.

Blogging can support a variety of knowledge worker activities. For example, in my own case, blogging helps to articulate and organise thoughts, to make contact with people interested in the same topics, to grow relations with other bloggers that often turn into a joint collaboration, to do research, or to work on a publication. When used in those ways blogging is beneficial for work and yet it is inherently personal, driven by the passions and investment of an individual, and difficult to formalise or control. For knowledge workers, blogging means crossing boundaries - not only the boundaries between passion and paid work, but also those between private and public or between multiple audiences of a weblog.

Since their early days, weblogs have been envisioned as a technology that supports knowledge work. However, despite of an increasing adoption of blogging in knowledge-intensive environments, blogging in respect to knowledge work has hardly been explored. This research aims to fill this gap by describing blogging practices of knowledge workers.

This chapter introduces the research in more detail. The first two sections summarise my initial insights into blogging and knowledge work, which shaped the rest of this dissertation. I then describe the focus and

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<sup>1</sup> "Mathemagenic" means "giving birth to learning" (Rothkopf, 1970). For more details about the weblog title, see [Ok, it's time to explain why](#) (Mathemagenic, 21 June 2002).



contribution of this work, introduce the research approach and provide an outline of the dissertation.

## 1.1 Blogging in knowledge-intensive environments

This section provides a view on my initial understanding of blogging and outlines the motivation for this research using as an input my early publications on knowledge work and blogging (Efimova, 2003a; Efimova, 2004; Efimova & Fiedler, 2004).<sup>2</sup>

After introducing weblogs, I summarise the results from a weblog adoption study to illustrate how weblogs might be useful in knowledge-intensive environments. Then I discuss the challenges of adoption of weblogs as instruments that support knowledge work and argue that more research is needed to address those challenges.

### 1.1.1 Weblogs

*Weblogs* (also called *blogs*) are not easy to define in one sentence. Most authors agree that a weblog is "a frequently updated website consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order" (Walker, 2005), but then discuss specific characteristics that make weblogs different from other forms of web publishing (e.g. Winer, 2003). The difficulty of defining weblogs has something to do with the fact that their authors have different goals, uses, or writing styles with only one thing in common: format. Said more poetically, "Weblogs simply provide the framework, as haiku imposes order on words" (Hourihan, 2002).

The typical *weblog tool* works as a lightweight content management system. It keeps a database of text entries (and other content such as pictures or sound files), supports the adding and editing of items, and simplifies publishing to the web by processing content through a set of pre-defined templates holding all the formatting information for a particular visual presentation. Simple weblog systems only provide a chronological organisation of entries (usually referred to as posts); however more advanced systems also support organising entries into categories or tagging (labelling them with additional meta-data such as keywords and topics).

Many weblogging tools not only generate HTML pages, but also encode their published content as a newsfeed, an XML-based format that is machine-readable. Newsfeeds can be harvested by so-called *news aggregators*. These programs automatically check subscribed weblog feeds for updates and display any new content. In this way readers can easily keep up with

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<sup>2</sup> A more elaborate introduction to blogging appears in section 2.2.

many weblogs, without the burden of navigating the actual web pages. As well as providing an easy way to follow a large number of sources, a growing adoption of news aggregators makes regular reading of a weblog more likely: someone subscribed to a weblog via its newsfeed is constantly reminded to come back as new posts appear in their reader.

However, what makes weblogs different is not the publication of content *per se*, but the personalities behind them. Most weblogs are not formal, faceless, corporate sites or news sources: they are authored by individuals (known as bloggers or bloggers), and perceived as 'unedited personal voices' (Winer, 2003).

Often a weblog is written as a narration of its author's thoughts and feelings (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus & Wright, 2004; Walker, 2005), allowing personality and values to emerge from the words. Even weblogs that are little more than collections of links and short commentaries say something about their authors. The selected content a weblog author finds interesting enough to link to and to comment on functions as a public record of personal interest and engagement. While at the first glance, weblogs are low-threshold tools to publish online, empowering individual expression in public, one thing that excites so many bloggers lies hidden from the occasional reader: blogging is learning about oneself and developing connections with others.

Though the average public weblog is a personal diary, mainly of interest to its author's family and friends (Henning, 2003), weblogs are also used by professionals in different domains. One can find, for example, *medlogs* (weblogs about health and medicine), *blawgs* (law-related weblogs), *edublogs* (educational weblogs) or *knowledge management weblogs*.<sup>3</sup> Such uses of weblogs indicate that they could be useful in supporting one's work and warrant the need to look in more detail at how exactly this works in knowledge-intensive environments.

### 1.1.2 Weblog supporting knowledge work: insights from a weblog adoption study

Since their early days, weblogs have been envisioned as a prototype technology for enabling grass-roots knowledge management (Bausch, Haughey & Hourihan, 2002; Nichani & Rajamanickam, 2001; Röhl, 2003), triggering discussions about k-logs (or knowledge logs), which are weblogs used by an expert or employee "to publish insight, a point of view (POV), links to resources, important documents and e-mails with annotation, and other thinking to an intranet where it can be archived, searched, and browsed" (John Robb in Bausch et al., 2002). While their increasing

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<sup>3</sup> Collections of weblogs in each domain could be found at [www.medlogs.com](http://www.medlogs.com), [www.blawg.org](http://www.blawg.org), [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edublog](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edublog) and [knwiki.wikispaces.com/KM+bloggers](http://knwiki.wikispaces.com/KM+bloggers)

adoption for knowledge development and sharing in companies (Bushell, 2004) or in academia (Mortensen & Walker, 2002; Aïmeur, Brassard & Paquet, 2003) inspired thinking about the possibilities of using weblogs to support knowledge work, there were not many empirical studies exploring the actual practices of knowledge workers who blog. As the literature on weblog uses in knowledge-intensive environments was limited at the beginning of this research, the insights from a weblog adoption study (Efimova, 2003a) discussed in this section were used as a starting point.

During this study, 62 bloggers and 20 people thinking of starting a weblog completed a qualitative web-based questionnaire about their motivation in having a weblog, as well as the context, technology and personal characteristics that they thought supported blogging. Below I summarise the study findings related to questions about the motivation for blogging and the values discovered once a blog had been started, job characteristics that support blogging, and situations that prompt writing to a weblog, illustrating them with selected quotes from the study respondents (spelling, grammar and punctuation are preserved).

The respondents were asked about their *motivation to start a weblog* (Table 1-1 presents examples of the responses). Many of them started blogging out of curiosity, as an experiment, or having been encouraged by others. However some stated explicitly that they wanted to organise ideas and references or improve learning. Starting a weblog was also driven by an interest in communication and sharing or a need for expressing and publishing ideas.

Table 1-1 Examples of responses about motivation to start a weblog

Why did you start your weblog? What motivated you?
<i>Respondent A:</i> Out of curiosity. Saw some people do it, wanted to experience for myself if it was worthwhile. And because it seemed like I had been blogging for years on paper: taking notes, jotting down ideas. It seemed an interesting experiment to try that on line.
<i>Respondent B:</i> I was sharing my knowledge in various mailing-lists. I thought by publishing them at one place things have more value for me
<i>Respondent C:</i> I had recently completed a Masters degree and wanted/needed an outlet for continued thinking.
<i>Respondent D:</i> To be able to share ideas. Also, writing helps to improve ideas and thinking as you have to articulate yourself to others

These results are interesting to compare with the bloggers' responses regarding *added values of blogging discovered after starting it* (Table 1-2). Some bloggers discovered that blogging helped to improve their knowledge and skills (e.g. technology-related skills, writing, discipline, being organised, ability to pose questions, or ability to distinguish between public and private). Others found that the serendipity, feedback and dialogues that

emerge between bloggers contribute to sharing, evaluating and developing their own ideas. Many respondents observed social effects of blogging: finding people with similar interests or new friends, amplified networking or community-forming. Some noted that after starting to blog they found an audience and an easy way to promote their ideas.

Table 1-2 Examples of responses about blogging values discovered after starting a weblog

What other added values of blogging did you discover after starting it (if any)?
<i>Respondent A:</i> 1) That ideas can turn into new relationships and social networks. 2) That I get praise for writing good stuff, or criticism for bad stuff, even if I myself wasn't sure about its worth: it's a sort of test, am I crazy, or is this a good thing. Especially when there are no others in your own organization working in the same field. 3) The dialogues that come from posting.
<i>Respondent E:</i> The increasing network of easily reachable "intelligent" people
<i>Respondent F:</i> The main thing that has surprised has been the depth of the information that is available in the individual blogs.
<i>Respondent G:</i> thinking in public is valuable and something I am learning; also the ability to distinguish between different public and private scopes
<i>Respondent H:</i> networking, building personal credibility, getting in touch with friends I had lost contact with, learning a lot of new stuff through reading other blogs
<i>Respondent I:</i> meeting new people with similar (and also different opinions... being open and learning to know myself better while others get to know me too

The answers about *job characteristics that support blogging* (Table 1-3) fall into three groups. First, blogging fits well with jobs focused on technology or weblogs: IT-related professions or any other job that requires studying or using technology in general or weblogs in particular for learning, collaboration or knowledge sharing. Second, weblogs are well supported by jobs that require trend-watching, collecting and aggregating information, making notes or other writing. They also fit well if there is a need for collaboration, sharing and feedback, or a need for exposure and 'selling ideas'. Finally, blogging fits working environments that offer the freedom to communicate, time and an internet connection.

Table 1-3 Examples of responses about job characteristics that support blogging

Which characteristics of your job support blogging?
<i>Respondent D:</i> Collaboration with others and the sharing of ideas. Also, writing and documentation is a regular part of my job. As an academic I have to write journal articles so writing for a wider audience in my weblog is a natural extension of that.
<i>Respondent F:</i> I am a collector of ideas and information and have found that a byproduct of blogging is a roadmap of my interests.
<i>Respondent H:</i> Knowledge-driven job; blogging has become "backup brain" for job- as well as personally-interesting links and notes. Posting job-related questions on the blog has yielded valuable feedback from readers
<i>Respondent J:</i> I spend a lot of time on research, so my blogging is partly recording opinions/information/insights/sites I find interesting and partly using the act of writing the blog to clarify my thinking on various topics.

I also asked bloggers about *situations that prompt writing in their weblog*. The motivation behind posting on a topic may include: capturing and organising information and ideas for oneself or others; articulating and clarifying ideas or concepts; contributing to the development of an idea by commenting or by connecting it to other ideas; starting a conversation; looking for feedback.

The findings from this study illustrate a variety of knowledge worker activities supported by weblogs: developing ideas and relationships, inspiring conversations and working on specific tasks directly related to one's job. However, they also indicate that study participants are likely to be early adopters experimenting with the medium. Other indicators, such as rapid change of weblog technologies or lack of publications on their uses in business settings when this research was started, suggested that weblogs as an instrument to support knowledge work were still in the early adoption stage. For example, according to a mid-2005 Gartner projection (Fenn & Linden, 2005) that places emerging technologies on a hype curve, corporate blogging had at that time passed the “peak of inflated expectations” and still had to go through the “trough of disillusionment” to reach productive use.

### 1.1.3 From early adoption to productive use

The examples from the previous section indicate that weblogs have the potential to become one of the tools that make knowledge work more productive. However, the promises that a new technology can create do not necessarily immediately result in a productive use. A perspective on this process is provided by Moore (1991), who suggests that a long-term success of high-tech innovation depends on crossing a *chasm* between an early adopter market of visionaries to a mainstream market dominated by pragmatists.

Research on diffusion on innovation suggests that a new idea may have a number of characteristics that increase the likelihood of its adoption (Rogers, 1995): relative advantage, compatibility with existing practices, ease-of-use, opportunities to observe and to try-out. Given that weblog technologies are low-threshold tools that can be relatively easily installed and used, the main barriers to their adoption for supporting knowledge work are likely to be related to the first two characteristics: understanding advantages of their uses in relation to other tools and their compatibility with knowledge worker practices.

Building upon Moore's ideas Gladwell (2000, p. 200) advocates that adoption of an innovative idea involves finding "some person or some means to translate the message of the Innovators into something the rest of

us can understand". From this perspective the focus of this research could be framed as "translating" experiences of early adopters of weblogs in knowledge-intensive environments into an understanding that pragmatists can use to make their decisions about why, how and when blogging adds value to their own work. This approach raises questions about potential applicability of early adopter practices to the situation of pragmatists, given that those two groups are qualitatively different. However, the research presented in this work is based on the assumption that, while the reasons for adopting weblogs might be different, the essentials of knowledge work and the potential of weblogs to support it are similar in the two groups.

This approach requires an understanding of both blogging practices and knowledge work. The following section presents the framework that describes the assumptions about knowledge work that is used to focus this research, while in-depth discussion of blogging practices appears in the Chapter 2.

## 1.2 Understanding knowledge work

In the initial stage of this research my understanding of knowledge work and of uses of weblogs by knowledge workers developed in symbiosis. Weblogs provided a looking glass to uncover the complexities of knowledge work and directed search for theories and models that accounted for them (e.g. as in Efimova, 2004). Those conceptual explanations in turn were useful for exploring the blogging practices I observed and experienced. This section summarises the assumptions about knowledge work that inform this research.

### 1.2.1 Knowledge work: discretionary and invisible

My initial reading of the knowledge management literature that focused on knowledge work left me puzzled, as I did not find a coherent framework that described the complexity of knowledge work (Efimova, 2003b). However, what I took from that reading was an understanding of knowledge work as discretionary and invisible.

Knowledge workers are best described as investors (Davenport, 1999; Kelloway & Barling, 2000; Stewart, 1998): they make choices regarding when to invest, and how much of their knowledge and energy to invest, in a company that doesn't have much direct control over these investments. Taking this standpoint leads to a definition of knowledge work as a *discretionary behaviour*, emphasising the choices that knowledge workers have over it:

*As such knowledge work is understood to comprise the creation of knowledge, the application of knowledge, the transmission of knowledge, and the acquisition of knowledge. Each of the activities is seen as discretionary behavior. Employees are likely to engage in knowledge work to the extent that they have the (a) ability, (b) motivation, and (c) opportunity to do so. The task of managing knowledge work is focused on establishing these conditions. Organizational characteristics such as transformational leadership, job design, social interaction and organizational culture are identified as potential predictors of ability, motivation and opportunity (Kelloway & Barling, 2000, p.287).*

While this framework, and others similar to it, (e.g. Kessels & Keursten, 2002; Schütt, 2003) provide an overview of the factors and conditions that empower and guide knowledge work, they look at knowledge work from an organisational perspective, describing it in terms of creating, transforming, sharing and applying knowledge. However, at a personal level, knowledge work also involves enabling activities (e.g. creating and maintaining relations with others or personal knowledge bases) that are often invisible and not accounted for.

For me the theme of *invisibility* in studies describing specific aspects of knowledge work was striking. *Iceberg*, the nickname I have chosen for my PhD project, came from the metaphor used in studies of informal and incidental learning to describe the 20/80 ratio between learning in formal settings (e.g. taking courses) and learning informally as part of one's work or other activities (Center for Workforce Development, 1998). The time and effort that goes into building and maintaining our personal networks (Nardi, Whittaker & Schwarz, 2002) is often not recognised or accounted for. Also, in a current business environment knowledge workers are increasingly working with ideas and digital artefacts, rather than physical objects: only the products of knowledge work – reports, designs, plans – remain visible, while the process of creating them is not (Drucker, 1999; McGee, 2002). And in many cases even these products are digital, locked on personal hard drives or in e-mail folders, so others hardly ever see the history of a constructive process. Much of the work of finding, interpreting and connecting relevant pieces of information, negotiating meanings and eliciting knowledge in conversations with others, creating new ideas and using them to come up with a final product, happens in the head of a knowledge worker or as part of communication or as an integral part of other work.

My interest in the invisible aspects of knowledge work is what initially brought weblogs into this research: I saw them as an instrument that could provide a window onto practice (Brown & Duguid, 1992) of knowledge workers that would help to develop an understanding of invisible aspects of



knowledge work (Efimova, 2004). While, over time, blogging became the central focus of the dissertation, the insights that came from reflecting on my personal blogging experiences and the results of the weblog adoption study (described in 1.1.2) resulted in the distinction between personal knowledge management and tasks as two perspectives to look at knowledge work.

### 1.2.2 Tasks and personal knowledge management

Published research that looks into the essence of knowledge work at the individual level is often focused on describing and analysing tasks that a knowledge worker performs in the context of a specific job (e.g. computer system administrators, competitive intelligence analysts and librarians in Schultze, 1999; weather forecasting in Burstein & Linger, 2003). Although the task view on knowledge work is important, it misses the fact that knowledge work also includes activities that cannot be attributed to the specific tasks, such as developing and managing one's professional network (Nardi et al., 2002).

Complementary insights are provided by the *personal knowledge management* (PKM) approach, increasingly popular among KM practitioners. For example, The Association of Knowledge Work, one of the most vibrant KM communities, hosted several STAR Series conversations discussing PKM;<sup>4</sup> there are also a number of business publications devoted to it (e.g. Barth, 2000; Higgison, 2004). Practitioners' definitions of personal knowledge management reflect the need of an individual to take over knowledge work and supporting activities:

*Definitions of PKM revolve around a set of core issues: managing and supporting personal knowledge and information so that it is accessible, meaningful and valuable to the individual; maintaining networks, contacts and communities; making life easier and more enjoyable; and exploiting personal capital (Higgison, 2004).*

Focusing on the individual, personal knowledge management complements approaches of studying specific tasks that knowledge workers perform with an overview of supportive activities, such as organising personal information sources or developing personal networks, and their interdependencies. From this perspective, knowledge work could be also

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<sup>4</sup> Conversations with David Gurteen: "IPKM: Inter-Personal Knowledge Management" ([www.kwork.org/Stars/gurteen\\_conversation.html](http://www.kwork.org/Stars/gurteen_conversation.html)). Conversations with Dave Pollard: "Weblogs and Other Social Software for Knowledge Work" ([www.kwork.org/Stars/pollard\\_conversation.html](http://www.kwork.org/Stars/pollard_conversation.html)). Conversations with David Snowden and Steve Barth: "Comparing and Contrasting Corporate and Personal KM" ([www.kwork.org/Stars/barth\\_snowden.html](http://www.kwork.org/Stars/barth_snowden.html)).

defined as managing a *one-person enterprise* – the knowledge worker's expertise, any "knowledge products" that are produced, the processes, tools, and relations with partners, customers and suppliers – and connected with literature on personal effectiveness and time management (e.g. Covey, 1990) or personal branding and networking (e.g. Cope, 2002).

While there are different views on what personal KM entails (for an overview see Wright, 2005), in this work I use my own definition, articulated early in the process of doing PhD research:<sup>5</sup>

*Web quote 1-1*  
[My personal KM](#),  
 Mathemagenic,  
 16 February 2004

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For me **personal KM** is about being aware of **conversations** you engage in (both actively and by being exposed to as a lurker), **relations** that enable them, and **ideas** that you take from and bring into these conversations.

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In this work I also assume that task and PKM views on knowledge work complement each other. Tasks represent the essence of one's work (e.g. doing research and reporting about it in the case of a PhD researcher), they are usually goal-oriented and have a specific time-frame. Working on tasks is *enabled* by one's PKM work (e.g. getting to know the field of research or establishing relations with other researchers for a PhD) and it provides the direction and focus for PKM.

Often there is no clear boundary between the core tasks and some of the PKM activities: at the micro-level, reading an article or having a conversation with another researcher could serve either finishing a report on a particular study or an open-ended orientation in one's research domain. In the framework, presented in the following section, this issue is addressed by positioning activities on a continuum.

### 1.2.3 The knowledge work framework

In this section, the assumptions about knowledge work that guide this research are integrated into a knowledge work framework (*Figure 1-1*).

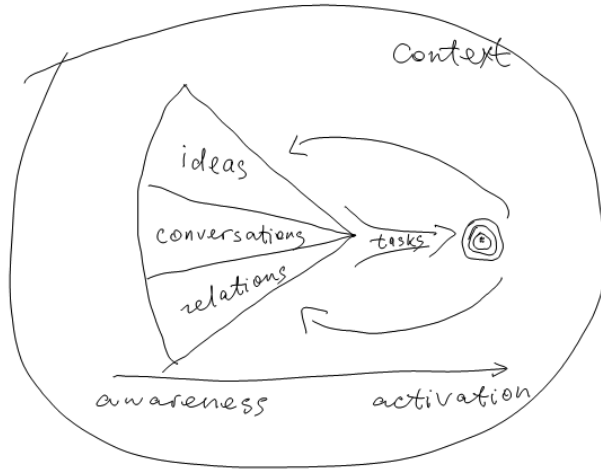
The scale from left to right represents a continuum between non-active awareness of a specific domain, its players and social norms, and activation of those resources for goal-oriented tasks. The scale reflects the process of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991), moving from being an outsider in a specific knowledge community to a more active position. *Awareness*, as a starting point of this process, comes through exposure to the ideas of others and lurking at the periphery (observing without active participation), learning about professional language and social norms (Nonnecke & Preece, 2003; MacDonald et al., 2004). In the framework it is represented by three sectors on the left,

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<sup>5</sup> The evolution of thinking on the topic is available at [blog.mathemagenic.com/tags/personal-km-model](http://blog.mathemagenic.com/tags/personal-km-model)

corresponding to personal knowledge management domains of ideas, conversations and relations.

Figure 1-1 Knowledge work framework



- The top sector represents the domain of developing *ideas*, which requires the filtering of vast amounts of information, making sense of it, and connecting different bits and pieces to come up with new ideas. In this process physical and digital artefacts play an important role (Halverson, 2004; Kidd, 1994; Sellen & Harper, 2001), so knowledge workers are faced with a need for personal information management (Landsdale, 1988) to organise their paper and digital archives, e-mails and bookmark collections.
- The sector of *conversations* reflects the social nature of knowledge work (Brown & Duguid, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991) and incorporates the spectrum from passively followed conversations to collaboration with others focused on performing specific tasks. Conversations contribute to both developing ideas and relations with others.
- The lower sector represents the domain of *relations*, since effective knowledge development is enabled by trust and shared understanding between the people involved (Cross, Parker, Prusak & Borgatti, 2001). For an individual, this means a need to establish and maintain a personal network (Nardi et al., 2002), to keep track of contacts (Whittaker, Jones & Terveen, 2002), or to make choices about which communities to join and which to ignore.

One's activities related to ideas, conversations and relations result in accumulating resources that enable activation of them to focus on specific tasks (Figure 1-1, right). Tasks are the core, goal-oriented activities of knowledge workers. They are enabled by ideas, conversations and relations,

but also focus the attention of knowledge workers in specific directions, shaping PKM work (Figure 1-1, feedback arrows).

Taking into account that knowledge work does not happen in a vacuum, I include *context* as part of the framework to indicate that knowledge work is shaped by multiple forces. While not aiming to provide a complete overview of those forces, in this work I take into account those that correspond to three perspectives:

- Personal<sup>6</sup> – e.g. personal needs, values, habits, practices of a knowledge worker;
- Social – e.g. norms and practices in the communities and networks where the knowledge worker belongs;
- Organisational – e.g. norms and practices of organisation(s) that pay the knowledge worker for her work.

In order to address the complexity of knowledge work, the framework brings multiple disciplinary perspectives together. It is primarily informed by knowledge management research, especially those in respect of the task view on knowledge work, the conditions for it and the role of communities of practice in supporting knowledge processes. However, these are complemented by the insights into the specifics of working in knowledge-intensive environments that come from other fields, in particular those that address work from an individual, rather than a social or organisational perspective (for example, like studies on personal information management or personal networking).

In the context of this work, the framework provides a view of what knowledge work entails. It is used to focus the research, which is primarily aimed at describing blogging practices of knowledge workers in relation to one or several parts of the framework.

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<sup>6</sup> *Personal* as a term is often confused with *individual* and *private*. For specific distinctions relevant for this research see [On definitions: personal perspective at work](#) (Mathemagenic, 6 November 2006).

## 1.3 Research overview

This section provides an overview of the research: research questions, approach and the dissertation structure.

### 1.3.1 Research questions

This research is motivated by the need to understand the relative advantage of blogging and its compatibility with knowledge worker practices, in order to inform decision-making about the uses of weblogs in knowledge-intensive environments. It focuses on *describing blogging practices of knowledge workers*.

While there is a growing body of research on blogging in various contexts, blogging in respect to knowledge work has hardly been explored. Describing blogging practices in this particular context contributes to understanding of weblogs as a medium, their potential in supporting knowledge work and the dynamics around its uses, especially those regarding the issues that arise when this personal medium is used in business settings. In addition, it also complements existing research on knowledge work and specific aspects of it, as well as research in the broader area of knowledge management.

The knowledge work framework, introduced in section 1.2.3, provides a view of what knowledge work entails in the context of this research. The study of the blogging practices of knowledge workers is guided by the *research questions* related to the specific parts of the framework:

1. *What are the blogging practices of knowledge workers in respect to ideas?*
2. *What are the blogging practices of knowledge workers in respect to conversations?*
3. *What are the blogging practices of knowledge workers in respect to relations with others?*
4. *What are the practices of knowledge workers in respect to using weblogs to support specific tasks?*
5. *What are the practices of knowledge workers in respect to dealing with issues that arise as a result of blogging in specific contexts?*

### 1.3.2 Approach

The knowledge work framework portrays various components of knowledge work and indicates many potential contextual forces that influence it. To deal with this complexity each of the studies included in this dissertation focuses on one or more parts of the framework, rather than the framework as a whole (*Table 1-4*). These studies are complementary, rather than comparative; aiming to portray a spectrum of possibilities of blogging with respect to knowledge work, rather than identifying specific conditions behind certain practices.

*Table 1-4* Overview of the studies included in this dissertation

Studies	Parts of the framework addressed	An overview
<b>Blogging PhD ideas</b> Carried out in March-September 2008	Ideas Tasks Context	A reconstruction and analysis of my personal blogging practices with respect to developing PhD ideas; focused on identifying uses of the weblog as a knowledge base, blogging practices in relation to working on a PhD dissertation as a specific task, and challenges that arise around those uses.
<b>Actionable Sense conversation</b> Carried out in spring 2004 together with Aldo de Moor	Conversations	A qualitative analysis of a weblog-mediated conversation in KM blogger community, focused on patterns of participating in a conversation (activity, media choice, linking) to identify conversational practices.
<b>Conversations with self and others</b> Carried out in autumn 2007 and spring 2008 together with Anjo Anjewierden and Robert de Hoog	Conversations	An analysis of linking patterns between and within posts of 34 weblogs written by KM bloggers in the year 2004, focused on blogging practices in respect of conversations with self and others, as well as personal differences between bloggers.
<b>Networking between KM bloggers</b> Carried out in June-November 2008	Relations Context	A study aimed at understanding how weblogs are used by KM bloggers for networking purposes, focusing on weblog uses for developing, maintaining and activating connections with others, and the place of blogging in an ecosystem of networking/communication tools.
<b>Employee blogging at Microsoft</b> Carried out in July-September 2005 together with Jonathan Grudin	Ideas Conversations Relations Tasks Context	Study of weblog adoption at Microsoft, focused on identifying personal blogging practices in an organisational context and tensions that arise when this personal medium is used in relation to work.

While working on the specific studies, I do not treat the framework as a mould and try to fit the findings into it; rather, I see it as a fishing net. It was developed to "catch" the important aspects of knowledge worker blogging practices, but I also look for the unexpected results it brings. Each study is focused on specific settings and specific sectors of the framework.

In order to address these I use theoretical insights from various fields and relevant findings from existing weblog research to translate the research questions presented above into more *specific research questions* for each study (Table 1-5; see chapters reporting on the studies for more detail).

Table 1-5 Specific research questions per study

Research questions	Specific research questions for each study
What are the blogging practices of knowledge workers in respect to ideas?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Blogging PhD ideas – What are my practices in respect to using a weblog as a personal knowledge base?</li> <li>• Employee blogging at Microsoft – What are the blogging practices of Microsoft employees as knowledge workers?</li> </ul>
What are the blogging practices of knowledge workers in respect to conversations?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Actionable Sense conversation; Conversations with self and others – What are the conversational practices of KM bloggers?</li> <li>• Employee blogging at Microsoft – What are the blogging practices of Microsoft employees as knowledge workers?</li> </ul>
What are the blogging practices of knowledge workers in respect to relations with others?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Networking between KM bloggers – What are the networking practices of KM bloggers?</li> <li>• Employee blogging at Microsoft – What are the blogging practices of Microsoft employees as knowledge workers?</li> </ul>
What are the practices of knowledge workers in respect to using weblogs to support specific tasks?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Blogging PhD ideas – What are my practices in respect to using a weblog to support the process of developing ideas from early insights to a dissertation?</li> <li>• Employee blogging at Microsoft – What are the blogging practices of Microsoft employees as knowledge workers?</li> </ul>
What are the practices of knowledge workers in respect to dealing with issues that arise as a result of blogging in specific contexts?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Blogging PhD ideas – What are my practices in respect to dealing with challenges that arise as a result of blogging in a specific context?</li> <li>• Networking between KM bloggers – What are the practices of knowledge workers in respect to dealing with issues that arise around weblog-mediated networking?</li> <li>• Employee blogging at Microsoft – What are the practices of Microsoft bloggers in respect to dealing with tensions between personal and organisational perspectives around blogging</li> </ul>

The studies combine, in different proportions, an analysis of weblog artefacts (text, links, tags) with participant observation and interviews. I position my research as *ethnographically informed*, as I use some conceptual distinctions and research instruments from ethnography, while only partially adopting the ethnographic writing mode.

### 1.3.3 Dissertation structure

This chapter introduces the research. It presents the insights on blogging and knowledge work that shape this work, introduces the knowledge work framework and provides an overview of the research.

Chapter 2 describes the research approach in detail. It positions this work as interpretive qualitative research; introduces conceptual categories of blogging artefacts and practices; discusses choices in respect



to the research methods, participation, writing and ethics; and proposes evaluation criteria for this research.

Chapters 3-6 report the results of the studies, focusing primarily on a particular sector of the knowledge work framework.

- Chapter 3 describes the study of my own blogging practices with respect to developing ideas for the PhD dissertation as well as challenges that arise around those;
- Chapter 4 combines two studies that look at conversations between KM bloggers;
- Chapter 5 focuses on the networking practices of KM bloggers and challenges that arise around those;
- Chapter 6 reports the results of a study of employee blogging at Microsoft, taking the framework as a whole to look at their blogging practices and the tensions between personal and organisational perspectives around blogging.

These chapters are organised in a similar way. They start with an introduction of relevant literature and the research approach, which includes a discussion of the specific case, methods, quality criteria and writing conventions. Presentation of the results is then followed by the discussion of them in relation to the knowledge work framework and existing research, as well as an outline for further research.

Chapter 7 integrates the results. There I present the findings across studies, discuss theoretical contributions of the research, as well as practical implications of it, and reflect on the work.

## Research approach

Somewhere in 2004 I shared Italian food and some of my methodological frustrations with Torill Mortensen, also a blogger, who had just completed her PhD studying text-based multi-user computer games. Torill pointed me to the methodology chapter of her dissertation, which says, among other things:

*A main problem in researching computer games is finding a workable methodology. It is possible to study aspects of the games, such as animation (in graphic games) or the written texts; or to study games from one perspective, such as a learning tool. But these approaches are reductive and include studying games in relations to what they might be, rather than looking at what they are. However, when pinpointing what computer games are, in order to study them, it is also necessary to include what they are not. Because of the composite nature of computer games, it is very simple to find theories that **might** be suitable or methodologies that **could** be useful. However, it is exactly this composite nature and flexibility of the game that is problematic (Mortensen, 2003, p.69).*

Like Torill, I have been exposed to a variety of theories, methodologies and methods that could be helpful for my research on weblogs. Doing multidisciplinary research, I also struggled with the academic practices of different research fields, often incompatible with each other. For example, when I met Torill and other game researchers, I kept trying to figure out how they could get away with doing research by playing games; at that time it didn't seem possible that that was part of a method.

To arrive at a workable methodology, I had to make my own choices, explicitly or intuitively. This chapter describes those choices and their implications for the research. The first section positions this work as interpretive qualitative research. Then I discuss blogging artefacts and practices, conceptual categories that shape the research approach. The third section discusses research choices with respect to methods, participation,

writing and ethics. Finally, the evaluation criteria for this research are elaborated.

## 2.1 Interpretive qualitative research

Talking about one's research paradigm is similar to talking about one's religion: often it is a matter of personal belief rather than a conscious choice, but making it explicit helps to put arguments in a context. It took me a while to discover my implicit beliefs and to position my work as *interpretive qualitative research*. It is based on the assumption that "our knowledge of reality is gained only through social constructions such as language, consciousness, shared meanings, documents, tools, and other artifacts" (Klein & Myers, 1999, p.69).

As well as reflecting my personal beliefs, this perspective fits well with the research questions addressed in this dissertation. Many aspects of knowledge work and blogging practices are difficult to observe and accessible only via personal interpretations or artefacts: implicit knowledge worker needs, not accounted for knowledge processes, invisible blogging activities, hidden subculture-specific values, uses of weblogs discovered only by those who blog. Blogging practices are shaped by a number of interacting factors, for example specifics of weblog tools used, personal preferences and working routines, social and organisational contexts. Weblog technologies and practices around them are hardly explored and still changing. In this case, cause and effect relations are difficult to identify and predict; often they become obvious only in retrospect (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003 call it retrospective coherence).

As opposed to qualitative methods that "enact positivist philosophical presuppositions" (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006, p.xii; Klein & Myers, 1999; Markham, 2006), in interpretive qualitative research qualitative data is not reduced into numbers that can then be used to confirm or contest a theory. Instead, reported results include:

*a richly detailed narrative form for communicating both data and findings, in which tables and figures, when used, supplement and/or illustrate the data and/or analysis – or constitute the data – rather than presenting them in summarized form Yanow (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006,p.xvi).*

Although not used to confirm or contest a theory, such results are used for developing concepts, generating theory, drawing specific implications or contributing rich insights (Walsham, 1995). The aim of this research is to contribute rich insights about the blogging practices of knowledge workers, drawing implications for weblog introduction in knowledge-

intensive environments and developing concepts that help to explain the phenomenon.

Studying complex emerging phenomena does not lend itself to straightforward research design, where important variables are known and could be controlled, so it has to evolve to address unforeseen circumstances and to incorporate developing understanding as the study progresses:

*[...] the research design often changes in the face of research-site realities that the researcher could not anticipate in advance of beginning the research. For this reason, it is accepted interpretive methodological practice not to begin such a study with a formal hypothesis that is then 'tested' against 'field' realities. Researchers in interpretive modes more commonly begin their work with what might be called informed 'hunches' or puzzles or a sense of tension between expectations and prior observations, grounded in the research literature and, not atypically, in some prior knowledge of the study setting. Understanding and concepts are allowed (indeed, expected) to emerge from the data as the research progresses (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006, p.xvi).*

This research has followed the path described above: it is started from an interest in uses of weblogs in a knowledge management context and went through multiple waves of data collection and analysis coupled with attempts to develop conceptual categories for describing knowledge work and blogging practices that would allow refining research questions. Those experiences are echoed by Hammersley & Atkinson (1994), suggesting that:

*Much of the effort that goes into data analysis is concerned with formulating and reformulating the research problem in ways that make it more amenable to investigations (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1994, p.31).*

The path I have followed doing my PhD research has been winding and confusing, so instead of describing it in the detail, in this chapter I present a *retrospectively coherent* picture of my research, explaining what I did and why, while sharing only the most relevant details of the process of arriving at those choices.<sup>7</sup> For those who want more details, I include references to my weblog, which documents most of the journey.

## 2.2 Researching weblogs: artefacts and practices

Over the period of working on this dissertation, research on weblogs has exploded. While when I started there were hardly any studies published, eventually it turned into to a thriving research domain, with its own

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<sup>7</sup> An early and much shorter version of those choices is available as [Making methodological choices](#) (Mathemagenic, 31 July 2007).

community, dedicated conferences, special journal issues and a difficulty in coping with the number of publications. It has also become a truly multidisciplinary space, with a variety of ways to conceptualise and to study weblogs.

This section introduces conceptual categories of blogging artefacts and practices that I use to navigate the research of others and to position my own research approach. While not aiming to provide a complete overview of existing views and strategies of studying weblogs, I use some of them to describe the view of blogging practices used in this research. Then I discuss how this view of blogging practices is combined with the knowledge work framework in order to study blogging practices of knowledge workers.

### 2.2.1 Artefacts

The public nature of weblogs makes them an easy target for a researcher, providing a record of personal interest and engagement in the posts, as well as links that indicate influences and relations with other bloggers. Most weblogs have simple and well-defined structures (e.g. the weblog post usually has a title, a body, a permalink and a date/time stamp), generate newsfeeds (RSS or Atom) representing weblog content in machine-readable format, or notify centralised weblog tracking tools (e.g. weblogs.com) about updates. Relatively simple structure of weblogs and widespread adoption of standards (RSS, XML-RPC, Blogger API) by weblog tool providers enable a variety of tools and services that allow the tracking and analysing of weblogs. For example, weblog incoming links or weblog popularity rankings can be checked at Technorati, trends can be tracked across weblogs at BlogPulse or selected subsets of weblogs can be read online at Bloglines.<sup>8</sup>

However, studies that look at weblog artefacts are usually limited by availability of datasets and tools to acquire and analyse weblog data. For example, often the analysis would include only weblogs indexed by a particular blog tracking tool (e.g. a random sample of those notifying blogs in Herring et al., 2004), weblogs on a specific blogging platform, such as country/language specific weblogs (e.g. Spanish blogosphere in Merelo-Geurvos, Prieto, Rateb & Tricas, 2004) or a broad array of weblog posts in a limited time-frame (e.g. Kumar, Novak, Raghaven & Tomkins, 2004). Existing tools and available databases do not provide an easy way of finding weblogs that are used in a specific way (e.g. to support knowledge work), let alone acquiring full-text and links of those weblogs for an analysis. In addition, many public weblog indexes only include relatively recent weblog data (e.g. latest 6 month for Technorati according to Riley,

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<sup>8</sup> Respectively: [technorati.com](http://technorati.com), [blogpulse.com](http://blogpulse.com), [bloglines.com](http://bloglines.com).

2007), which creates difficulties for longitudinal studies or for those exploring a specific period in the past.

There is another complexity in analysing weblogs. The artefacts – structure, posts, links – that appear as a weblog represent only the tip of the iceberg, since blogging tools allow for a variety of uses. In the same way as a pen could be used to write a diary, a novel, a letter to a friend, or just a shopping list pinned to a fridge door, blogging tools can be used to publish a personal diary, to collect and share links, to communicate to customers, as an unfolding novel, a record of an experiment, a recipe book... A link in a weblog written as a personal diary is likely to mean something different to a link in high-traffic news-focused weblog, and the potential to derive this meaning by focusing only on weblog features is limited (Marlow, 2006 provides a good example of dealing with this problem by combining link extraction with questioning weblog authors about extracted links).

In addition, studying blogging through visible weblog artefacts does not necessarily explain the value of weblogs to their authors:

*Early efforts to define and analyze blogs in terms of structural features or the content are most valuable to outsiders and machines trying to understand how the output compares to the broader concept of a webpage or other practices of communication and textual production. Yet, they fail to capture the actual practice of blogging, why blogging has become popular, and how the output is evolving as more people begin to blog (boyd, 2006, ¶27).*

Focusing on weblog artefacts alone does not provide answers to the research questions that address connections between blogging and knowledge work. On one side, as illustrated in the previous chapter, weblogs do provide a *window onto practice* (Brown & Duguid, 1992) of a particular knowledge worker, supplying a researcher with data to plot assumptions on how weblogs could be useful to work on one's ideas or develop one's professional network. On another side, "blogs are smokescreens as much as windows" (Walker, 2004) – they provide only hints to those aspects of their authors that the authors have chosen to make public, but leave the job of interpreting those hints to the readers.

Although studying weblog artefacts is not the main focus of this research, they are incorporated in the analysis either for pointers toward the issues to study in-depth, as an additional data source or as a way to position and validate the findings.

### 2.2.2 Practices

Since weblog research presents a variety of (disciplinary) approaches, there is no single way to define blogging practices. A good place to start is the blogging practices framework by Jan Schmidt, which is based on ideas of structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) and integrates well findings from a variety of blog research studies:

*Based on ideas from sociological structuration theory, as well as on existing blog research, it argues that individual usage episodes are framed by three structural dimensions of rules, relations, and code, which in turn are constantly (re)produced in social action. As a result, "communities of blogging practices" emerge—that is, groups of people who share certain routines and expectations about the use of blogs as a tool for information, identity, and relationship management (Schmidt, 2007, Abstract).*

Although I do not apply the framework directly in my work (partly due to the fact that it was developed towards the end of my research)<sup>9</sup>, I use it as a starting point to discuss the complexities of blogging practices in this section.

#### ***Blogging tools and their uses***

The relations between blogging tools and their uses are dynamic. From one side, software features enable or restrict certain actions (Schmidt, 2007). Rebecca Blood provides an example in her essay "How blogging software reshapes the online community", describing how the introduction of permalinks and comments changed conversations between bloggers (Blood, 2004).

In addition, the differences between functionalities of different blogging tools sometimes result in development of blogging practices difficult to compare. For example, in his analysis of linking between bloggers Marlow (2006) separates LiveJournal weblogs into a separate cluster, "because the security and structure of LiveJournal blogs is considerably different than others". This concern is well supported by qualitative researchers, who also report that people using this platform often do not perceive their journals as weblogs (boyd, 2005; Kendall, 2007), confirming the risks of taking technology-based definitions of blogging without questioning them (boyd, 2006).

The influences also work in the opposite direction – developers of blog software constantly adapt to emergent uses with supportive functionalities (Schmidt, 2007). For example, when tagging support was introduced

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<sup>9</sup> Although the framework provides one of the most comprehensive views of blogging practices, there are additional reasons for not using it as a foundation of this research: it does not accommodate for the role of a weblog as an aggregation of blogging episodes over time or the diversity of personal blogging practices.

by Technorati at the beginning of the 2005 (Sifry, 2005), many blogging tools had followed by improving their functionalities to support categorising weblog posts with tags. Resulting adoption of tagging changed the ways that bloggers categorised their own content and provided additional ways to find bloggers with similar interests.

Finally, blogging has to be considered as part of an ecosystem that includes technologies outside of a single weblog, such as news aggregators or weblog search engines (see Rose, 2007, for an overview; and Helmond, 2008, for an in-depth discussion of the relations between blogging and tools that surround it). Although bloggers have different degrees of awareness of those tools, even those that do not take them into account experience the ecosystem effects, for example by dealing with visibility and readers brought by search engines.

Although blogging technologies are not in the focus of this research, I take into account the ways they restrict or enforce particular blogging practices. Where possible, I outline the impact of technologies on the practices of the bloggers I studied.

### ***Social context of blogging practices***

There is an on-going debate in the weblog research community about how social weblogs are. From one side, a randomly selected weblog shows limited interactivity and seldom links to other weblogs (Herring et al., 2004). From another, there is growing evidence of social structures evolving around weblogs. This evidence ranges from voices of bloggers themselves speaking about social effects of blogging (e.g. Mehta, 2004), to studies on specific weblog communities with distinct cultures (e.g. knitting community in Wei, 2004; or goth community in Hodkinson, 2006), to mathematical analysis of links between weblogs indicating that community formation in the blogosphere is not a random process, but an indication of shared interests binding bloggers together (Kumar, Novak, Raghaven & Tomkins, 2003).

The blogging practices framework by Schmidt (2007) reflects the views of weblog researchers who believe that "the boundaries of blogs are socially constructed, not technologically defined" (boyd, 2006, ¶36). It suggests that blogging practices are shaped by a blogger's networks as well as shared norms that emerge over time in those networks (e.g. being a member of Knitting Bloggers NetRing requires certain frequency of posting and focus on knitting according to Wei, 2004).

Blogging networks are not evenly distributed and often not easily found. For example, as a randomly selected weblog is not likely to be well connected with other weblogs (Herring et al., 2004) and links between weblogs come in bursts (Kumar et al., 2003), the chance of discovering



a network of bloggers by extracting linking patterns depends heavily on a subset of weblogs and time frame selected for an analysis. Blogger networks may have visible boundaries (e.g. NetRing for knitting community described by Wei, 2004), but more often indicators of social connections are subtle and difficult for a non-member to distinguish. In contrast to other online communication tools (like chat rooms or forums), there is no single space to observe social ties between bloggers. Rather, relations are formed in a space *between* weblogs, similarly to social activities that emerge in public spaces between buildings in a city (Efimova, Hendrick & Anjewierden, 2005). This creates difficulties in defining the boundaries of a weblog network one wants to study.

Also, since they are difficult to find, blogging networks with rich distinct cultures may escape the view on blogging practices represented in the media (Bruns, 2006; Greg, 2006; Herring, Kouper, Scheidt & Wright, 2004). An example from my own work includes a comment by an anonymous reviewer of the paper on weblog conversations (Efimova & de Moor, 2005), who stated that the findings presented were "so unlike the blogging that everyone else has written about that I'm not sure where the authors are coming from". This comment illustrates the importance of studying "niche" blogging practices and the risks of broad generalisations.<sup>10</sup>

This research is informed by an understanding of blogging in a knowledge-intensive environment as a niche practice: the studies describe practices of bloggers who share a specific social environment (e.g. belonging to a topical network or working for a specific company) and take into account specific characteristics of this environment. However, while the view of blogging practices in this work is informed by theories that view practice as social (primarily coming from the research on communities of practice in Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), the focus is on personal blogging practices of knowledge workers.

### ***Blogging episodes over time***

Although factors that shape a particular blogging episode might be relatively easy to distinguish, it gets more complicated once blogging practices are considered at the level that goes beyond single episodes. As boyd (2006) argues, weblogs are both a medium for an expression and a by-product of such expression. Words of weblog posts written with particular intentions in a context of specific blogging episodes "build on the top of each other under the same digital roof" (boyd, 2006, ¶29). As fictional characters with distinct personalities limit writers in their choices to make them believable,

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<sup>10</sup> For more details see [Generalising from own experiences when talking about weblogs](#) (Mathemagenic, 2 December 2006).

over time a weblog raises certain expectations (e.g. with respect to content, style or frequency of posting), forcing its author to take them into account. In addition, the history of interaction with others around the weblog becomes embedded into it:

*All blogs seem to start off general and exegetical; however, as they build a core audience and persist over hundreds of posts, more of the 'back story' is contained in an archive or across conversations throughout the community, and more and more is taken for granted as known [...]* (Morrison, 2008).

Similar to weblog text shaped by the history of blogging, the uses of a weblog evolve over time. While single weblog posts might serve specific situated goals, the uses of the weblog as a whole are framed not only by the sum of those "local" goals, but also by the accumulated effects of different blogging episodes over time.

Although the distinctions between the micro-level of blogging episodes and their aggregation into blogging practices over time are useful conceptually, it does not help much with data collection. For example, knowing that asking, "Why have you started a weblog?", "Why did you write this post?" and "Why do you blog?" might yield different results, researchers would have to make the distinctions clear to respondents. As this research is not focused on the micro-level dynamics of blogging, I combine stories about specific blogging episodes, their effects and more general statements about weblog uses into a single category.

### ***More than writing, more than a blog***

Blogging practices are not only about writing one's own weblog. For example, Schmidt (2007) distinguishes between selection, publication and networking rules that correspond to different roles of a blogger (reader, author and networker, respectively). Dave Pollard (2003b) provides another example in his blog post:

*Web quote 2-1*  
[The blogging process](#),  
 Dave Pollard,  
 30 July 2003

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For some bloggers, just writing is enough. For most of us, though, we're looking to the blogosphere to provide us with useful and interesting information, education, entertainment and/or inspiration for our writing, and feedback, a critical audience, and help with the creative and publishing process.

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He continues by providing a flowchart of his own blogging process that includes a variety of activities such as, for example, "archive, index, categorise", "research who is reading you and why", "participate in forums, wikis, group blogs". This post also indicates that weblog technologies are not used alone, but are complemented by other communication tools, such as email, instant messaging, forums and wikis.

In this research I use an open definition of blogging practices that includes activities and issues present because one is blogging. This might involve not only reading or writing weblogs, but, for example, explaining to one's manager why blogging would not harm the company, going the extra mile to finally meet another blogger face-to-face, or figuring out where blogging fits into one's personal GTD<sup>11</sup> approach.

### 2.2.3 Studying blogging practices of knowledge workers

My study of blogging practices of knowledge workers is guided by two conceptual frames. I use the knowledge work framework (Chapter 1) as a view of what knowledge work entails, while the understanding of blogging is guided by the distinctions between artefacts and practices discussed above. These conceptual frames play different roles in the process of doing research.

The knowledge work framework defines primarily *what* is to be studied: each of the cases addresses blogging practices related to the specific parts of the framework and aims to answer corresponding research questions. Then I turn to the blogging artefacts and practices to shape *how* the study proceeds. Those conceptual categories, as well as an understanding of the complex nature of blogging practices, guide the selection of methods and specific choices with respect to getting access to various sources of information, data analysis and presentation of the results. Once blogging practices are described, I return to the knowledge work framework to position and discuss them, separately for each case and then integrating results across cases.

## 2.3 Research choices: methods, participation, writing, ethics

In this section I address the choices in respect to research methods, participation, writing and ethics relevant to this dissertation.

### 2.3.1 Methods

One of the characteristics of interpretive qualitative research is a flexible response of a researcher to specific circumstances (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006), when "the object under study is the determining factor for choosing a method and not the other way around" (Flick, 1998, p.5). A quote from

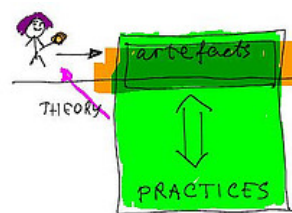
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<sup>11</sup> "Getting things done", after David Allen's book on personal productivity and time management, popular in some blogging circles; also referred to in the following chapter.

my weblog illustrates the choices of methods that would address the complexity of weblog research with respect to artefacts and practices:

Web quote 2-2  
[Weblog research: artefacts and practices](#),  
 Mathemagenic,  
 12 April 2006

So, what would be a way to study blogging practices? I have a few pictures. The first two represent what I call [archeology and ethnography](#) (the person with "flower" is actually a researcher with "looking glass" :).



'Archeology'<sup>12</sup> is about studying artefacts in order to say something about artefacts or practices. In the first case, I don't have any problem: study artefacts -> say something about them.

The second case could be more complicated. Artefacts only represent practices, so if you want to study artefacts and then say something about practices you need to understand how those two connected. One way to do so

is by having a good theory (existing knowledge of connections between artefacts and practices): if you have it then claims about practices based on artefacts could be pretty much true.

The point is that in most cases we do not have good existing knowledge about blogging practices, so I tend to be quite critical on blog research that concludes something about blogging practices by studying only artefacts. [For example](#).

**Ethnography** would be an alternative: studying practices by living the "life of the tribe". In this case you are more likely to provide a better picture of specific practices, but those would be limited to subcultures you studied. However, it's also pretty time-consuming.



I also learnt from [Andrea](#) that ethnographers do not necessarily have interest in artefacts or skills to study them the way "archeologists" would do. Which would be a pity in a case of weblogs, since blogging artefacts can say a lot, especially if "triangulated" based on knowledge about practices.

It also doesn't mean that you really have to be "inside" to learn about practices. Another way would be to ask people to tell **stories about practices** (e.g. in interviews or, in a very shortened form, in surveys). However, blogs provide an additional way: one can study meta-blogging (blog posts reflecting on all kinds of issues around blogging).

<sup>12</sup> The use of this term has been inspired by Jones (1997), who draws on parallels with archaeology to propose an approach for studying online communities through artefacts of their virtual settlements. I used it while trying to develop an approach to map boundaries of knowledge management blogger community (Efimova & Hendrick, 2004; Efimova et al., 2005).

Meta-blogging posts would provide at least some idea on blogging practices without directly asking bloggers. Of course, they are likely to bias the results in the direction of bloggers who tend to reflect more or do not censor these posts based on whatever reason.

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This research combines both the study of artefacts and of the practices behind them. In most cases my initial engagement with other bloggers and observations of blogging practices are mediated through their weblogs. It is weblog artefacts - text, links and patterns in those - that provide starting points for asking questions about practices behind them or making the decision to study practices of a particular blogger. Then participant observation, interviews and analysis of meta-blogging entries come into play, to interpret the meaning of artefacts and gain insights about practices that are not necessarily visible on a surface.

### 2.3.2 Participation

Although it is often considered preferable for the researcher to be a detached outsider, soon after starting my research I found myself at the opposite end of the spectrum, doing *research through active participation* (Mortensen, 2003). After submitting my first paper on knowledge work and blogging (Efimova, 2004, reported in 1.1.2) I realised that my insights came not only from analysing replies to the questionnaire, but also from my experiences of being part of the KM blogger community, writing my own weblog, interacting with other bloggers, and reflecting on those experiences. I started to look for methodologies that would allow accounting for the personal experiences of the researcher and soon found that *ethnography* addressed many of my concerns.<sup>13</sup>

Ethnography, originating as a method in sociology and anthropology, is increasingly used in research of technology-mediated practices. It includes studying a particular culture by learning to live the life of its members (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1994). Next to informal interviewing, *participant observation* is a central way to generate ethnographic data.

Although weblogs, like many other online tools, provide an opportunity to observe unobtrusively by lurking and reading, passive observation was not a choice for me, since the beginning of my PhD coincided with my first blogging experiences. In my research I played two roles: a knowledge worker who blogs about her work and a researcher who studies knowledge

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<sup>13</sup> Yanow (2006) suggests that "ethnography" refers both to a set of research tools and to a mode of writing'. I position my research as "ethnographically informed", as I use some of conceptual distinctions and research instruments of ethnography, while only partially adopting the ethnographic writing mode.

worker blogs. The following quote, illustrates one of my first attempts to describe the effects of combining those two roles:

*Web quote 2-3*  
[Two papers, me in between](#), Mathemagenic,  
 16 March 2005

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I sketch an outline – main things that I want to say – about personal experience of blogging as a starting point that shapes my research questions, about drive of find out why others do not believe my blogging stories (they couldn't be fake even if there is evidence that they are not true for an average weblog – [I can't throw away my own experience!](#)), about my learnings from stories others share in reaction to my blog posts, about writing as participation, data collection, feedback on emergent interpretations and final publication ([all melted into one](#)), about hard choices of [being blogger and researcher at the same time](#), about all things that make my research so fun and so insecure when I think how to frame it to be a "proper scientist"...

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While the specifics about the degree and forms of participating in the blogging cultures I studied differ per case, high-level choices regarding participation are the same. This section describes those choices, as well as the challenges of being a researcher and a blogger at the same time.

### ***Learning about blogging culture***

My personal blogging practices became an important source of learning about blogging, especially from the point of view of understanding the aspects of it that are difficult to observe by reading weblogs. Those aspects include, for example, the effort that goes into fine-tuning a weblog tool to fit personal needs, the surprises of receiving feedback on pieces that I never expected to be interesting to others, or the change of daily morning routines as a result of blogging. Reading weblogs, as "another blogger" and not only with the coding purposes in mind, was an important part of my personal blogging experience. It helped me to get to know people behind weblogs: "absorbing details of others' lives from their weblogs, sense of connectedness and somewhat intimate knowledge about them" turned into following weak signals and "interviews that could touch themes and go to the depths not possible otherwise".<sup>14</sup>

I also learnt a lot by comparing my personal blogging practices to those of others in my own community and outside it. The frequent surprises of observing how different the blogging choices of others could be from my own have led to questioning the reasons behind those differences. From another side, trying to describe to the sceptics some practices shared in

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<sup>14</sup> Quoting from my weblog posts [Slow reading and knowing questions](#) (Mathemagenic, 17 November 2005).

my blogging community helped to shape the research questions and to position this work with respect to that of other researchers.<sup>15</sup>

Since not much was published on weblogs when I started this research, reflection on my blogging experiences and meta-blogging conversations with others provided starting points for it and a critical eye when dealing with the growing number of publications on weblogs. They also served as a compass for navigating multiple domains potentially useful as part of a multidisciplinary view on blogging practices of knowledge workers: my search for theories eventually used in this dissertation was driven by the need to find those that would accommodate the specifics of what I observed and experienced.

### ***Blogger identity, relations and access***

Being a blogger gave me an identity between other bloggers and helped to develop trusted relations with others.

In my own blogging community I did not need introductions and could easily contact others for information or an advice, by email, instant messaging or phone. When travelling, I could often stay in the houses of my blogging friends, giving me an opportunity to peek into their private lives and to have casual conversations about blogging on topics that would likely to escape more formal interviewing.

Having a weblog also served me when approaching study participants outside of my own network. Arranging for a study of weblogs at Microsoft was mediated via my weblog. Also, when emailing bloggers I didn't know to ask for an interviewing opportunity, I would include a link to my own weblog next to other credentials. It is difficult to measure how much closed doors it opened, but I feel that it provided more equality as participants of my research could check my background as easily as I could check theirs (see Mortensen & Walker, 2002 for a similar example; Beaulieu, 2004 for a discussion of it).

### ***Sense-making***

Although this was not my original intention, blogging also became a way to document my research, thinking and emotions around it. It also provided the instruments to organise those notes and to reflect on them, turning into a set of sense-making practices that I conceptualised as everyday grounded theory (discussed in more detail in the following chapter).

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<sup>15</sup> For example, [Communities, shared spaces and weblog reading](#) (Mathemagenic, 7 June 2004) documents an attempt to develop a conceptual explanation to explain how "hard to believe that they exist" weblog communities might develop. Issues, outlined in this weblog post were addressed later in several publications (Efimova & Hendrick, 2004; Efimova et al., 2005) and appear in the study of networking practices of KM bloggers (Chapter 5).

As I blogged on the progress of my research, other bloggers could easily follow those posts, creating influences and feedback loops that researchers usually learn to avoid in order to escape "contaminating their data". I have learnt to embrace them in my research, taking the advice of Hammersley and Atkinson:

*Once we abandon the idea that the social character of research can be standardized out or avoided by becoming a 'fly on the wall' or a 'full participant', the role of the researcher as active participant in the research process becomes clear. He or she is the research instrument **par excellence**. The fact the behaviours and attitudes are often not stable across contexts and that the researcher may influence the context becomes central to the analysis (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1994, p.19).*

I tried to vary the degree of closeness to the participants between and within specific studies. For example, when selecting bloggers for interviews I made an effort to talk to people more distant from myself (for example, those unlikely to be reading my weblog).

Many of the bloggers who participated in this research could be described as *lead users*, those who shape emerging technology to address their needs (von Hippel, 1986). Often their own professional interests aligned well with my research quest to discover how weblogs could support knowledge work. As well as asking study participants to comment on drafts of the research reports, blogging about progress of my research helped to involve them as *co-researchers*. There were multiple occasions when I received feedback from fellow bloggers on shaping study methods, data collection instruments, emergent interpretations or specific sections of my papers after posting them as drafts.

### ***Colliding worlds***

As my blogging served me in both roles, as researcher and blogger, it was not always easy to separate them and to make choices in the case of a role conflict. This is an example of one of these cases as documented in my weblog:

*Web quote 2-4*  
[Hard choices: researcher vs. blogger?](#)  
 Mathemagenic,  
 17 December 2004

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I saw an interesting conversation unfolding, I wanted to participate, but I also thought that it would be a great "another case" to add to our paper since we discussed some future work with Aldo. Those two seemed to contradict: as a blogger I wanted to participate, as a researcher I knew that a better choice would be to stay away, so I could claim more objectivity in a future analysis.

The only thing that saved me from writing at that moment was the fact that I was too busy to find time for writing :)

Now I probably should be happy with it, since it feels too late to contribute and I can safely study the conversation (although, I'm not 100% safe as the [work](#) we did with [Stephanie](#) was referred to at several moments, so I managed to influence the conversation even without direct participation :)



The funny thing is that I'm not happy with it, because next to being a researcher, I'm a blogger. Deciding not to contribute because it makes easier to justify my research changes my usual behaviour and influences conversation anyway ([Monica](#) said once that once you are a member of the community silence is a participation).

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However, role conflicts appeared also where I did not expect them. Studying blogging practices of people outside of my own circle resulted in similar choices between insider participation and keeping an outsider distance:

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*Web quote 2-5*  
[Studying weblogs at Microsoft: connecting the dots](#), Mathemagenic, 20 August 2005

"Connecting the dots" is the biggest fun I have doing my study of weblogs at Microsoft... As an outsider I have the excuse of asking stupid questions and the value of insights coming from getting enculturated into local practices. As an insider (signed NDAs :) I have certain degree of trust and access to the information I wouldn't be able to reach otherwise. As a blogger I pay attention to the details. As a researcher I have time to go around and ask questions and I have an inclination to look how details fit into a bigger picture.

With fun comes the responsibility.

Sometimes I realise that having access to all bits and pieces, blog initiatives through the company and experiences of different people as well as time to study those I may discover things that nobody knows yet (at the end, this is what research is about :). I see how things happening in the different parts of the company are connected. I see people who may be much better knowing about each other. I hear about the events from the different sides. All that knowledge can be useful if it turns into action.

And this is where the hard choices came into play again. Before coming to Microsoft I thought that my usual [researcher vs. blogger](#) problem wouldn't appear in this case. Since I'm not studying my own community I thought I could stay distant as an observer. It doesn't work.

The first reason is that as an intern I'm part of the company, at least for the time being. So, I feel responsible for doing some good while I'm here.

I'm also a blogger. It makes talking to other bloggers easier, but often it pushes me out of the "just observing" end because I have my own [how do I blog over here?](#) burning questions next to the pure research interests.

Finally it's personality. I can't walk away silently knowing that I know something that could help people trying to solve a particular problem. Even if it means being a better researcher.

So, I'm not a true observer – I contribute and often my contributions are results from having advantage of "connecting the dots" as a researcher. Once in a while I introduce people, suggest solutions or provide information that wouldn't be there without me. I also [leak](#) things that I probably shouldn't...

All these make me more of a participant than observer and probably change things I'm studying. Bad on methodology side.

But the same things open new doors, turn into trusted relations or give life to unexpected developments that help understanding blogging at Microsoft much better.

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In addition to the role conflicts, being a blogger made it difficult to draw a line between *fieldwork* and *homework*, participant observation and working on a research report, creating a risk of turning my research into an on-going endeavour (Beaulieu, 2004). In addressing this problem, publication deadlines served me well: as a deadline approached I would have little time to read other weblogs and to blog myself, thus creating a natural withdrawal moment that served as a boundary between the field and home.

My own active participation, as well as involving others as co-researchers, brings similarities with *action research*, another participatory research approach. At the core of action research is a set of actions that aim to solve a particular problem (Lewin, 1946). The resulting change is intentional, it is part of the research design and expected as an outcome. Although my research goals and the interests of the participants with respect to understanding blogging practices were often aligned, this research did not aim to change those practices in a specific direction. In addition, action research often involves several cycles of preparation, action and reflection (Champion & Stowell, 2003) that are absent from my work.<sup>16</sup>

The feedback loops resulting from blogging changed the way I would report my research in a publication. Although sometimes study participants are expected to read a final research report (usually as a way to improve quality, see 2.4.2), they are not the intended audience for it. In my case, thinking of the study participants as readers of the finished work was something I had no choice about, knowing how little effort it would take for them to access my published work.

### 2.3.3 Writing

In respect of this dissertation, writing comes in two forms: writing my weblog as a way of participating in blogging cultures I study, and writing academic texts describing the results of those studies. Formally, these require different writing conventions, but since blogging has been an important part of doing my PhD research I have found myself constantly struggling with the boundaries between them.

Being a *researcher who blogs*, I held myself accountable for my weblog writing in a similar way to writing papers: referring to relevant sources,<sup>17</sup> qualifying statements ("I don't have any evidence, but I think that...") or

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<sup>16</sup> For the discussion on those issues see [Action research vs. ethnography?](#) (Mathemagenic, 8 April 2005) and the discussion in the comments to it.

<sup>17</sup> This is a relatively common convention in weblog writing. However I often felt responsible for providing properly formatted references when quoting academic sources and guilty for not doing so.

adding caveats when blogging on analysis-in-progress. Being a *blogger who does research*, I kept on wondering if there were ways to write research papers so that they were understandable and could engage non-researchers. I missed the personal *I*, the power of narratives, passionate writing and hypertext linking every time I had to write a traditional academic text.

In addition, I always felt that the formal and objective style of traditional academic writing didn't correspond to the nature of research as I experienced it and saw it done by others, much as Carol Ronai discusses in her paper:

*Merton (1968, 4) complained that sociologists do not inquire into "the ways in which scientists actually think, feel, and go about their work," and as a result there is little public discourse concerning how social science is actually done. Moreover, Merton (1968, 4) believes that textbooks on research methods exacerbate the problem by teaching:*

*how scientists OUGHT [emphasis his] to think, feel, and act, but these tidy normative patterns, as everyone who has engaged in inquiry knows, do not reproduce the typically untidy, opportunistic adaptations that scientist make in the course of their inquiries.*

*He describes immaculate, bland, and typically impersonal sociological presentations that lack any accounting on the intuitive leaps, false starts, mistakes, loose ends, and happy accidents that comprise the investigative experiences. I further suggest that these presentations disguise the eminently social character of the production of knowledge, scientific or otherwise. By attempting to organize articles neatly into literature reviews, methods, findings, conclusions and so forth, all thinking is forced into a mould yielding an account of the research process that ignores, indeed counts as irrelevant, issues such as who the researcher is and what his or her motives are for the researching the topic of interest (Ronai, 1995, pp.420-421).*

Part of my PhD process has been about searching for a legitimate way to accommodate the subjectivity of the researcher not only in the choice of methods used, but also in reporting about it. I also wanted to see how the personal voice, so powerful in weblogs, could be integrated with academic writing. Reading autoethnographies has shown me, as a reader and as a writer of scientific texts, the possibilities and the power of writing this way.<sup>18</sup> I then looked at broader categories of ethnographies written as *confessional or impressionist tales* (Van Maanen, 1988) and *CAP [creative analytical*

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<sup>18</sup> I found chapters of "Composing ethnography: Alternative forms of qualitative writing" edited by Ellis & Bochner (1996) especially illuminating in this respect. Most of them were on the topics hardly relevant to my own interests and yet they had a profound and lasting impact.

processes] *ethnographies* (Richardson & St.Pierre, 2005) for more inspiration and guidance.

The aim of confessional writing (telling detail-rich stories, writing from a personal perspective, including emotions and personal details) is not only to articulate the author's role in the research process, but also to invite readers to examine their own practices and assumptions, by presenting the research text not as a final truth, but as a starting point for a conversation (Van Maanen, 1988; Schultze, 1999; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 2004):

*The stories we write put us into conversation with ourselves as well as with our readers. In conversations with ourselves, we expose our vulnerabilities, conflicts, choices, and values. [...] In conversations with our readers, we use storytelling as a method of inviting them to put themselves in our place. [...] The usefulness of these stories is their capacity to inspire conversation from the point of view of the readers, who enter from the perspective of their own lives. The narrative rises or falls on its capacity to provoke readers to broaden their horizons, reflect critically on their own experience, enter empathically into worlds of experience different from their own, and actively engage in dialogue regarding the social and moral implications of the different perspectives and standpoints encountered (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 748).*

I have experimented with some of the alternative writing approaches in my academic writing, in an impressionistic story about discovering autoethnography, later published in a special issue of *Reconstruction on blogging* (Efimova, 2006), and in a co-constructed narrative (Efimova & Ben Lassoued, 2008) that presents an analysis of a weblog-mediated relation between another researcher and me as a *layered account* (Ronai, 1995). This dissertation has some traces of these experiments: I analyse my personal blogging practices as well as studying those of other bloggers.

This approach was inspired by a paper by Ulrike Schultze, "A confessional account of an ethnography about knowledge work" (1999), where she presents an analysis of her own research activities along with those of the knowledge workers she studied. In the paper, her personal story serves two purposes: (1) to reflect on her own experiences along with those of her participants and (2) to describe the specifics of conducting research (e.g. details on data collection and analysis). In this way, detailed descriptions of the research process and decisions, usually only briefly outlined in the methods section, finds a legitimate place in the text.

I take a similar approach in the dissertation. I treat my weblog as a reflexive journal (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) that documents research choices, personal experiences and emotions in the process of doing research. Next to consulting those entries when writing about work on

specific studies, I also bring them into the dissertation text as quotes or references.

In addition, one of the studies reported in this dissertation presents an autoethnographic account, where I use my weblog (entries, links, tags) as a starting point to reconstruct uses of weblogs in the process of developing ideas for the dissertation. In this case, combining visible traces of my thinking in the weblog and personal experiences of turning those into a dissertation, serves as a way to articulate practices usually hidden from weblog readers, while at the same time providing more insight on how "blogging as everyday grounded theory" works.

### 2.3.4 Ethics

Annette Markham (2006) suggests that ethical choices in research go beyond the issues of privacy, anonymity and informed consent; ethics serves as a compass that guides decisions throughout one's research. For me ethical choices start from the question of whom the research results should serve. The driving force behind my research is an opportunity to go beyond academic settings:<sup>19</sup>

*Web quote 2-6*  
[On the role of theory,  
 researcher accountability  
 and translation,](#)  
 Mathemagenic,  
 19 October 2005

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For me research is about impact. Of course, intellectual curiosity, contribution to a theory and rigor should be there, but for me my own research makes sense only if it [makes a difference in the lives of people](#). People who may or may not understand the language of theory.

Researchers make their own choices about that. Some would choose hunting for treasures deep in the theory land and let others bring it back to the world just because this enables them to go further. Others would take extra effort not to bring it back (at all or during the study time), out of ethical concerns (do you have a right to change the way indigenous people live with all your ideas on how things could be different?) or methodological consideration (keeping distance helps to avoid "polluting your data"). I guess I belong to another group, those who feel that bringing it back is part of the research itself.

[...] It's only now I'm starting to articulate my implicit beliefs in researcher's accountability to the broader community than his or her research peers, the responsibility to bring the research results back from the theory land to where most people live, either by translating them into everyday words, teaching the language of theory or even involving them as co-researchers...

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My priorities in bringing research back to practice resulted in treating my respondents as co-researchers and as an audience to whom I present the results. However, research reports shaped by the conventions of academic writing are not necessarily intended to be read by their participants. Since most academic texts are written for peers, they might

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<sup>19</sup> For a discussion on differences between knowledge produced primarily for an academic audience and knowledge that serves someone in extra-academic settings see Yanow & Schwartz-Shea (2006, pp. 368-369).

produce unexpected outcomes when they become accessible to the people studied, as papers in the collection "When they read what we write" (Brettell, 1993) vividly illustrate. Considering the participants of my research as readers of the finished work has direct implications for choices of how to represent them in the text.

Bloggers participating in my studies are public figures. They write in public spaces, often using their names and sharing professional affiliations. They also share traces of their thinking with anyone potentially interested, rather than a small group of family and friends. When blogging I quote their words without being concerned about the implications of bringing them to audiences different from their own; often I hear that pointing others to their ideas is appreciated. I comment on their words knowing that they can easily find out that I did so and follow-up on any misrepresentation; and knowing that the readers are likely to click through the links to find more about relevant contexts and history.

Studying practices of other bloggers while being one myself puts me in the middle of two conflicting practices when representing them in my reports. In the blogging world, the rule is to attribute any quotes from other blogs, ideally linking to the original post, while in the research world the rule is to anonymise to protect privacy of the respondents.

As a starting point to resolve this problem, I use ethical recommendation from the Association of Internet Research (Ess & the AoIR ethics working committee, 2002): I treat bloggers as authors of publicly available texts and explicitly attribute weblog posts to them.<sup>20</sup> This is aligned to practices in blogging communities I study, and also allows me to honour bloggers as public intellectuals, who, like academics, "earn their living in large part through their ideas" (Sheehan, 1993, p.81).<sup>21</sup>

However, as well as public weblogs, I also use data sources not easily available to others (e.g. interviews, participant observation or patterns in weblog data), so the need to protect the participants is still there. While weblog text is public and the blogging patterns could be easily discovered from it, aggregating and visualising those patterns adds an additional layer of information and it is not necessarily in the interests of the participant to share it publicly. As a result, the visualisations of patterns in personal blogging practices in my dissertations are treated in two different ways: when attribution to the real person is unavoidable or essential for

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<sup>20</sup> However, I also provided a list of weblog entries cited in this dissertation in my weblog, using it as an opportunity to notify their authors about citing their words prior to finalising the text (see [Bloggers cited in my dissertation](#), Mathemagenic, 16 March 2009).

<sup>21</sup> For an extended discussion on it see [Bloggers as public intellectuals and writing about them in a research report](#) (Mathemagenic, 3 September 2008).

an interpretation, permissions to include names and links were acquired; in all other cases, visualisations are anonymised.

Weblogs also provide an extended visibility for their authors, who then could be recognised by specific details in their practices or opinions, even if a name is not provided, creating a challenge when using pseudonyms while reporting on sensitive issues.<sup>22</sup> Having publicly known "signature" statements next to the responses on more sensitive issues could result in undesired implications for the respondents. In this case I take an approach similar to the one described by Sheehan (1993), representing bloggers through fragments that could not be connected to a single person by attributing some words and citing anonymously in other cases.

The transparency and interactivity that blogging research provides resulted not only in ethical challenges to be resolved, but also made it difficult to use existing approaches of evaluating the research. The next section provides an overview of choices I made in respect to it.

## 2.4 Judging quality

The quality of a research is best judged within a researcher's own *epistemic community*, where shared practices provide context for an evaluation (Lincoln, 1995; Schwartz-Shea, 2006). However, doing research in a new multidisciplinary field does not make it easy to find established communities, shared practices or unquestioned criteria. In this section I draw on methodological literature that resonates with my research choices to propose quality criteria and corresponding verification strategies for this research.

### 2.4.1 Quality criteria

Reading methodological literature can be confusing, so finding good guidance is important. For my research this was the work of Pelegrine Schwartz-Shea on quality evaluation criteria for interpretive research (Schwartz-Shea, 2006). It discusses how multiple terms and categories are used across and within different research paradigms without making parallel terms explicit, and draws some of the missing parallels. I adapted her table, which matches terms used in classic interpretive research texts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994) to positivist research, to propose quality criteria for this research: authenticity, trustworthiness and impact (Table 2-1, column 5 is added by me).

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<sup>22</sup> For an extended discussion of this, see [When they read what we write: respondent identification](#) (Mathemagenic, 11 July 2006).

Table 2-1 Interpretive approaches to evaluative criteria Source: adapted from Schwartz-Shea, 2006, p. 94

Criterion	Terms used in methodological positivism	Lincoln and Guba (1985): parallel terms	Miles and Huberman (1994): parallel and new terms	Simplified terms
Truth value	Internal validity	Credibility	Internal validity / credibility / <i>authenticity</i>	Authenticity
Applicability	External validity / generalizability	Transferability	External validity / transferability / <i>fittingness</i>	Trustworthiness
Consistency	Reliability	Dependability	Reliability / dependability / <i>auditability</i>	
Neutrality	Objectivity	Confirmability	Objectivity / confirmability	
			<i>Utilization / application / action</i>	Impact

I propose a simplified list of terms as a way to address the differences between terminologies used in a variety of publications that I consulted. For example, a list of criteria suggested by Richardson (2000) to evaluate autoethnography provides an example of an alternative terminology that does not easily match any of the classic texts, but addresses specific issues well for this type of research:

1. *Substantive contribution: Does this piece contribute to our understanding of social life? Does the writer demonstrate a deeply grounded (if embedded) human world understanding and perspective? How has this perspective informed the construction of the text?*
2. *Aesthetic merit: Does this piece succeed aesthetically? Does the use of creative analytical practices open up the text, invite interpretive responses? Is the text artistically shaped, satisfying, complex, and not boring?*
3. *Reflexivity: How did the author come to write this text? How was the information gathered? Ethical issues? How has the author's subjectivity been both a producer and a product of this text? Is there an adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the reader to make judgements about the point of view? Do authors hold themselves accountable to the standards of knowing and telling of the people they have studied?*
4. *Impact: Does this affect me? Emotionally? Intellectually? Generate new questions? Move me to write? Move me to try new research practices? Move me to actions?*



5. *Lived experience: Does this text embody a fleshed out sense of lived-experience? Does it seem "true" – a credible account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the "real"? (Richardson, 2000)*

I define proposed criteria in *Table 2-2* by describing what is judged by each of them and how this could be translated into specific questions to ask about the research.

*Table 2-2* Evaluation criteria for this research

Evaluation criteria	What is judged	Specific questions (adapted from Miles & Huberman, 1994; Brower, Abolafia & Carr, 2000)
Authenticity	Quality of representing real-life phenomenon	Do the findings of the study make sense? Are they credible to the participants and readers of the report? Do the results provide an authentic portrait of the phenomenon studied? Has the author been there in the field?
Trustworthiness	Quality of the research	Do other researchers have enough information to judge: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research process and methods used</li> <li>• Connections between data, interpretations and conclusions</li> <li>• Biases and influences of the researcher and measures to address those</li> <li>• Opportunities to transfer the results to other contexts, to generalise</li> <li>• Theoretical contribution</li> </ul>
Impact	Reader engagement Relevance to practice	Does the text create unique impressions about the subject for readers? Does it stimulate them to re-examine taken for granted assumptions in their own worldviews? Does it affect them emotionally? Does the study provide insights relevant to the practice? Are there implications for actions?

In comparison to the research done in more traditional ways, this approach presents more challenges in respect of defending its trustworthiness, since I report explicitly about my personal involvement and certain degrees of subjectivity in doing it. A good example of those challenges is provided by Holt (2003), who analyses the comments on his autoethnographic paper by journal reviewers. He identifies two groups of issues related to acceptance of his work: the use of self as the only data source and the use of verification strategies in autoethnographic studies. The first is applicable fully to only one of the studies, while for the dissertation as a whole my own case is used to complement other cases and to add transparency to the research process. I address the second concern, difficulty of using common verification strategies to judge this type of research, in the following section by proposing specific quality verification strategies for my work.

### 2.4.2 Quality verification strategies

Quality verification strategies provide specific means to make sure that a research project satisfies quality criteria. They are used *during* all stages of the research process, not only for verifying quality of the outcomes (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson & Spiers, 2002).

#### *Theorising*

Next to being a starting point or target for research, theory could be an instrument to make it stronger. In this research theory is used in the following ways (based on Walsham, 1995; Klein & Myers, 1999; Brower et al., 2000):

- as a "sensitising device" (Klein & Myers, 1999) to inform research questions and conceptual categories;
- as a mental frame that helps to tease out implicit nuances that might be easy to miss otherwise<sup>23</sup> and to address difficult to predict research circumstances (what Yanow (2006) calls "improvisational character of interpretive research");
- to explain and to position findings;
- to "normalise the atypical" (Brower et al., 2000) by drawing parallels between the cases and conditions more familiar to the readers.

#### *Exposure*

Prolonged engagement "in the field" ensures that a researcher had enough opportunities to encounter a variety of perspectives that would allow rich representation of the phenomenon under study. Yanow (2006) notes that exposure refers not only to the time, but to location as well. For me this means "being in the right places for long enough, talking to a variety of people to uncover important issues".

While doing research this means making an effort to "map the territory" (Yanow, 2006) in a way that allows the representation of a variety of perspectives. For example, in the case of my research this means talking to bloggers with diverse practices, including those in minorities. For example, in the Microsoft study, the diversity was insured by complementing snowball interview sampling with finding people outside the network by searching for "deviating weblogs", e.g. those written in another language or used in unconventional way.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> For an example see [On the role of theory](#) (Mathemagenic, 12 October 2005).

<sup>24</sup> Described in more detail in ['Those that belong to the Emperor' \(on weblog types\)](#) (Mathemagenic, 17 March 2006).

The efforts made to maximise the exposure should be evident in the written research report. Such evidence includes, for example, describing the study settings, time and duration of being there; efforts made to define the field, to acquire representative data, to include alternative perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schultze, 1999; Brower et al., 2000; Yanow, 2006).

### ***Triangulation***

Triangulation refers to use of multiple sources and modes of evidence to make findings stronger, by showing and agreement of independent measures, or by exploring and explaining conflicting findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Schwartz-Shea, 2006). In this research several types of triangulation are used:

- Triangulating by study – studying blogging practices from three perspectives using a variety of methods.
- Data triangulation – including in the analysis different types of data (e.g. text and statistics), data sources and data collection methods. In my research that means, for example, including non-elicited data (Pargman, 2000) from public sources (e.g. weblog text) as well as the recorded interviews.
- Involvement of multiple researchers in data collection or analysis in all studies except one.

### ***Participants as co-researchers***

One of the strategies to ensure that research results represent the phenomena under study is informant feedback (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Schwartz-Shea, 2006), i.e. asking study participants to comment on the report. In my case I take it further, treating participants as co-researchers. This means not only asking for feedback on finished reports, but also providing them with opportunities to observe and to influence parts of the research process via my weblog.

### ***Transparency***

At its extreme, making one's research transparent means conducting an audit, where a detailed record of research processes and decisions as documented by a researcher is examined by an independent auditor to access research quality (Akkerman, Admiraal, Brekelmans & Oost, 2008; Halpern, 1983). For this research I use a broader definition of transparency as a set of practices to document research for an inspection by others (Schwartz-Shea, 2006). The following strategies are used to make the research more transparent:

- I use my weblog not only to document my research, but also to carry out part of the research process. In this way it is available not only for

- auditing in retrospect, but also for a real-time feedback, which is more useful for addressing possible problems before it's too late.
- As well as discussing high-level methodological choices in this chapter, descriptions of research processes and specific decisions made are provided for each case. As in this chapter, these are accompanied by references to weblog posts that include more details.
  - Since some of the data used in this research is publicly accessible, readers of my research reports are provided with references to it, so they have an opportunity to check my interpretations by examining the data for themselves.

### ***Thick description***

Thick description (Geertz, 1973) refers to the style of reporting the research results aimed at "transporting the reader to the field" by providing detail-rich descriptions of the life of the research participants (Klein & Myers, 1999; Brower et al., 2000; Yanow, 2006; Schwartz-Shea, 2006). In the case of my research this means quoting extensively from weblogs and interviews, describing history and context of a particular setting, and portraying the complexity and interrelations between different aspects of blogging practices. When quoting from weblogs I preserve linking in the text and provide a direct link to the post, so those who read this work digitally<sup>25</sup> can literally "transport themselves to the field" with one click.

### ***Reflexivity and purposeful confessional writing***

Reflexivity refers to the awareness and theorising about the role of self in all phases of the research process (Schwartz-Shea, 2006). My weblog serves as a *reflexive journal* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) providing a space for "writing along the way" that helps in "working with the personal in order to accomplish scholarly work and to build scholarly practices" (Kamler & Thomson, 2006, p.72). Documented in the weblog the moments of doubting and thinking aloud provide opportunities for self-examination and challenging questions by others. I reference and quote those entries where relevant in the text. In addition, I choose not to present the research as a clear path, but instead invite the reader to examine my work, and to reflect on their own, by incorporating stories that convey uncertainties, dilemmas, influences and mistakes in addressing those different forms of bringing personal experiences into an academic text as *confessional writing*.

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<sup>25</sup> In addition, identifying information is provided next to the cited weblog posts, so they can be found with a search engine. Alternatively, an index of weblogs cited is available in my own weblog at [blog.mathemagenic.com/phd/blogs-cited](http://blog.mathemagenic.com/phd/blogs-cited)

As Schultze (1999, p.31) points out, bringing a personalised author (Van Maanen, 1988) in a text requires not only "the use of personal pronouns to consistently highlight that the point of view being represented is that of the field worker, but also the construction of the researcher as a reasonable yet fallible individual with whom the audience can identify". This means providing information about the researcher's personal traits (e.g. age, gender, epistemological assumptions or theoretical point of view) that could impact the research process, disclosing unflattering details (e.g. anxieties or mistakes) and the efforts made to maintain the quality of the research in less-than-optimal research conditions.

However, taken to an extreme, confessional writing could turn a research report into an autobiography (Schultze, 1999; Duncan, 2004). This risk could be avoided by making sure that confessional writing serves a research-related purpose. In this research this is done by:

- articulating the purpose of including confessional material (e.g. as an additional data source, to provide transparency, as a way to engage the readers);
- drawing parallels between my personal experience and those of other bloggers (in my own studies or as reported in the literature);
- interlacing self-revealing writing with more traditional forms of academic writing (Ronai, 1995; Schultze, 1999);
- separating personal data available for others to examine (e.g. my weblog posts) and personal interpretations of it.

### 2.4.3 Matching quality criteria and verification strategies

*Table 2-3* presents an overview of strategies and their relevance to the quality criteria I proposed in the previous section. An overview of quality verification strategies for each study presented in this dissertation is provided as part of the research approach in respective chapters.

Table 2-3 Quality criteria and verification strategies

Verification strategy	Authenticity	Trustworthiness	Impact
Theorising	Theoretical frames are used to discern the implicit nuances.	Clear theoretical contribution by justifying research questions and positioning the results.	
Exposure	Being in the right places for long enough, talking to a variety of people to uncover important issues.		
Triangulation	Alternative interpretations are uncovered and represented	Data source: rich picture, replicating findings across data sources. Study: uncovering complementary aspects of blogging practices by studying them from different perspectives. Researcher: decreasing subjectivity.	
Participants as co-researchers	Participants have a chance to make sure that their perspectives are uncovered and reported.	Decreasing subjectivity	Participants have an opportunity to shape research to have practical relevance.
Transparency	Providing evidence of the researcher's immersion in the field.	Allowing alternative examination or replication of the study.	
Thick description	"Transports" the reader to the field through quotes and contextualised descriptions.	Connection between data and conceptual categories is evident in the text. Readers have enough contextual information to decide how far the results could be generalised.	Engaging readers through storytelling.
Reflexivity and purposeful confessional writing	Providing a view onto the researcher practices next to those of the participants.	Uncovering and accounting for unexpected in the process of doing research. Articulating subjectivity in writing. Delineating between "objective" data and subjective interpretations.	Revealing dilemma's and uncertainties in research process engages readers. Making ethical choices. Engaging readers through sharing personal experiences and uncertainties.



## Blogging PhD ideas

Since their early days, weblogs have been conceptualised as personal thinking spaces: as an *outboard brain* (Doctorow, 2002), a *personal filing cabinet* (Pollard, 2003a) or a *research notebook* (Halavais, 2006). In fact, the first academic publication on blogging (Mortensen & Walker, 2002) discusses uses of blogging in a research context, particularly in relation to developing ideas, and the weblog of its first author, Torill Mortensen,<sup>26</sup> has a telling title: "Thinking with my fingers". My own motivation to start blogging was exactly that:

*Web quote 3-1*  
[Ok, it's time to explain why](#), Mathemagenic,  
 21 June 2002

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I had so many notes on pieces of paper, in files, in yellow outline of print-outs, in books, in collections of links of references, in my head ... I needed one point access for collecting those notes, relating them, reflecting, sharing and discussing.

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I soon discovered that a weblog worked well that way, but also that this "thinking in public" provided an opportunity to see how ideas, my own and those of other bloggers, develop over time. One of my strongest early blogging experiences was reading an essay by Sebastien Paquet,<sup>27</sup> also a blogger. He discussed uses of weblogs in the context of research (Paquet, 2002). What I found most exciting was not the content of the essay, but having the sense of familiarity with the ideas behind the text:

*Web quote 3-2*  
[Evolution of thinking](#),  
 Mathemagenic,  
 3 October 2002

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I like this story not only for the good quality content that provokes thinking and saves time of trying to explain "blogs" to my colleagues, but also for one more thing. For me, as a regular reader of [Seb's Open Research](#) it illustrates the evolution of thinking: I recognise "bits of ideas" that I've seen before, and I'm fascinated to see how they emerge into a whole. What could be better for the "researcher-to-be" than observing how someone's thought grows?

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<sup>26</sup> Torill is blogging at *Thinking with my fingers*, [torillsin.blogspot.com](http://torillsin.blogspot.com)

<sup>27</sup> Sebastien is blogging at *Seb's Open Research*, [openresearch.sebpaquet.net](http://openresearch.sebpaquet.net)



That feeling was reinforced by following the work of another blogger, Jim McGee,<sup>28</sup> who stressed the importance of getting an insight into the process of knowledge work, as well as seeing the products of it, and discussed weblogs as one of the instruments to do so (McGee, 2002).

This chapter grew from those seeds: it presents an exploration of how blogging contributes to developing ideas for this dissertation, using the case of my own blogging practices as an example. After introducing the domains that are used as lenses in this study, the research approach is described. I then present the results with respect to using a weblog as a personal knowledge base and a support for turning early insights into a PhD dissertation, and the tensions that arise as those practices are shaped by multiple contexts. The discussion that positions the findings follows.

### 3.1 Useful lenses: PIM, GTD and advice on writing

While there are many ways to look at the weblog as an instrument to develop ideas, the research presented in this chapter is informed by the insights coming from three domains. This section provides an introduction to them. It is not an in-depth overview, but rather an outline of the ideas taken from those domains to inform the research.

#### 3.1.1 Personal information management

While many authors provide their definitions of knowledge and information, the boundaries between uses of those terms in practice are often fuzzy (e.g. Swaak, Efimova, Kempen & Graner, 2004). Similar to Stenmark (2002) I believe that knowledge doesn't exist "out there": products and artefacts only represent knowledge that people have. To develop knowledge, one has to filter large amounts of information, make sense of it, and connect the different bits and pieces to come up with new ideas. In this process, physical and digital artefacts play an important role (Kidd, 1994; Sellen & Harper, 2001; Halverson, 2004). As a field of research and practice (Jones, 2008), personal information management (PIM) provides conceptual categories that help to understand how one works with information at a personal level.

For example, Boardman and Sasse (2004) discuss types of information according to its usefulness to a person: un-accessed, not useful, dormant (inactive, but potentially useful) or active, used at the moment. Although similar classifications are proposed by other authors (for an overview see Jones, 2008, p.50), this one is particularly useful in reflecting on

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<sup>28</sup> Jim is blogging at McGee's Musings, [www.mcgeemusings.net](http://www.mcgeemusings.net)

the relationship between information and one's ability to fit it in as part of an active workflow.<sup>29</sup>

Research on personal information management also provides insight into personal activities around information, for example in the process of creating and using personal information collection or dealing with different types of information to support work. In this work I look at a weblog as a personal knowledge base and take a somewhat narrow perspective on PIM activities,<sup>30</sup> using as a starting point those proposed by Barreau (1995): acquisition of items to form a collection, organisation of items, maintenance of the collection and retrieval of items for reuse.

Many PIM publications discuss what strategies people use to support some or all of these activities, or how particular tools are used for this. However, for the purpose of this work I find studies that could be more easily applied to analysing uses of a new tool to be particularly relevant. Examples of these include studies that examine PIM strategies across different tools (e.g. Boardman & Sasse, 2004); the reasoning behind choosing a particular strategy (e.g. Jones, Bruce & Dumais, 2001; Whittaker & Hirschberg, 2001); or provide an insight into the relationship between PIM and working on a task (e.g. Kidd, 1994; Bondarenko & Janssen, 2005; Jones, Phuwartnurak, Gill & Bruce, 2005).

### 3.1.2 Personal productivity: getting things done

By focusing on the process of managing one's actions to achieve results across multiple tasks, the literature on personal productivity provides another way to look at blogging in relation to developing ideas. While there are a number of different approaches that could be included in this category (e.g. those focusing on time-management), in this work I refer primarily to the Getting Things Done (GTD) approach of David Allen (2005), increasingly popular with bloggers and actively covered in weblogs such as *Lifehacker*, *43 Folders* or *Zen Habits*.<sup>31</sup>

While the GTD approach is only one of those that inform my understanding of what makes knowledge work productive, one of its principles is directly relevant for this chapter:

*Anything you consider unfinished in any way must be captured in a trusted system outside your mind [...] that you know you'll come back to regularly and sort through. (Allen, 2005, p. 13).*

<sup>29</sup> For more discussion on this, see [Things that don't fit](#) (Mathemagenic, 24 July 2006).

<sup>30</sup> A more detailed classification, potentially better suited to this research, is proposed by Jones (2008); however it came to my attention only when most of the chapter had been written.

<sup>31</sup> [lifehacker.com](#), [43folders.com](#) and [zenhabits.net](#), respectively

The reasoning behind this principle is twofold: capturing ideas in a trusted external repository makes one's mind free to work on a task at hand, and it also creates an opportunity to notice connections and to generate more ideas (Allen, 2005, pp.16 and 72-74 respectively). From the perspective of this study, a weblog is viewed as such an external repository that might be useful as a *parking space*<sup>32</sup> for ideas.

### 3.1.3 Writing

Finally, since in this chapter I look at the relation between blogging and developing ideas for the dissertation, it is also informed by the literature on writing. In that respect, advice on writing in general (e.g. Lamott, 1995) has been helpful in understanding the "tricks of the trade", as well as specific problems that arise in the process and possible solutions. Additionally this work is shaped by publications on writing in academic settings, as well as my own experiences of writing for an academic publication.

As Kamler and Thomson (2006, p.3) rightfully point out, writing a dissertation is more than just a task of "writing up your research". Their work, as well as publications on alternative writing formats in ethnography (Van Maanen, 1988; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Richardson & St.Pierre, 2005) and stories told by writers themselves,<sup>33</sup> provides multiple perspectives to look at writing.

At the micro-level writing could be viewed as a *sense-making* process:  
*...writing and understanding are mutually constructed. Scholars write and think simultaneously and their writing develops their ideas and then pins meaning on the page (Kamler & Thomson, 2006, p.81).*

While personal practices of researchers in this respect, and their transparency of reporting it, might differ, there are cases where writing is the main method of inquiry or a substantial element of it (Richardson & St.Pierre, 2005). Reflecting on my own research process, I conceptualise writing, for both my weblog and more formal academic publications, as a process that contributes substantially to the development of ideas represented in a text.

Writing could be also viewed as an *iterative process*, where arguments are structured and restructured as they are presented to multiple audiences. For example, writing a working report or a conference paper prior to a journal publication is common academic practice. In the case of the dissertation, a much bigger and potentially more complex work, writing

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<sup>32</sup> The metaphor was suggested by Robert-Jan Simons in a discussion on a draft of this chapter.

<sup>33</sup> A good starting point for an insight into academics' reflections on their writing process is provided by the "How I Write" series of conversations at Stanford University, [www.stanford.edu/group/howiwrite](http://www.stanford.edu/group/howiwrite)

stand-alone pieces is an essential part of developing a way to present the whole. While in some cases those pieces might be publications on work-in-progress, they could also be "chunks" shared with supervisors and peers who discuss particular aspects of the work (Kamler & Thomson, 2006). In the case of this research, writing a weblog post is viewed as one of the iterations in the writing process.

Finally, academic writing could be conceptualised as a complex, institutionally constrained social practice, where the text itself is shaped as it is integrated in a specific academic discourse and influenced by specific institutional settings (Kamler & Thomson, 2006, p.20-23). This perspective corresponds to the view on blogging practices used in this dissertation; in this chapter, academic environment is considered as one of the contextual forces that shape my blogging practices.

#### **3.1.4 Summary**

This section introduces three domains that shaped the study presented in this chapter. The field of personal information management provides conceptual categories that help to understand how one works with information at a personal level. The personal productivity domain gives an insight into the role of an external trusted system to organise one's thoughts in the process of getting things done. Literature on (academic) writing provides an understanding of the complexity of the task of writing and the contextual factors that shape writing in academic settings. As well as shaping the way of translating general research questions into specific ones to be answered in this study (section 3.2.1), insights from these fields are used to reconstruct, analyse and position my personal blogging practices (sections 3.3-3.5).

### **3.2 Research approach**

This section discusses the research approach for this study: the reasons for choosing my own case for the study; methods of data collection and analysis; quality verification strategies; and choices in respect to presenting the results in writing.

#### **3.2.1 Case**

This case focuses on describing blogging practices from a personal perspective: I study my own ways of using the weblog to develop ideas for this research.

I started my weblog in June 2002 as a place to organise my thinking. My work as a researcher gave me plenty of opportunities to find interesting

and somewhat eclectic topics to blog about, starting from those around learning and knowledge management, but eventually covering a variety of issues related to "personal productivity in knowledge-intensive environments, weblog research, knowledge management, PhD, serendipity and lack of work-life balance..."<sup>34</sup> Over time the weblog became my primary tool to collect and organise information relevant for working on the dissertation. At the time of this study (January 2008) it included 1490 posts; in total more than half a million words.

To blog I used *Radio Userland*,<sup>35</sup> one of the most advanced weblog platforms at that time, which allowed a lot of control and flexibility over one's content. Despite the time and effort that figuring out the intricacies of this tool required, it suited my needs for organising bits of relevant information. However, in a couple of years Radio lost its competitive edge and many bloggers around me moved to other blogging platforms. I made several resolutions to do so,<sup>36</sup> but started to work on it only at the beginning of 2008, when Radio was broken "beyond repair" and stopped uploading content to my server.

The main reason for sticking with a barely functional tool for so long was simple: I used the functionality to its extremes in order to organise my work-related thinking and could not think of parting with the metadata that accompanied my weblog posts, as it was essential for writing a PhD dissertation. Moving to another platform would mean losing access to my "external brain" at the moment when I needed it most.

While in many respects my own blogging practices do not necessarily represent those of the majority of bloggers, this case provides a good starting point for exploring the potential of using a weblog as an instrument to develop ideas.

Combining visible traces of my thinking in a weblog and personal experiences of turning those into this dissertation provides an opportunity to study in-depth how blogging contributes to the process of developing ideas in a long-term complex project. From this perspective my approach is similar to that of Thomas Erickson, who studied his own use of a personal electronic notebook to uncover synergies and longer-term effects that were not easy to study otherwise (Erickson, 1996).

Another reason to use this case as part of the dissertation is the need to reflect on the ways my weblog contributed to this research. While high-level connections between blogging and PhD methodology were discussed in the previous chapter, this study provides an opportunity to make

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<sup>34</sup> Quoted from the tagline of my weblog, [blog.mathemagenic.com](http://blog.mathemagenic.com)

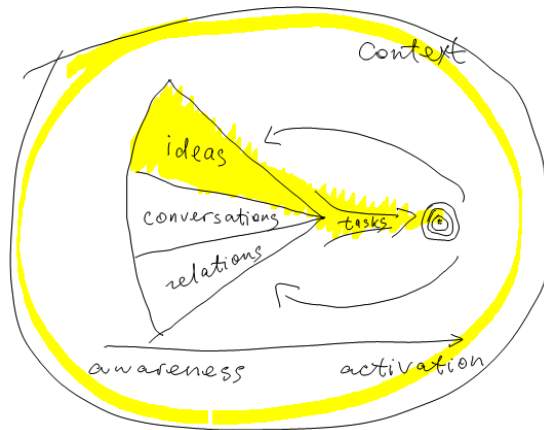
<sup>35</sup> Called 'Radio' further in the text; [radio.userland.com](http://radio.userland.com)

<sup>36</sup> [Radio Userland: what I love and hate about it](#) and [Changing blogging platform](#) (Mathemagenic, 28 February 2004 and 26 January 2006, respectively).

the specifics of my uses of a weblog in the process of doing research more transparent.

The focus of this study is on how weblogs support one specific aspect of knowledge work – developing ideas *Figure 3-1*). Although I share the belief that knowledge is socially constructed, here I look at this process from a personal perspective, focusing on an individual contribution to the collective whole. To do so, I intentionally limit the discussion of my own blogging practices to those that are personal, rather than social, leaving to other chapters the themes related to uses of weblogs for sharing knowledge with others, establishing ones reputation or networking.

*Figure 3-1* Parts of the knowledge work framework addressed by this study



In this study the case of my own weblog is used to address the following research questions:

- What are the blogging practices of knowledge workers in respect to ideas?
- What are the practices of knowledge workers in respect to using weblogs to support specific tasks?
- What are the practices of knowledge workers in respect to dealing with issues that arise as a result of blogging in specific contexts?

In order to address those questions, my personal blogging practices are reconstructed from three perspectives. First I focus on exploring how blogging supports managing ideas as a permanent "overhead" practice of building one's own knowledge, and explore my practices of using a weblog as a personal knowledge base. Then I look at the "activation-awareness" scale of the framework with respect to ideas: the process of turning fuzzy early insights into a specific product. To do this, I analyse my practices of using a weblog at different stages of developing PhD ideas and dissertation writing as a core task. Finally, I explore the contextual factors that influence

the development of those blogging practices, by examining what issues arise as a result of blogging being situated at an intersection of personal, social and organisational contexts.

The specific *research questions for this study* are formulated according to the three perspectives:

- What are my practices in respect to using a weblog as a personal knowledge base?
- What are my practices in respect to using a weblog to support the process of developing ideas from early insights to a dissertation?
- What are my practices in respect to dealing with challenges that arise as a result of blogging in a specific context?

### 3.2.2 Methods

As a starting point for reconstructing blogging practices I use my weblog artefacts (weblog entries, links, tags, etc.). In this process special attention is paid to *meta-blogging entries*, an unstructured documentation of my experiences of using the weblog to develop ideas that provides an *in-situ* view of my blogging practices. However, as section 3.4.1 illustrates, not all aspects of blogging practices are visible in the weblog text or meta-data: some have to be reconstructed from memory, using weblog content to aid recall.

To support the analysis of weblog entries, and to provide access to them for the readers of this work, the entries are categorised using emergent and retrospective codes. *Emergent codes* are tags that I used for topical organisation of my weblog entries when I wrote them (the quote below provides an example of a weblog post with associated topical tags at the bottom).

*Web quote 3-3*  
Emergent codes in  
a blog post.  
[Good research...](#),  
Mathemagenic,  
12 October 2005

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While doing other things I'm in the middle of post-[AOIR](#) thinking on research methodologies, ethics and researcher's responsibilities. I have to do all those other things, but I'm pretty sure that this thinking will surface in writing, sooner or later.

But so far just a quote from [Annette Markham](#) ([Ethics as method: A case for reflexivity \(.pdf\)](#)):

Good qualitative research, online or off,  
is not difficult to find or access,  
it is difficult to formalize.

Good research, online or off,  
is hard work.

Good research comes from the heart.

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Tags: [AOIR](#), [ethics](#), [ethnography](#), [methodology](#), [research](#)

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*Retrospective codes* are added for specific purposes at the moment of doing this study (March-April 2008); these include references to the specific chapters of the dissertation. All coding is done using the functionality of my weblog software, so the pages that aggregate the results on specific codes are publicly visible and could be used as a reference throughout the dissertation.<sup>37</sup>

Further analysis and writing were carried out simultaneously.<sup>38</sup> To identify aspects of my blogging practices I printed weblog entries related to this chapter and then further sorted them into piles referring to the specific type (e.g. blogposts related to the background literature for this chapter) or theme (e.g. the role of time in blogging). Then some of the piles were further sorted to identify entries to use as a "skeleton" for this chapter; arranging those to make a linear story resulted in the chapter structure. At the same time I looked at ways of aggregating or visualising corresponding patterns in weblog artefacts by exploring functionalities of my weblog software and other tools<sup>39</sup> and "played" with the data. Ideas and interpretations that emerged in this process were included directly in the text. In the process of writing I blogged on some of the themes covered in the chapter, offered a draft version of it for a review<sup>40</sup> and incorporated the feedback in the chapter text.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Weblog entries used as an input for this chapter are accessible at [blog.mathemagenic.com/categories/phd/chapter3](http://blog.mathemagenic.com/categories/phd/chapter3) (only those from 2002 to 2007 are used for the analysis). References in this chapter are linked to the entries in the living weblog, where the accompanying metadata is evolving. The rationale behind this choice and links to a copy of the weblog "frozen" at the moment of the analysis are at [Researcher vs. blogger: My weblog as a data source](#) (Mathemagenic, 25 April 2008).

<sup>38</sup> See [www.flickr.com/photos/mathemagenic/tags/chapter3](http://www.flickr.com/photos/mathemagenic/tags/chapter3) for more details about the process and specific artefacts.

<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately, there were not many options to do so. For more discussion on it see [Developing ideas in a weblog: show vs. tell](#) and [Comparing weblog text to the PhD dissertation via tagclouds](#) (Mathemagenic, 9 and 7 July 2008 respectively).

<sup>40</sup> See [blog.mathemagenic.com/categories/phd/chapter3](http://blog.mathemagenic.com/categories/phd/chapter3), blog entries between April and August 2008.

<sup>41</sup> I also used material presented in this chapter as an input for preparing a conference submission (Efimova, 2009). I was tempted to revise this chapter after receiving feedback on it, but at the end left the dissertation text without major changes.



3.2.3 Quality criteria

Table 3-1 describes specific quality verification strategies applied in this study (for detailed description of verification strategies, see section 2.4.2).

Table 3-1 Quality verification strategies for the study of my own blogging practices

Verification strategy	Application for studies of conversational blogging practices
Theorising	Literature on personal information management is used as a frame for reconstructing practices of using a weblog as a knowledge base; where possible, theory-based explanations are used in other sections as well.
Exposure	Studying self as a way to maximise exposure.
Triangulation	Complementing personal reconstruction of practices with historical archive of meta-blogging entries and studying patterns of weblog use. Two studies on weblog conversations reported in the following chapter include visualisations of my blogging patterns and a comparison of those to other bloggers.
Participants as co-researchers	Not relevant
Transparency	Weblog data and coding is public and referenced in the text.
Thick description	Results are presented as a layered account that includes quoting from weblog entries and corresponding interpretations. Context that shaped blogging practices is described.
Reflexivity and purposeful confessional writing	Weblog as a reflexive journal; references to relevant entries are included. Written as autoethnography.

3.2.4 Writing conventions

The following sections present the results of the study in respect of the three research questions, focusing on the weblog as a personal knowledge base and a support for turning early insights into a PhD dissertation, and on the challenges that arise as a result of using the weblog that way.

The results are presented as a layered account (Ronai, 1995), where excerpts from my weblog are complemented by the commentary and analysis. In the following text, quotes and discussion of specific weblog posts are accompanied with their URLs, all of which were valid as of September 20, 2008. Quotes include original text and emphasis used in the posts and comments; links are indicated as underlined text and clickable in a digital version of the dissertation. Any other formatting is excluded.

### 3.3 Results: the weblog as a personal knowledge base

Over time the weblog became my primary tool to collect and organise information relevant for working on this dissertation. From the total of 1490 posts in the weblog, 640 were coded as directly relevant to one of the chapters of this dissertation; however, the majority of the remaining entries are related to my non-PhD work.

This section describes the study findings with reference to the first research question: "What are my practices in respect to using a weblog as a personal knowledge base?" To structure the discussion, I look at how my weblog supports four component activities of personal information management (Barreau, 1995): forming a collection, organisation it, maintenance of it, and retrieval of items for reuse.

#### 3.3.1 Forming a collection

According to the cross-tool study of personal information management strategies (Boardman & Sasse, 2004), ways of acquiring information differ between tools. For example, files are usually self-created and placed in a collection, while emails arrive in uncontrolled way.<sup>42</sup> Weblog posts have to be created manually (although there are plug-ins that simplify the process) and it is up to the blogger to decide what kinds of posts to write and how many of them should be written.

In this section the activity of creating a post is viewed as an act of storing pieces of information in the weblog. I discuss what motivates my use of the weblog to store information, and what kind of information appears in weblog posts.

The use of weblogs to store information, as with any other information storage tools, is guided by multiple factors. An example of complex reasoning behind deciding which tools and strategies to use in such cases is provided by the study by Jones, Bruce & Dumais (2001), which examined what people did with web pages once they found them, and the factors that influence the choice of a particular strategy to do so. Using those factors my reasons for using weblog as a tool to store information are summarised in the *Table 3-2*.

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<sup>42</sup> While I use examples from other tools in the text, I do not aim to provide a systematic comparison of these to weblogs in this chapter. Weblogs as a PIM instrument are discussed in more detail in the discussion section.

Table 3-2 Using a weblog to store information

Factors (Jones et al., 2001)	My experiences in respect to using a weblog to store information
<b>Portability</b> <b>Number of access points</b>	I use multiple computers and I'm very likely to be online while working, so using weblog to organise my thinking resources fits my preferences for web-based applications. In this respect, a server-based weblog provides a much better alternative for organising my ideas than any desktop application, since I can access it when I'm online regardless of the location.
<b>Preservation of information in its current state.</b> <b>Currency of information</b> (having an up to date version of it)	To a degree, a weblog allows information to be preserved while providing access to an updated version at the same time. I usually quote the most relevant bits of external resources, so those quotes are preserved in their current state. The quotes are accompanied by a link to the original (if online), so an updated version is easily accessible. If the original disappears or is moved, I could use the quote to find it; (usually it's an updated location easily found with any search engine, otherwise I use Internet Archive Wayback machine <sup>43</sup> ). This approach served me well while working on this dissertation, when I needed to find current locations of weblog posts that had been moved. <sup>44</sup>
<b>Context</b> (remembering why it was saved) <b>Reminding</b>	Most of my weblog posts contain a commentary that provides a context for a specific thought or reference. I also use multiple strategies to establish connections between different. That context is enough to recall why a certain weblog post is there, and to remember to use it at a later stage (although for urgent tasks, a to-do list is more effective).
<b>Ease of integration into existing structures</b>	From one side, my weblog is a stand-alone tool that requires its own organisation and archiving. From another, it is essentially a set of web pages connected by links, with permalinks, metadata and underlying standards. It is an integral part of my online presence and references to it could be easily included in a variety of other documents or systems.
<b>Communication and information sharing</b>	Sharing information via a weblog is not a specific activity, but a by-product of writing. In most cases it's an advantage; however it limits potential uses of blogging when access to some of the weblog posts has to be restricted. A weblog is not good for a goal-driven communication to a select group of people, but it is a perfect instrument for non-intrusive sharing of ideas in cases where the potential audience is not well defined.
<b>Ease of maintenance</b>	In my case most maintenance problems are technology-related and they are the result of choosing a weblog platform that provides a high degree of freedom and flexibility.

As the table illustrates, a weblog provides a way to store information that fits multiple needs at the same time (preserving information vs. updates, keeping it for oneself vs. sharing), while with other tools there is often a need to choose one or another. In addition, it fits the way I work and provides personalised ways of dealing with the stored pieces of information.

Although the weblog is my preferred tool for organising information, not everything goes into it. For instance, my weblog used to include posts

<sup>43</sup> [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org)

<sup>44</sup> In most cases "moving" involved a new URL as a result of changing weblog domain name, weblog software or the way URLs are generated for a weblog post.

with links to external resources but no commentary, however I only used the weblog to include this information because there was no better alternative (since using browser-based bookmarking did not fit with working on different computers). As soon as I discovered *del.icio.us*, a web-based bookmarking service, most of the links moved there.<sup>45</sup>

With a few exceptions, the rest of my weblog posts are meaningful for me in some respect: they include quotes that resonate with my view on an issue, my commentary to someone else's words, descriptions of my own ideas or experiences. However, not all personally relevant information becomes documented in the weblog: given the public nature of my weblog, using it to describe experiences or observations that involve others is more challenging than doing that in a private collection. While in some cases I can do so in a generalised form, many such observations and experiences (together with associated insights) remain undocumented.<sup>46</sup>

Many of my weblog entries include *dormant information* (Boardman & Sasse, 2004): something I do not necessarily work on at the moment of writing, but expect to be useful in the future (e.g. an idea for some future work). In many cases these are ideas that could not be integrated into the current work or distract me from doing it:

Web quote 3-4  
[Time in blogging:  
 catching a moment  
 to write](#), Mathemagenic,  
 27 September 2004

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For me blogging is as much about **releasing ideas from my brain** as about reporting interesting news to others. I blog bits and pieces of ideas to get rid of them on the path to what I want/need/have to do in the moment.

For example, now I really want to work on a paper on personal KM, but I have all these ideas about time, weblog research and corporate blogging on the way. I don't want to lose them and I can't switch to something else when they are still on my mental radar (so much that I woke up with ideas for blog posts :), so I'm blogging instead of working on the paper. In this case blogging is pretty much similar to filing things into [43 folders](#) (see also: [Getting Things Done](#)) so they get out of your way :)

---

Blogging that includes *active information*, used for working on a task at hand (Boardman & Sasse, 2004), is different: such information is easier to use directly when needed, so blogging becomes an unnecessary extra effort. For example, while I blogged extensively on the issues related to the Methodology chapter,<sup>47</sup> the section on the quality criteria hardly has any coverage in the weblog. Since the need for it appeared only at the moment of working on the chapter, it was easier to write it directly there instead of blogging.

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<sup>45</sup> [Experiences of using del.icio.us](#) (Mathemagenic, 17 January 2004).

<sup>46</sup> This creates obvious challenges when a weblog is used to collect research data (see [Weblog as a research notebook \(3\): my own experiences](#), Mathemagenic, 7 April 2005).

<sup>47</sup> An archive of posts related to the Methodology chapter is available at [blog.mathemagenic.com/categories/phd/chapter2](http://blog.mathemagenic.com/categories/phd/chapter2)

Exceptions are those cases where the social nature of blogging plays a role; for instance those where the things that I actively work on might be of interest for others or those where I can benefit from feedback. For example, as soon as a draft version of the methodology chapter was completed, I posted parts of it in my weblog:

*Web quote 3-5*  
[Methodology chapter:](#)  
[posting parts online,](#)  
 Mathemagenic,  
 27 September 2007

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I'm almost finished with my methodology chapter. I haven't been blogging much while writing it, but it contains quite a few things where I either would be extremely happy with the feedback or I believe that some other "methodologically challenged" researcher could benefit from (without waiting for the whole dissertation to be published).

---

In sum, most of the weblog entries I create include:

- personally meaningful information;
- dormant information, which might be useful for me at some point in the future (the value of it often becomes visible in retrospect);
- information actively used at the moment of creating a blog post, in the cases when extra effort of sharing it in public is beneficial for myself or others.

### 3.3.2 Organisation

The ways people organise items in their collections depend on their personal preferences as well as systems they use. Organising strategy and effort are usually influenced by the likelihood of, and style of, retrieval, as well as a sense of ownership over information (Boardman & Sasse, 2004).

The simplest way of organising my weblog posts, chronological organisation, does not require any additional work: weblog entries are automatically associated with a date and time, which could be used for navigation or retrieval.

Another way to organise a weblog is to add references manually as self-linking or running titles. I include links to other weblog posts in my weblog, in order to connect related entries. In most cases those links are part of the text; however in some cases related posts are listed under "See also" or similar labels at the end of a post. An example of scale and frequency of self-linking in my weblog is available in the next chapter (last profile in *Figure 4-6*).

Running titles, where part of one post heading is repeated in another post, to make clear that there is a connection, are used for reporting from an event (e.g. while writing about a conference I often start post titles with the conference name), or for a series of weblog posts on a topic, either intentionally broken into smaller interconnected pieces or emerging as a result of aggregating feedback and follow-up thinking. Posts connected by running titles are usually written consecutively or with just a few non-

*Web quote 3-6*  
Selection of weblog  
titles from April 2005,  
Mathemagenic

connected posts in between. A selection of the titles of my weblog posts in April 2005 provides an example:

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20 April	<a href="#">Being researched...</a>
	<a href="#">Networked identity</a>
21 April	<a href="#">BlogWalk 7: Mechelen, Belgium</a>
	<a href="#">Networked identity: links, relations and control</a>
23 April	<a href="#">On the road again...</a>
25 April	<a href="#">Social Computing Symposium: just before</a>
	<a href="#">Social Computing Symposium: wiki, irc, blogs...</a>
26 April	<a href="#">Social computing symposium: community morning</a>
	<a href="#">Social computing symposium: BlogTrace demo</a>
29 April	<a href="#">Hosting imaginary friends</a>

---

More advanced forms of organising weblog posts include categorising them with additional metadata, which should be supported by weblog software. In my weblog, categories and tags are used for this purpose.

Categories are a built-in feature of the weblog software I use: a new post could be assigned to one or several categories and then placed into category-specific archives and RSS feeds. In the beginning I used them to categorise weblog posts by topic, but eventually stopped doing so: placing an entry into a category would create multiples of it in the archives, creating different online copies of the same post and potentially causing confusion when cross-linking. Since this functionality has not been actively employed in my blogging process, I used it for coding weblog entries for this study.

In contrast, using tags is an essential part of my blogging practice. I use liveTopics,<sup>48</sup> an add-on that allows tagging any weblog post. Tagging involves assigning a topic, which is essentially a combination of words of my choice, to a post. Indexes are then generated per tag, and a list of recent and most popular tags is shown.<sup>49</sup> In addition there is an interface for managing tags (e.g. deleting or renaming tags and converting existing categories into tags). Below is an overview of the hundred most used tags for my weblog and the number of posts for each at the moment of this study.

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<sup>48</sup> The development of the tool has been discontinued several years ago. This was one of the reasons to move weblog to another platform at the moment of doing this study; now tagging works slightly different technically, but my uses of it stay the same.

<sup>49</sup> [blog.mathemagenic.com/allTopics.html](http://blog.mathemagenic.com/allTopics.html)

Web quote 3-7  
[Weblog posts by topic.](#)  
 Mathemagenic

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blog research (184) – PhD (133) – blogs in business (100) – life (92) – knowledge networker (79) – KM (72) – methodology (59) – personal knowledge management (57) – **blog ecosystem (49)** – **communities (48)** – BlogTalk (48) – blogging conversations (48) – travel (47) – knowledge mapping (46) – blog writing (43) – blog reading (43) – learning informal (41) – blogs (39) – **blog communities (39)** – KM&learning (38) – e-learning (37) – blogging tools (37) – Radio (32) – BlogWalk (32) – blog new (32) – **networking (31)** – Microsoft (31) – writing (29) – Quaerere (29) – learning event (29) – transparency (25) – papers (24) – knowledge representations (24) – KMSS (24) – BlogTalk paper (24) – technology adoption (23) – passion (22) – knowledge sharing (22) – ethnography (22) – blogs and learning (22) – metaphors (21) – learning (21) – fun (21) – innovation (20) – **blog networking (20)** – no work-life balance (19) – cross-cultural (18) – RSS (17) – research (17) – meta-learning (17) – bloggers (17) – Russia (16) – motivation (16) – I-KNOW (16) – ontologies (15) – learning facilitation (15) – **community straddling (15)** – change (15) – wiki (14) – KM Europe (14) – blogs stickiness (14) – blogging as research (14) – synchronicity (13) – **social network mapping (13)** – liveTopics (13) – blogs in research (13) – better blogging (13) – apprenticeship (13) – actionable sense (13) – parenting (12) – leadership (12) – emergence (12) – usability (11) – tools (11) – definitions (11) – k-collector (10) – AOIR (10) – action research (10) – reading (9) – KnowledgeBoard (9) – introducing blogs (9) – context (9) – city (9) – asking questions (9) – **lurking (8)** – face-to-face time (8) – BlogTrace (8) – blog research tools (8) – RUSMECO (7) – research and practice (7) – public vs. private (7) – PhD chapters (7) – infoOverload (7) – GTD (7) – flow (7) – **community vs. individual (7)** – time (6) – Seattle (6) – Reboot (6) – OKLC (6)

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These tags are not systematic: some refer to events (BlogWalk), organisations (Microsoft), projects (RUSMECO) or products (liveTopics); others to the type of thing discussed in a post (papers, definitions), high-level categories (PhD or life) or specific topics. Topical tags are not necessarily exclusive: for example, those indicated in bold all refer to the broader theme of *relations* and would be connected in a more formal classification (e.g. *blog communities* represent specific types of *communities*, while *lurking* and *community straddling* are activities in a community). Some of the tags are not likely to make sense to an outsider: *knowledge mapping*, for example, refers to weblog entries on various topics that were associated with one of the tasks in a project I was involved in.

Tagging provides a way to add personally meaningful metadata to my posts without restricting which tags should be used or how many of them are assigned. It is usually an ad-hoc process: when writing a blog post I either select relevant tags from the list or create a new one. This way I can tailor the organisation of posts to suit my personal working practices.

The multiple ways to organise content in the weblog allow great flexibility and provide an opportunity to combine the benefits of alternative strategies to organise information, *piling* and *filing* (Whittaker & Hirschberg, 2001). New items could be put into piles without thinking much about

how they relate, but also "filed" together when the nature of connection between items is clear.

### 3.3.3 Maintenance

PIM studies (e.g. Barreau, 1995; Boardman & Sasse, 2004) suggest that once collections are created, little effort is spent in maintaining them (e.g. re-categorising items, deleting old items). Maintenance is usually restricted to occasional spring-cleaning or major changes in life/work, for example a new job (Boardman & Sasse, 2004). Those observations are true for my weblog: the biggest reorganisations of my weblog posts are either technology- or work-related. The first includes changing internal links after moving to another domain and converting categories into tags when tag support for my weblog software became available, while the second includes introducing new categories and coding archived posts while working on this study.

However, at a more granular level, metadata maintenance is a constant process that accompanies weblog writing. When retrieving an archived post to support writing a new one, I often add missing metadata and sometimes a link to a follow-up post.

In the case of my weblog, maintenance usually does not involve deleting or relocating weblog entries, since those actions might have an impact on any webpages that link to those entries, both my own internal links and external links from other sites. One exception is the removal of posts in specialised categories (unfinished posts and automatically included del.icio.us links) while coding archived entries and preparing the weblog for a migration to a new server during this study.

### 3.3.4 Retrieval of items for reuse

In addition to following links between posts, a weblog provides multiple ways to retrieve old posts. Compared to other tools I use to organise information,<sup>50</sup> a weblog provides the most flexible and efficient way of retrieving old entries:

*Web quote 3-8*  
[How do I search my weblog?](#)  
 Mathemagenic, 22 July 2003

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Just a brief thoughts about my ways of finding something in my blog:

- If it was recently I scroll
  - If I remember the date and it's not too far from now, I use calendar
  - If I know the words I used before I use Google search on my site
  - If I can recall it by seeing its title I use [All posts by title](#) archive
  - If I can recall associated theme I use [liveTopics](#) (I don't use categories anymore because they [break RSS feeds](#))
- 

<sup>50</sup> Multiple email clients, file system, collaborative bookmarking and photosharing services, paper archives, etc.



Similar to the preferences of others retrieving items from their own collections (Barreau & Nardi, 1995; Boardman & Sasse, 2004), I do not use search frequently, but combine browsing with sorting or scanning of weblog posts based on their metadata.

The practice of looking for related entries in my weblog became an important part of my work (described in more detail in section 3.4.3). I use my weblog archives regularly, not only when working on a specific task (for example, looking for an input or a reference when working on a paper), but also for finding broader patterns. Unfortunately, while tools to spot trends across weblogs do exist, there are not many ways to support discovering personally meaningful patterns in a single weblog. Working on this chapter provides an example: despite having access to weblog analysis tools as part of my work on mapping knowledge flows in weblogs (see the next chapter), sorting printed weblog posts was more beneficial for analysing my own blogging practices.

### 3.3.5 Summary

This section uses insights from the research on personal information management to explore my practices with respect to using my weblog as a personal knowledge base using four PIM activities (Barreau, 1995). I create weblog posts to store personally meaningful information that either does not fit into current work activities (dormant information) or benefits from sharing it with others (e.g. by receiving feedback that could be incorporated into a paper I work on). This information is organised in multiple ways: via automatic chronological archives, links between posts, use of running titles, categories or tags; this organisation is ad-hoc rather than pre-planned. The effort put into organising information is paid back, because it provides multiple ways of retrieving it, which results in frequent use of weblog archives when working on a task, as well as opportunities to reflect on emerging patterns in retrospect. Except for specific occasions, such as coding weblog entries for this study or moving to another platform, maintenance of the meta-data associated with weblog entries is an on-going process integrated with regular use of the weblog.

For me, the weblog is a flexible tool that addresses my information management needs in a way that fits personal preferences (e.g. for web-based applications or ad-hoc tagging). Being a web-based instrument, the weblog allows easy access to the stored information from multiple computers, keeping relevant external information with personally meaningful context and links to the originals, as well as sharing information with others in a non-intrusive way.

In sum, the weblog provides me with a space to create a repository of insights that otherwise would be scattered across different spaces or not

documented at all. Once this information has been captured and organised, it becomes useful: in the following section I discuss in more detail how it contributes to my work.

### 3.4 Results: from early insights to a dissertation

In my view, knowledge work is not a straight-forward process: parts of it are relatively well-defined tasks with deadlines and specific outcomes, but at the same time one might also be preparing for future work – sensing interesting topics to explore, building background knowledge, planning what will turn into a well-defined task later.

This section describes the results of the study with respect to my practices of using a weblog to support the process of developing ideas from early insights to this dissertation. It is structured along three phases in the process of idea development, defined as a result of a bottom-up process of grouping and organising coded entries of my weblog: awareness and articulation; sense-making; and turning ideas into a product. I start this section with an example of idea development in my weblog, which I use to define three phases of the process. Then an in-depth exploration of blogging practices is presented for each of them.

#### 3.4.1 An example: thinking about weblog research ethics

In the process of writing this chapter I found that it was easier to tell how ideas grow in the weblog than to show it. While regular blog readers are likely to recognise recurring themes and notice the evolution of thought, references to such themes are scattered throughout the text and often implicit. In addition, the process of idea development is often prompted or shaped in other ways by the events that are not necessarily reflected in the weblog. In order to provide more insight into the process, I reconstructed it for one of the topics covered in the previous chapter: ethical choices in weblog research. The reconstruction below is a story that summarises relevant weblog posts (marked with letters), and documents the events that shaped those.

*Web quote 3-9*  
Developing ideas in  
respect to ethical  
choices in weblog  
research

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**Spring 2004.** It's still early in my PhD research and I have not given much thought to the ethical questions around it. What I have done so far was relatively unproblematic: invite people to participate and anonymise the responses; no need to deal with formal requirements for an informed consent.

I'm working on a paper that uses conversation from my own weblog community as an example (de Moor & Efimova, 2004; a follow-up research is published as Efimova & de Moor, 2005, and reported in the Chapter 4), and I realise that my previous research experiences do not provide any guidelines about using and quoting publicly available weblog data in a publication.

(A) 27 April 2004 [Weblog research ethics](#)

- In this post I do not mention the paper, but reflect on the dilemmas I face working on it, asking "what would you do when using quotes or stories from public weblogs as examples in your research?" that breaks down into three questions:
  - Do you inform people that you study them?
  - Do you quote anonymously or with attribution?
  - Do you ask for permission?
- I ask for a feedback and also inform the readers, "Once you are reading this post you are somehow on my radar – beware, I may be studying your weblog."

Several people leave comments to the post or provide input in their weblogs while linking back.

(B) 29 April 2004 [Weblog research ethics \(2\)](#)

- I summarise the responses:
  - There are different opinions about informing the participants and asking for permission; the main criterion used is whether weblogs could be considered a publication and treated as such.
  - In respect to quoting: distinction between weblog as a data source and as an information source (similar to any other publication) and protecting privacy and recognising the authorship as a researcher responsibilities.
- I also hint about my feelings in respect to a suggestion of not citing weblogs as a supporting source, by articulating that most of my own learning comes from weblogs and not academic publications.

The discussion continues in several weblogs.

(C) 16 May 2004 [Weblog research ethics \(3\)](#)

- This post includes links to some of the follow-up discussion, examples of choices by others, and a reference to the ethics guidelines of the Association of Internet Research.

**Summer-Autumn 2004.** I make choices for the paper and move on. After seeing references to the Association of Internet Research (AoIR) in different contexts I arrange to attend its annual conference.

(D) 18 September 2004 [AOIR 5.0. Workshop on qualitative research](#)

- This post includes notes from the workshop on multiple topics. I also realise that "although I do internet research, this is not (yet?) my scientific community – unfamiliar names, methods, frames of reference. ... It feels like discovering the whole new world."
- My notes in respect to the ethical issues show that I am discovering the complexity of the subject; for example, realising that "private spaces in public" should not be treated as a publication, even if the format suggests so.

**Spring 2005.** I read a lot on ethnography and write many posts attempting to make sense of the role blogging plays in my research.

(E) 4 May 2005. [Being researched \(2\)](#)

- This is a follow-up on another post where I report on discovering weblogs of students who were studying me as part of their assignment. I reflect on the irony of being researcher who is researched and my uneasy feelings on discovering something that was supposed to be private. I relate my experience to the issues of "private spaces in public".

**Summer 2005.** I continue my exploration of the methodological challenges that arise at an intersection between blogging and research, giving a talk about the topic at a research institute and writing a proposal for the next AoIR conference. A study of weblogs in Microsoft that I carried out from July to September provides another opportunity to make ethical choices. In October I present my work at the AoIR conference and participate in a workshop on ethics of online research, where I pick up additional themes and a few references.

(F) 12 October 2005 [Good research...](#)

- I write about being "in the middle of post-AOIR thinking on research methodologies, ethics and researcher's responsibilities", but only share a quote from the paper on ethics by Annette Markham (2006).

(G) 19 October 2005 [On the role of theory, researcher accountability and translation](#)

- This is a follow-up on an earlier post on the role of the theory in research: I pick up a reader comment to articulate my beliefs about the researcher accountability, adding in a footnote, "Heavily influenced by conversations at AOIR."

**Spring-summer 2006.** After disengaging from PhD work for a while due to other obligations, I work on multiple versions of the paper that presents the Microsoft study results (Efimova & Grudin, 2007, also reported in the Chapter 6). There I make an implicit choice not to create an anonymised persona for each respondent that has to be justified; as an input I read a collection of essays on the politics of ethnography (Brettell, 1993) mentioned at an AoIR ethics workshop.

(H) 11 July 2006 [When they read what we write: respondent identification](#)

- I bring together my experiences as a participant in someone else's research and as a researcher (Microsoft study) to suggest that, "Sometimes you don't need a name to recognise that the story told in the research report is associated with a specific person." I argue that person-centric narratives of weblogs make this situation very likely and relate it to my choice of not creating anonymised personas.
- I recommend Brettell (1993) for an in-depth reading on the topic and promise to "*blog it one day*".

**Summer 2007.** After my maternity leave I get into the final stage of the research, where the work done so far should be integrated into the dissertation.

(I) 7 June 2007 [Bibliography conventions when writing on weblogs](#)

- I use the examples from other publications to discuss the practical issues of citing weblogs in the dissertation: distinguishing between different types of citations (weblog as a data source vs. as a reference) via citation placement and formatting.

**Summer-autumn 2007.** I work on the methodology chapter. Although I post sections of the draft to my weblog, the section on ethics doesn't appear there. This is partly because it heavily uses the insights already covered in the weblog, but also because I'm not happy with the way they are integrated.

**Summer 2008.** While working on this example, I get a better idea of what needs to be changed in the ethics section and write on Twitter: "Wanted to use a section from the Methodology chapter to illustrate something else. Now rewriting it." At the same time I work on a paper, on my choices for integrating blogging in the dissertation text, that has a section on ethical choices of representing

bloggers (Efimova, 2008). While working on the paper I reread some of the essays on the politics of ethnography.

(J) 3 September 2008 [Bloggers as public intellectuals and writing about them in a research report](#)

- I blog on the parallels between the ethical challenges of presenting the results of a study of academics in one of the essays (Sheehan, 1993) and those that I face in my own work. The quotes I include, and the discussion of them, are important for my thinking on the issue, but they are tangential to the paper.

**September 2008.** As soon as I finish the paper I go back to the Methodology chapter and reuse the paper text to rewrite the section on ethics, now close to its final version.

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Most of the ethical issues discussed in the weblog posts in the example above could be found in the dissertation text. The broader themes of researcher accountability, relations between researcher and study participants, and choices regarding representing bloggers in writing, appear in various sections of the Methodology chapter. The discussion of specific ethical questions appears in the section on ethics. It cites all academic publications mentioned in the weblog posts; the text of the post on researcher accountability is cited (post G), while two others (H, J) are paraphrased and referred to.

Although conversations and personal experiences reported in the example were important in the process of developing my understanding of ethical issues in this research, discussing it in the dissertation provides a polished view of the choices, omitting most of the details of the process of getting there. While similar connections between the weblog and the dissertation text would be visible for many other topics covered in the dissertation, understanding the process that connects the two requires more explanation. In this chapter I distinguish three phases.

The first phase is *awareness and articulation*. This is the moment when a certain idea (or an aspect of it) first comes onto my radar, either brought to me by others or articulated as a result of reflecting on my own experiences or choices. I join those two as they are often interrelated. Personal experiences shape what I pay attention to in interactions with other people, while articulation of my own thoughts is often prompted by events or conversations that involve others. In the story above, examples of awareness and articulation include those where I articulate my own questions about the ethics of weblog research (e.g. post A) or learn about important choices from others (e.g. those about the broader issues of researcher accountability in posts F and G).

Once ideas appear on my mental radar, they go through a *sense-making* phase: discovering different aspects of an idea, the meaning of it to me and its connections with other ideas. For example, weblog posts B, E and H

include an elaboration on specific aspects of weblog research ethics and connect those to my personal experiences.

Finally, there is a moment where ideas are put to work and the process of *turning them into specific products* is started. In my case it is doing research and reporting about it, usually in the form of an academic publication. In the example above, this phase is more visible from the commentary I added than it is from the weblog posts themselves, although the strong focus on "how do I cite weblogs" (post I) hints that at that moment the choices in respect to attributing other bloggers were made and I was working on figuring out practicalities of doing that in a dissertation.

These phases do not have clear boundaries between them. While being engaged in a sense-making process around an idea, I may become aware of, or articulate, new aspects of it; working on making an idea part of a product often prompts additional rounds of sense-making. However, the distinction is useful to look at the specific role that blogging plays in the process. The following sections discuss in depth how exactly blogging contributes during each of the three phases.

### 3.4.2 Awareness and articulation

Before ideas grow and mature they are vulnerable: it is not necessarily clear why a particular topic is worth exploring. It is often difficult to relate it to the work one is doing at the moment and, as a result to find time for it. Although the image associated with doing research is often one of endless exploration, the reality is different: there are topical, political and financial limitations, as well as approaching deadlines. (This is especially true when working on shorter-term applied research projects, such as those that accompanied my PhD work most of the time.) In this context, blogging can serve as a way to create a space for investing in future ideas, even when under a pressure of current work:

*Web quote 3-10*  
[Blogging as creating  
 space for important.](#)  
 Mathemagenic,  
 21 February 2005

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[...] It's a long time since I think about blogging in a frame of [urgent/important matrix](#) by [Stephen Covey](#). It's easy to be "too busy" to work on important things when everyday urgent stuff piles up and requires its share of attention. In this case blogging creates a legitimate space for important.

There are two sides of it, reading and writing.

Reading weblogs as a way for prevention, preparation, relation and expertise building. It's like everyday exercise to stay fit – knowing what is going on, what are the trends, who are the people. It may feel as not very important in everyday scale, but every time when I face a new big challenge I appreciate it – like appreciating everyday exercises and being fit if time comes to run for your life.

Reading is also about taking time to develop ideas (I often think of "being pregnant with ideas" :), having time to explore, bit by bit, creating a space for emergent connections and associations. This is where writing comes into play as well.

For me writing is about catching ideas on the fly, growing and connecting. (Here I can go into a body of research on how artefacts support thinking and knowledge creation, but I wouldn't :) Somehow the process of articulation is largely the process of idea development as well. Like a sculpture that exists only in a head of sculptor and needs to be moulded into physical shape to get a life, writing gives shape and life to fuzzy ideas in my head.

Still, reading and writing are very vulnerable. Unless you are at the "almost final product" stage, they are difficult to put in a list of deliverables and deadlines. They are rather small things that need everyday bit of attention, like everyday watering of a plant that would bring you fruits one day. Not urgent, but very important.

This is where blogging helps. It creates a space for those small activities. Through fun of "distraction" between other tasks to read weblogs, urge of writing a small bit of idea before it's lost in a middle of deadline, pressure and pleasure of knowing that there is an audience, others who may enjoy reading... Because it's so fun I steal time from urgent things to blog, but as a result I create a space for important, so ideas have a safe place to grow before they are big enough to become urgent in a list of all kinds of deadlines.

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For me, the weblog provides two essential ingredients that allow me to invest in future ideas: an instrument that fits the way I work, and a motivation to take time for it. While many professionals use their private notebooks for this purpose, I could never find enough motivation and discipline to make notes on my own ideas that would go further than just a few keywords or a drawing. Blogging, providing a low threshold to write, also gives me an extra motivation to write properly: knowing that my writing is public helps me to go beyond "just a few keywords" and to write in full sentences, structure an argument so others can understand it, and provide some contextual information.

Compared to writing a document, which has a particular purpose and audience in mind (e.g. an academic article or a PhD dissertation), weblog writing requires less mental restrictions around what is appropriate. It is also easy to write a couple of paragraphs that do not necessarily connect to anything (yet), so a weblog can capture many seemingly random notes, providing fertile soil for unexpected ideas.

### 3.4.3 Sense-making

As with any writing, blogging is not simply formulating in words an idea already developed in one's mind. It is also about connecting, developing and redefining half-baked ideas. When writing, I often go through the weblog archives to explore connections with what is already there. Reading and rereading what I wrote before shapes and changes what I'm about to write: I often find something unexpected or see patterns obvious only in retrospect.

Andy Clark (1998, pp. 171-172) compares this process to the growth of mangrove forests, where the trees come before the land:

*It is natural to suppose that words are always rooted in the fertile soil of pre-existing thoughts. But sometimes, at least, the influence seems to run in the other direction. [...] By writing down our ideas we generate a trace in a format which opens up a range of new possibilities. We can then inspect and re-inspect the same ideas, coming at them from many different angles and in many different frames of mind. We can hold the original ideas steady so that we may judge them, and safely experiment with subtle alterations. We can store them in ways which allow us to compare and combine them with other complexes of ideas in ways which would quickly defeat the un-augmented imagination. In these ways [...] the real properties of physical text transform the space of possible thoughts.*

Writing is not the only way a weblog can help make sense of one's ideas and grow them. For me there are two other components in this process: instruments that the weblog provides to connect my ideas, and the weblog's public nature. Tagging, for example, allows gathering ideas into digital "piles" long before I am able to explain why they belong together: I simply choose a new tag knowing that I don't have to explain it to anyone and that I can always change it in the future. Playing with different ways to connect posts in a weblog (section 3.3.2) is very similar to sorting and coding research data to see what comes out of it.

Sharing half-baked ideas in public also creates an opportunity for feedback. Over time I have learnt not to count on it, as it is difficult to predict whether anyone will comment and what exactly might catch their attention. However, I have also learnt to appreciate unexpected turns in my own thinking triggered by the feedback of others:

Web quote 3-11  
[Refactoring in  
 the backstage](#),  
 Mathemagenic,  
 20 December 2004

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Last Friday I was feeling a bit guilty when I [blogged](#) instead of finishing the report I was supposed to finish [...].

Now, getting online after an offline weekend and discovering [thoughtful comments](#) from close colleagues and distant readers, I don't have any traces of that guilty feeling. Once more I feel how rewarding sharing your uncertainties with others could be... It will take time to digest comments and even more time to react, since urgent is still there ready to claim time...

And, on the meta level, this reminds me of a metaphor of [Giuseppe Granieri](#) that [Riccardo brings](#) commenting on my post about [finding time to blog](#):

Lilia refers to blogging as a new, value adding, way to do things: thus it becomes just a different tool to organize your thoughts, daylife, research, whatever. [...]

Giuseppe instead chose to refer to blogging as a "batch" process, building up and refactoring in the backstage of our mind 24 hours a day, and requiring "practically" just those few seconds needed to actually write down the post.



I guess it's more: when you blog something you may trigger others' thinking on the issue, so then your own "refactoring in the backstage" gets connected with ideas of others, making the whole process more powerful and more rewarding.

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Combined, reading and writing, organising my own ideas, and the power of the feedback that comes from doing it in public, result in developing sense-making practices that might not be that far from the way academic research is done:

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*Web quote 3-12* [PhD: experiential research and everyday grounded theory](#), Mathemagenic, 16 May 2004

My main method of studying weblogs is not scientific at all. I call it "**everyday grounded theory**" (more on [grounded theory](#)):

- I read weblogs from my usual reading list and spot interesting themes.
- I start collecting examples or illustrations of these themes. Now I mainly use [del.icio.us](#) to collect relevant pieces and "code" them. For example, I pick up posts that indicate something about [blog writing](#) or [blog reading](#).
- I think of interpretations and connections between themes. Usually I think in public, so my interpretations end up as posts in my weblog.
- Then collaborative part comes in. My interpretations are discussed (or not) and developed by others around me. They evolve and mature.
- Once in a while I pick up the matured ones and I write a paper pretending to be a researcher :)

Of course I use more "traditional" data collection methods (e.g. interviews) as well, but sometimes I feel that this is just to confirm/clarify/develop ideas that I've got from my "everyday grounded theory".

One thing that I like about my "everyday grounded theory" is that it's effortless. Not that I don't spend time doing it, but I don't do that on purpose. It's so much part of my everyday reading/thinking/writing routines that it doesn't feel like work. I guess if I would structure it just a bit more (select proper sample, select more objective set of themes and not only those that interest me, clarify intermediate results of each iteration, etc.) it would be "scientific" enough to present in papers. But I guess once I do it it will become "not so natural" and embedded anymore, so I'll end up putting much less effort into it. I think Jill is right, [blogging is researching](#), but we have to find a way to make it rigorous enough to pass in the academic world...

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### 3.4.4 Turning into products

My first study of weblogs (Efimova, 2003, also reported in section 1.1.2) was an experiment. I used my weblog heavily while working on it: thinking aloud on the design choices, distributing the questionnaire, drafting parts, reporting on the data analysis and discussing the conclusions.<sup>51</sup> Reflecting on it in retrospect I realised how uncommon this degree of using a weblog while doing research was for myself and others:

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<sup>51</sup> See [Blogs: the stickiness factor – story](#) for an overview; some reflections on the process are at [Why weblogs are rarely used to document research?](#), [Why weblogs are rarely used to document research \(2\)](#) (Mathemagenic, 16 April 2003).

*Web quote 3-13*  
[Why weblogs are rarely used to document research?](#)  
 Mathemagenic,  
 16 April 2003

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I know that many people in my subscription list do research (as part of their job), but I don't see many of them explicitly blogging about it. Reading their blogs I get a feeling of a situation similar to my own. I'm blogging bits and pieces only loosely connected to my main "research job" and you probably can't explain what I'm doing in my PhD from reading my weblog.

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While blogging can support the early stages of developing an idea, it is not necessarily the best tool when it comes to planning, performing or documenting specific tasks (i.e. doing research and reporting about it in my case). Those tasks might be confidential or embedded in a context that is difficult to explain to weblog readers; there might be better tools to work on those tasks (e.g. a word processor to write a document to be published offline), and finally, because documenting a task in a weblog as well as doing it requires an extra effort.

Although my weblog supports many activities that are part of my work, in most cases it is only indirectly used to support my primary tasks, doing research and reporting about it.<sup>52</sup> In this section I explore the role of blogging in respect to producing a document, since this task is more common for different types of knowledge work.

As discussed in the previous two sections my weblog provides a space to grow and develop my ideas. At a certain moment it becomes clear how different pieces are connected into a whole. However, those pieces are fragmented notes on thinking in progress and making "the whole" visible for others still takes time and effort:

*Web quote 3-14*  
[The power of visible loose ends,](#)  
 Mathemagenic,  
 23 November 2003

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I guess this is something my weblog has done for me: revealing a need to pull all the loose ends into a bigger canvas, to connect bits of ideas and to work them out. This bigger canvas requires time and focus, it needs more than a few minutes in between to write to my weblog. It calls for recognising that is really important and for giving it enough energy to grow. Setting priorities, making choices and time management.

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For me, blogging makes the "loose ends" visible and creates a need to work on a bigger whole. In the context of my work, this is likely to be an idea for research or a publication to work on.

Like many other writers, when it is time to work on a publication I often struggle to start writing, dealing with the "blank page" problem. To overcome this problem many books on writing recommend to start writing without much thought about the quality of it ("shitty first drafts" as Anne Lamott calls it (1995, p.21)). While writing "at least something", knowing that it is not likely to end up in a final document, might be a challenge, a weblog provides a legitimate space for it. A piece that does not fit into a publication might still have a place there, as a documentation

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<sup>52</sup> As section 2.3 Illustrates, blogging is an integral part of doing research for this dissertation. However, it plays a supportive rather than primary role.

of one's thinking, or since it might be of interest to others, even out of its immediate context:

*Web quote 3-15*  
[PhD blogging and paper writing](#), Mathemagenic,  
 23 April 2004

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[Blogging] helps starting. When I work on a paper I often write posts related to it: informal notes that later will turn into formal paragraphs, side track ideas, paper summaries or just associations. Next to a good feeling of producing at least something it get's me into a writing mode: switching from blogging to paper writing is much easier then starting directly.

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Alternatively, I start writing by going through my weblog archives to identify previously written weblog posts that might be reused. Even if those weblog posts cannot be included directly in the final work, they often provide ideas on how to structure the arguments, or could be used as a draft to be revised later. In one of my papers I describe an instance of this process: "Adding a few weblog posts to the outline with jotted arguments makes a trick: it is 7 pages now – something that feels as an achievement" (Efimova, 2006).

Often finding a way to organise arguments in a bigger document, such as a dissertation, requires multiple attempts and involves, for example, drafts reviewed by peers or presenting work-in-progress on various occasions (Kamler & Thomson, 2006). In that respect a weblog offers an opportunity to explore ways to structure arguments at a micro-level, as it provides an audience to present them to.

Posting parts of a document-in-progress provides an additional benefit in that readers' feedback may be gained, and that could be incorporated in the final version and improve its quality. The weblog is also useful for finding people who are interested in reviewing the document as a whole (and also providing emotional support):

*Web quote 3-16*  
[Blogging and paper writing](#), Mathemagenic,  
 3 October 2004

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Last week I had a crazy idea of finishing a paper earlier than expected...

[...] I had lots of discussions with colleagues [...] on the earlier versions of the paper and was in a middle of reworking it... What I needed most on Friday was a "fresh eye" view on it as well as English check :)

So after hesitating a bit I ended up asking for help in my [PhD crisis post](#) (which probably made it more dramatic as the crisis has not much to do with the paper :)

I didn't expect to receive so much support... For me it was more than offers to review the paper, but more of emotional "hang in there" that make going through difficult times much easier... So, thanks a lot for all who reacted!

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Finally, a weblog could be useful to notify potential readers when the paper is finished, and to share it with others. While a formal publication usually takes a lot of time and is not necessarily accessible to everyone who might be interested, weblogs not only provide a direct way to reach some of

the readers, but also a possibility for viral recommendation of the work via other weblogs.

### 3.4.5 Summary

This section describes my practices of using the weblog to develop ideas for this dissertation.

Since writing a weblog post does not require much effort, it could often be fitted into working on something else, providing a low-key way to articulate emerging insights and "park" them somewhere until the moment they are needed. Reading other people's weblogs and engaging in conversations with them provides a way to become aware of issues and themes that might be useful later on. Over time, ideas on a topic accumulate and connections between them become clearer. Browsing through archives when writing a new post, multiple ways to organise posts, as well as the feedback that comes from the readers, turns blogging into a set of sense-making practices that I call "everyday grounded theory".

While in my case using the weblog to work directly on the core tasks, doing research and reporting about it, is an exception rather than a rule, blogging does support those indirectly. In the case of research writing, it not only creates the need to connect multiple fragments into a bigger whole, but also helps with working on it, turning ideas into a product. The text of relevant older posts can provide an inspiration or be reused in a document. Writing a new weblog post at this stage can facilitate getting into a writing flow or provide a way to structure an argument before it becomes part of a final product. The readers' feedback on work-in-progress helps to strengthen it. When a document is finished, a weblog provides an additional channel to distribute the work.

Although the choices of what and when to write are my own, the public nature of the weblog results in additional motivation to document emergent ideas and to put more effort into clarifying them for others, and a legitimate place to share thinking in progress. Interaction with others helps to make sense of emergent insights and to convert them into a product. The following section explores in more detail how this process is influenced by multiple contexts.

### 3.5 Results: dealing with challenges around blogging

My blogging practices did not develop in a vacuum: they were shaped by my personal circumstances and choices, as well as my position in respect to the weblog audiences, professional network, academic culture and the realities of my immediate working environment. This section discusses the results of the study with respect to dealing with challenges that arise as a result of blogging in this particular context. It is structured around the themes that emerged when I sorted weblog entries related to this chapter: integration between blogging and work, broken blogging routines, finding a balance between my own interests and those of others, and issues of weblog content attribution and ownership.

#### 3.5.1 Integrating with work

While blogging does not replace the core tasks of my work, doing research and reporting about it, it does change the way work is done, by transforming many of the activities that support those tasks:

*Web quote 3-17*  
[Blogging as breathing or how to find time for blogging?](#)  
 Mathemagenic,  
 03 December 2004

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From [Ton's write-up](#) of [BlogWalk in Umea](#):

[...] Reading blogs, writing to reflect and digest, writing to collect and gather, and sharing along different channels (blog, wiki, company portal, e-mails, etc.) is just the way how I collect and process my personal information flow. Asking me how much time I spend blogging, is treating blogging as an additional activity in my life (which it was at first), and feels to me like asking how much of my time I spend breathing.

My answers to this question are pretty similar: I can afford spending quite a lot of time blogging only because it's so integrated with my regular activities that it's not an add-on anymore.

A brief brainstorm of the role blogging plays in my own work:

- professional awareness
  - I read weblogs instead of reading mailing lists and searching professional web-sites to stay updated with news and trends
- work-related search
  - saving time for searching as in many cases I come across papers/information I need for my work via weblogs and blog/bookmark it
  - social search – very often I know whom to ask for a specific information/advice
- networking
  - reading weblogs is a low-cost way to stay in touch with others (if they have weblogs :)
  - writing my own weblog exposes my own work and expertise, so it's easier to establish contacts
  - better use of f2f time as with bloggers there is no need for updates on each other news

- conversations
    - getting help or answers fast without being too intrusive
    - feedback on ideas and early drafts
    - development of ideas in a community (actually: in different communities :)
  - research
    - data collection, interpretation and presentation (e.g. as [everyday grounded theory](#))
      - reading other weblogs and being a blogger are part of my data collection instruments
      - I use my weblog to test my interpretations and to get a feedback on ways of presenting some pieces of research
    - weblog as a research notebook
      - keeping notes on reading, research progress, ideas, publications
      - organising notes into themes to support thinking and future retrieval
    - writing
      - low-threshold [space to start writing](#) that helps to start small when working on large pieces (like papers or PhD as a whole)
      - space to get an early (or [urgent](#) :) feedback on writing
    - getting [emotional support](#)
- 

While in the beginning blogging was separate from my work, discovering how useful it could be in supporting work-related activities made me look for ways to make it more legitimate; for example, by showing the positive impact of blogging on my work, to justify spending working hours blogging or as an extra point during an appraisal.

This integration resulted not only in a legitimate blogging during office hours, but also eventually, in blogging, as well as conversations and networking that came from it, becoming an integral part of my work, influencing the topics chosen for a study and methods used in a research process.<sup>53</sup> This produced a number of effects, as diverse as having a reference to the weblog on my business card, receiving an Edublog Award in 2004 for the best research-based weblog,<sup>54</sup> and an internship at Microsoft that started from a comment on one of my weblog posts.

However, officially blogging about work-related issues also created the need to navigate various work-related tensions, such as, for example, dealing with blurred boundaries of blog content ownership (see 3.5.4) or potential problems with blind peer reviews as a result of exposing work in progress

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<sup>53</sup> For an extended discussion see [Researching blogs and blogging research: synergies of colliding worlds](#) (Mathemagenic, 21 June 2005) and section 2.3 of this dissertation.

<sup>54</sup> [Edublog Awards: results](#) (Mathemagenic, 13 December 2004).

to those who might be the best experts to judge it.<sup>55</sup> It also resulted in challenges dealing with the multiple paths of getting ideas for my own work or its evaluation:

*Web quote 3-18*  
[Challenged hierarchies](#),  
 Mathemagenic,  
 26 November 2006

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[...] I have some examples ([here](#)) of how external blogs influence the hierarchy inside [...]

Last few days I was thinking a lot about it – thinking about parallels with my own work. Given how our company works (with multiple hierarchies in projects that could make you a manager and a lowest-ranking team member of the same person at the same time) it's not a big issue.

However, in doing PhD research it is – the hierarchy is not only well defined, but also embedded into the practices of academic work. For example, many PhDs I know get their own professional network via introductions by their professors. When you are beginner in the field, it's very natural to get to know it (people, themes, events, politics, etc.) via someone more experienced and well established, and your supervisor is a very natural figure for that role.

Blogging changes that – it gives you an alternative way to connect to the professional world. In my case it has all kinds of effects, but right now I'm trying to figure out how to deal with one in particular – deciding what to do when my supervisors and external people in my blogging world have pretty different perspectives on part of my work...

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### 3.5.2 Broken blogging routines

One would expect that once integrated with work, blogging finds a protected place in a working routine, but that is not necessarily so: in my case, those routines were eventually broken, despite the fact that blogging served work-related needs, and partly because of it.

*Figure 3-2* provides an overview of the number of weblog posts I wrote per month between June 2002 and December 2007, with an indication of corresponding events in my life. While most of the sudden drops in the frequency of blogging correspond to summer holidays,<sup>56</sup> longer term changes appear as a result of personal events that brought alternative demands for my time (*relationship* and *baby* on the graph). Another important factor was stress level: blogging dropped when I was juggling coordination of an EU project (*project management*), a ten-week internship at Microsoft in the USA, and personal uncertainties that came from the decision not to return to Russia, as I had always planned to do.<sup>57</sup>

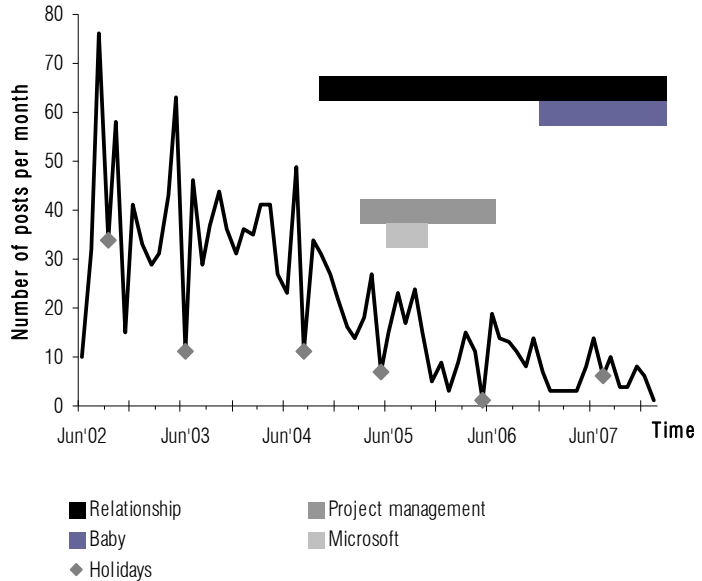
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<sup>55</sup> Although I do not know if blogging work in progress has created any problems in finding reviewers for my own publications, there were two cases where I could not do supposedly blind reviews due to being familiar with the work in question as a result of its exposure via weblogs.

<sup>56</sup> There were other holidays, usually smaller in duration; drop in the posting frequency in November 2002 corresponds to the period when my weblog server was offline for 2 weeks.

<sup>57</sup> [The age of transition](#) (Mathemagenic, 10 November 2005).

Figure 3-2  
Mathemagenic: number  
of weblog posts per  
month



However, although lack of time and stress are important factors behind the reduction in frequency of writing, their influence is indirect. I believe the most important and direct issue behind not blogging is broken information processing routines, especially those related to reading weblogs:

Web quote 3-19  
From email to blogs:  
[challenges of changing  
the channel.](#)  
Mathemagenic, 24  
July 2006

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When I started blogging I loved it. Reading others brought all those unexpected insights and relationships that improved my work dramatically. However, it also brought heavy information overload that I wasn't prepared to deal with. Having many (more than I could ever imagine) bits of potentially useful insights with no immediate way to process them made me feeling stressed and lost. I am a bit better now, but it's still not working well and I still envy Ton who not only [wrote about need for new information processing strategies](#), but also figured out how those could work for himself (check his posts on [filtering](#), [tools](#) and [routines](#)).

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While the social filtering mechanisms of weblogs and content delivery by RSS feeds are often praised for their efficiency in allowing readers to keep up with many information sources, I experienced a weblog-induced information overload. There were several reasons for that:

- *Multidisciplinary connections.* Topic-wise, blogging reflected my interests in bridging multiple domains in my research. While focusing primarily on knowledge management and learning in the beginning, over time my weblog began to cover a wide variety of issues. As a result of conversations that came out of it, I discovered many bloggers writing on



- topics that I wanted to bring into my work or found potentially interesting in that respect: the number of my connections exploded.
- *Growing adoption of blogging.* In addition to topical expansion, over time I found more and more interesting weblogs on a given topic as the relatively small cycle of early adopters expanded to include many interesting newcomers.
  - Trying to keep up with more interesting weblogs resulted in *RSS overload*. There were periods of 1000+ subscribers to my RSS feed, but even without trying to keep up with all of them, my weblog reading list grew to more than 200 weblogs and was a challenge to keep up with.
  - *Need to converge.* Expansion of my weblog network, and the growing amount of potentially useful information coming through it, came at the moment where my dissertation ideas started to converge. At that moment, it was essential to reduce information intake and the degree of engagement with others, in order to process emerging insights and integrate them into a bigger whole. Reducing time spent on reading other weblogs reflected, at micro-level, the suggestion to "stop reading and start writing" often given to PhD students struggling to incorporate recent publications in their work.

While withdrawal from frequent and engaged blogging reflected my personal and work circumstances, the main reason behind it was the challenge of *adjusting my information processing routines* to address increasing amounts of potentially interesting information coming via weblogs at a time when my work dictated the need to be extremely selective and focused. I would probably have been able to cope with the quantity of material at another time, but at that point, due to lack of time and high stress levels, I did not have the energy for it: I just stopped reading blogs systematically.

In turn, writing suffered. Since I was not reading other weblogs, my writing was stimulated now mainly by my own thinking and work. There was not much follow-up on the feedback to my posts, so potential conversations died at birth. I can also imagine that for others it was less interesting to link to, and comment on, someone who was not very responsive. In the end blogging became just putting things "out there," instead of engaging, which resulted in a decreasing motivation to write. When my weblog software stopped working in January 2008, it was easy to take an extended break from blogging (additionally motivated by the fact that it was a natural point to "freeze" the weblog archive, in order to analyse it for this study). While eventually I returned to blogging, my practices now are coloured by the experience of my withdrawal from it, and accompanied by a more cautious attitude to my own ways of dealing with blog-related information.

### 3.5.3 Myself vs. others

Blogging is frequently viewed as a medium for public communication: it is reasonable to assume that those who do not want their words to be read by a broad audience would use another medium. However, while the need to communicate is a part of blogging (Mortensen, 2004), it is not necessarily the primary reason for it.

In my case, blogging grew out of a need for a place to organise my thinking and exploration; the readers, as well as writing for them, came later. While the public nature of blogging was a factor I took into account from the beginning, the primary force that shaped my blogging was its usefulness to me:

Web quote 3-20  
[Why blogging 2](#),  
 Mathemagenic,  
 30 October 2002

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I always need a **conversation for growing my ideas**. This is the main reason I blog. Even if no one comments, blogging makes it a conversation: I come to the idea next day and I can discuss it with "yesterday's Lilia" :)

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When blogging, while I try to strike a balance between my own needs and interests and those of my potential readers, I often choose to serve my own interests first. Such choices have shaped my blogging practices in multiple ways.

Although weblog readers are more likely to benefit from well-thought out and carefully crafted posts, my need to capture ideas at their early stages resulted in writing quick *work-in-progress memos instead of polished pieces*:

Web quote 3-21  
[Edges](#), Mathemagenic,  
 3 June 2005

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[A quote and an emergent interpretation of it in relation to my work]

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I guess it's a bit cryptic, but if you read me long enough you probably able to connect the dots. Otherwise just wait till words around ideas mature and mould into something readable...

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Using the weblog for writing quick notes, often squeezed between working on other tasks, also resulted in many relatively short posts, connected by links. While it provides a trail of connected ideas that works for my own purposes, it is more difficult for a reader to follow and to make sense of. Readers would probably benefit more from reading a longer entry that connected several linked posts into a coherent whole.<sup>58</sup>

Choosing to serve my own interests also appeared as "*selfish*" *tagging*. While I had multiple opportunities to use tags that would help users of external systems to find relevant entries in my weblog, I did not use them, since this would mean losing the personally meaningful tag-based navigation in

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<sup>58</sup> The following chapter provides an illustration of the impact this choice had on linking patterns in my community, as well as examples of bloggers who make other choices.

my weblog.<sup>59</sup> The choice of terms to use as tags is also influenced primarily by their relevance to my own thinking practice and it not necessarily easy to interpret for an outsider (section 3.3.2).

While at the beginning my weblog was focused primarily on the topics related to learning and knowledge management, over time my writing shifted to other topics, *fragmenting weblog focus* and potentially alienating loyal readers:

*Web quote 3-22*  
[Too serious?](#),  
 Mathemagenic,  
 19 April 2005

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A haven't been blogging much last weeks. And when I did it was mainly about all kinds of things related to my PhD methodology. I'm going to write more on it, but keep on wondering what does it do to my readers.

[...] I wonder if people from "KM crowd" still read my weblog – I haven't been writing on KM for a couple of months if not more. Not because I'm out of the topic, just because there is so much time to blog and topics of higher priority for the moment take the stage. So what people do? Unsubscribe? Skim and hope that I'll right more in the future? Actually read it?

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Although I was "not sure that reading all methodology 'thinking aloud' is that fun" for the readers of my weblog, it was essential for my learning process, so it became a relatively big part of the weblog content.

The reasons for choosing to serve my own needs before those of my audience are twofold. First, serving the needs of others might make blogging meaningless for me. For example, writing only on a narrow set of topics in the weblog defeats my initial purpose of blogging, which was to collect in one place fragmented bits relevant to my thinking. Second, in my case too much dependence on the audience has proved to be paralysing: I would spend too much time trying to figure out for whom exactly to write and what their needs might be. Also, the non-intrusive nature of blogging (e.g. compared to the email that is delivered to mailboxes) means that there is not necessarily an audience for a specific post, so writing to serve others in this case feels similar to giving a presentation in an empty room.

### 3.5.4 Attribution and ownership

"Aren't you afraid to write about work in progress? What if someone takes your ideas and publishes them before you do?" There were countless times I had to answer those questions when talking about blogging about my research. In those situations I usually talk about the benefits of the fast feedback, opportunities for others to learn about my work without waiting

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<sup>59</sup>Specific examples are at [K-collector links and questions](#) and [Shout if you want to be heard or Technorati blog finder](#) (Mathemagenic, 30 September 2003 and 4 September 2005 respectively)

for months (or years) and having access to costly academic databases, and the fact that, "My ideas are there with the time stamp on them," so there is evidence of my authorship.

However, the issue is more complex than that. Although, according to the unwritten rules of blogging, attributing those who influenced a weblog post is essential, it is not always easy. In the following comment to one of my blog posts Alex Halavais discusses the challenges of attribution:

*Web quote 3-23*  
Comment by [Alex Halavais](#) to [Context and attribution](#),  
12 February 2004

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This is, arguably, easy enough with words, but much harder when it comes to ideas. I came up with some thoughts that, I will assert, are my own. Someone noted that these followed closely some things you had written about in your blog. I am a regular reader of your blog, and I think it is likely that these entries--at the very least--prompted my thinking in a particular direction. This tendency to remember the ideas but forget their source--the "sleeper effect"--has been shown in communication research several times over the last 50 years.

You actually know about this, because someone else made the connection and hyperlinked it. But otherwise, I would have been absconding with your ideas without due credit. As interested as I am in encouraging hyperlinking as attribution, there has to be a limit.

I wonder whether a standing set of citations (your "Regular reads/dialogues") constitutes a kind of "thought group"--an indication that your ideas are at least in some part attributable to the people you communicate with every day?

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While "a standing set of citations", usually visible as a blogroll, is helpful to give credit to others when adding a link to a specific weblog post is not feasible,<sup>60</sup> this approach does not translate well to non-blogging contexts. For example, there is the challenge of attributing ideas learnt from weblogs in an academic publication:

*Web quote 3-24*  
[Challenges on writing literature overview on business blogging \(or another turn on researcher vs. blogger\)](#),  
Mathemagenic,  
30 November 2006

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Academic publications on business blogs are scarce, while there are quite a lot of white papers, case-studies from commercial companies, business publications or general media stories on the topic. And, of course, there are lots of ideas worth citing across the blogosphere.

The last one is a difficult decision. For an academic getting into research on business blogging it wouldn't be an issue: just run search through databases of scientific publications, work with the results and pretend that the rest doesn't exist. For me, learning about interesting issues in the field from weblogs years before something along the same lines gets "properly" published, it is a challenge. I can not pretend that the body of knowledge in weblogs doesn't exist, but, bounded by academic conventions, I can't figure a good way to fit it into my publications.

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<sup>60</sup> Not only due to forgetting the sources of the idea due to the "sleeper effect", but also because finding the relevant weblog post in someone else's weblog archive is not an easy task, especially when there is no phrase to search with, but only an idea that "there was something relevant".

Even more, even if I try to give an overview of what is there on the topic across weblogs, I can't do it according to academic standards that aim for completeness and objectivity. I know that I shouldn't even try to provide a complete and objective picture when giving an overview on whatever issue across weblogs.

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It is not easy to find to whom, and how, to credit when one's ideas are inspired by reading the weblogs of others and conversations in a weblog network. When those ideas leave the blogosphere and take shape in something that is part of paid work (publications, presentations, instruments, methods), lack of attribution could result in bitter feelings, as sharing one's ideas for a "collective good" is not the same as giving them to someone who might be competing for a publication space or consulting assignments in the offline world.

In addition, while attributing words to their authors is easy with clear authorship of a weblog, this is not necessarily the case with the ownership of those words:

*Web quote 3-25*  
[BlogTalk: who owns narrated experiences?](#),  
 Mathemagenic,  
 23 May 2003

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The question that came into my mind: what happens with your ideas that you posted to a weblog inside certain boundaries (e.g. corporate blog or course blog) after you leave these boundaries. Both Martin and Sebastian suggest that it should be your property and you have to be able to take it with you as your own learning resource. Ideally, I would say the same, but I don't think that it's going to happen easily in practice.

Companies and educational institutions are recognising that they could benefit from aggregating ideas produced by people (e.g. course assignments from previous courses could be reused in a new course). An individual knowledge worker, from other hand, wants to have access to his own thought, may be throughout his whole life. This is not interesting for a company (it's competitive advantage!) and it should be ideal educational institution to take care of it (at the end no any educational institution is responsible to your own life-long learning).

In one paper knowledge workers were addressed as investors bringing their knowledge for corporate use. This is good metaphor, but unlike real investors knowledge workers can not take their investment back. Even worse, if you leave treads of your knowledge work in corporate context they are likely to belong to a company (often copyrighted), so they in fact risk loosing some of their investments.

In a long-term this could be a problem to weblogs adoption in a corporate context: I'm more motivated to write something down if I know that it stays with me and I can come back to it than if it's locked in a corporate knowledge management system or e-learning system [...].

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This situation appears when blogging, which is not a paid activity for a blogger, results in something directly relevant to employment:

*Web quote 3-26*  
[Between bloggers and their employers \(2\)](#),  
 Mathemagenic,  
 16 July 2003

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From notes of the [Voxpolitics event on blogs and politics](#) [...] about Stephen Pollard, "first major journalist in the country to be running a weblog":

And he's not writing for free – people respond to his comments and inspire him to write pieces for which he gets paid.

This simple phrase gets the value of blogging for free – it inspires you to come up with other pieces (with more insight/analysis/depth/structure) to get paid for.

For me it would also draw a border for copyrights: I'd like to "own" my blog (to give it away under [Creative Commons](#)) even if it is related to my work, while my company owns more elaborate products (e.g. papers) that can be inspired by it (of course when a company pays me to work on these products :).

In fact I don't like to get paid to blog, because I want the freedom of doing it and I want to own the content. I'm also addicted to blogging enough to think that I would not be happy if I couldn't do it. And I have scary phrases in my contract to worry about these issues :(

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In the research environment, using a weblog in the process of creating an article makes the issue even more clouded, since transferring copyrights to the academic publishers often requires that no part of the work has been published before.

### 3.5.5 Summary

When blogging becomes a useful instrument to support one's work, it is natural to try to make it a legitimate work activity. In my case this process resulted in blogging during work hours, amplified uses of it for work, and bringing work-related blogging effects as an extra point in my appraisal. However, as a result, the boundaries between personal and professional blogging became blurred. Instead of making blog-related decisions for myself only, now I have to take into account the implications that blogging might have on my work, such as crossing traditional hierarchical boundaries or interference with academic practices like blind peer-reviews.

Despite work-related considerations, blogging is still shaped heavily by my personal circumstances and practices, as the section on broken blogging routines illustrates. For example, personal events in my life not only influenced blogging directly (e.g. not blogging while on maternity leave), but also indirectly, as increased stress levels did not leave enough resources to adjust information processing routines when that was necessary. However, this section also shows that a specific aspect of blogging (withdrawal from it in this case) could be shaped by multiple contexts at the same time: in this case it's not only personal circumstances, but also social factors (expanding blogging network) and those directly related to work (need to converge in the PhD research).

Bringing personal information into a public weblog is always influenced by both personal needs and social expectations. While in my case presence and needs of others are important, blogging serves my own interests first: the posts are relatively short interlinked fragments articulating thinking-in-progress rather than a finished argument; topic-wise they represent an eclectic collection organised with "selfish" tags that might be cryptic to

an outsider. This choice is motivated by my uses of the weblog (organising my own thinking as a primary motivation) and the open-ended nature of blogging, where the audience is only partly known and often unpredictable.

Growing ideas in the weblog is a long, fragmented and social process, which may result, over time, in difficulties in attributing bits of thoughts to their authors. Dealing with the outcomes of such collective intelligence is especially challenging when they leave the blogosphere to be used in academic publications or paid work. In addition, when blogging becomes part of work, blurred personal and organisational investments in it, and resulting benefits, challenge existing content ownership settings.

### 3.6 Discussion

This study is focused on exploring how blogging contributed to the development of ideas for this dissertation. While this is a case where a specific type of work is integrated with blogging, it provides an in-depth view of how blogging might be used for work-related purposes, especially those related to collecting and processing information and turning ideas documented in a weblog into a written document.

When used as a personal knowledge base, a weblog provides an opportunity to create a flexible personal information management system. In my case it serves as a low-threshold way to create personally meaningful content: writing in small chunks that are easy to fit between other activities, adding personally meaningful context and including information which is not relevant for specific current goals, but might be used in the future. This collection is organised and maintained in a flexible and personalised way, using chronological archives, tagging or connecting posts via links or titles. Once there, weblog entries and the associated metadata are retrieved, reused, and analysed to see how ideas are connected to each other.

While there are other tools that could be used in those ways, the public nature of blogging provides additional opportunities. Not only does it increase the motivation to write and discipline to provide content that others can understand; it also results in sharing information that would otherwise be hidden in a private collection. As a side-effect of blogging, sharing emergent insights this way does not require much additional effort. It is also non-intrusive, as readers can decide themselves if, what and when to read, and it provides a way of reaching audiences that one might not know or not think of beforehand. When information in a weblog is relevant for others, their feedback and further development of it enriches the blogger's own thinking about a topic.

With respect to the knowledge work framework, these results fall primarily into the ideas sector, but they also illustrate that the personal work of dealing with information and developing ideas is influenced by engaging in conversations with others: it might be triggered by them and shaped by the feedback (or even the possibility of it).

As well as being used as a knowledge base, weblogs can also support the process of developing ideas over time. *Table 3-3* summarises how different stages of idea development are supported by the activities around the weblog content: low-threshold creation of entries; a flexible and personally meaningful way to organise and maintain them; opportunities to retrieve, reuse and analyse blog content, and to engage with others around it.

*Table 3-3* Matching activities supported by weblog to different stages of idea development

Activities	Stages	Awareness and articulation	Sense-making	Turning into a product
Low-threshold creation of blog entries		Capturing fuzzy ideas in short bursts.	Developing ideas while constructing a weblog post.	Getting into writing flow. Posts as non-scientific drafts.
Organising and maintaining content in flexible, personally meaningful way		Ad-hoc categorisation such as "piling".	Playing with connecting posts in different ways, to make sense of the ideas behind them.	Trying out multiple ways to structure an argument.
Retrieving, reusing and analysing		Becoming aware of patterns of one's own interests and interconnection of ideas	Exploring archives for connections while writing. Sorting, looking for patterns.	Need for integrating into a bigger whole. Reuse of existing content.
Engaging with others around blog content		Motivation to document ideas, to write better, to contextualise.	Feedback and contributions of others that help to establish connections.	Feedback and contributions of others. Draft document review.

Using weblogs as a knowledge base, and then as an instrument to support PhD work, creates synergies, as the effort that goes into creating and organising entries later pays off by providing more ways for retrieval, and a better quality of the material to be reused. In turn, the experience of reuse or unexpected discoveries that older posts bring stimulates putting more effort in creating new entries. The cycle proves that a weblog could be that "trusted external repository" (Allen, 2005) where new ideas could be safely "parked" to free a mental space for a task at hand.

When used for developing ideas and turning them into products, the public nature of blogging provides a "window onto practice" (Brown & Duguid, 1992) that gives others an opportunity to observe one's working practices, creating a potential for a technology-mediated apprenticeship (Efimova, Fiedler, Verwijs & Boyd, 2004). It also provides visibility for "rejected" ideas and work-in-progress, so others might develop alternative



interpretations and make other uses of those. While this potentially increases competition, it also provides a valuable input for the author's own work and creates opportunities for collaboration. Using weblogs to present partial results to an audience helps in shaping the final product, similarly to the way in which presenting PhD work at conferences helps in crafting the way it is presented in a dissertation (Kamler & Thomson, 2006).

However, the public nature of blogging also influences the idea development in less positive ways. It limits what is written, and how it is written, so it is not a reliable source of documenting every important thought or observation. While "everyday grounded theory" works because it is embedded into everyday routines, it also lacks a systematic approach. Even though they are in the public domain, weblog posts do not always receive feedback, and those comments that appear do not necessarily serve the research interests. In addition, dealing with fragments of information in one's own weblog and those of others is a challenge. Those concerns are especially relevant in academic settings since, compared to other types of work, doing research requires one to be more systematic and to maintain neutrality.

The results illustrate the relation between two elements of the framework: personal knowledge management activities as part of the everyday work of growing one's ideas, and activating and using that knowledge for specific tasks. On the one hand, the work that goes into using a weblog to create a personal knowledge base enables and accelerates working on specific tasks, by providing an access to ideas that would not be documented otherwise, as well as the instruments to play with connecting them in different ways. It may also lead to the discovery of underlying patterns. On the other hand, working on a task can also influence which posts are written and how they are organised.

The study results also provide a view on some of the challenges that blogging brings, and practices of dealing with those. It shows how discovering the added value of blogging for my work gradually blurred the boundaries between blogging and work. While weblog uses for work provided a legitimate excuse to blog during work hours, it also made it difficult to change a weblog platform, challenged hierarchical relations and confronted existing working practices, in particular those related to blind reviews and content attribution/ownership. Blogging supported working with my own ideas and offered an easy access to the ideas of others. However, it also resulted in broken information processing routines, as I needed to deal with fragmentation and an abundance of blog-related information when my dissertation required convergence and my energy was taken away by other events in my life. Also, using the weblog as a place to organise my own thinking and exploration made it difficult to cater for the interests of the weblog readers.

While study of a single blogger is not representative for all knowledge workers who blog, the findings presented in this chapter correspond to personal accounts of other bloggers discussing uses of their weblogs for organising their own thinking (Doctorow, 2002; Halavais, 2006; Mortensen & Walker, 2002; Pollard, 2003a), publications discussing how weblogs could be used that way blog (Paquet, 2002; Edmonds, Blustein & Turnbull, 2004; Todoroki, Konishi & Inoue, 2006; Peña-López, 2007) or how contextual factors shape blogging in an organisational environment (Walker, 2006). Studies of work-related blogging suggest that weblogs serve as a "trigger to elicit passion for knowledge" (Kaiser, Müller-Seitz, Lopes & Pina e Cunha, 2007) and are used as a reference archive to support working on a document (Carter, 2005) by knowledge workers in other settings; however, they do not provide an in-depth view of the activities behind those uses.

The literature on personal information management allows for the comparison of the findings to existing research at a more granular level. The synergies between using a weblog to collect and organise ideas and uses of those in supporting specific tasks are similar to those described by Erickson (1996) in the case of a personal electronic notebook. The possibility of feedback in the case of a weblog provides an additional motivation to contribute. However, writing in public also results in limitations on what can be written that do not exist in the case of a personal tool.

Although at first sight using a weblog as an online knowledge base calls for comparison with digital collections created by other tools, I find more parallels with the studies that look at information represented by the paper artefacts on desks and in personal archives (Bondarenko & Janssen, 2005; Kaye et al., 2006; Kidd, 1994; Whittaker & Hirschberg, 2001).

For example, the type of information included in my weblog, and the role it plays in developing ideas, echoes the discussion of the role of paper on the desks to support knowledge work in the study by Kidd (1994). According to this study, spatial layout of papers in the office serves as a holding pattern for the ideas that knowledge workers "cannot yet categorise or even decide how they might use", as a primitive language that reflects models of the world still being constructed, as contextual cues to recover the state of their thought after an interruption, and as demonstrable output of the progress (Kidd, 1994, pp.187-188).

Not being tied to specific tasks and bounded by the expectations and format of a bigger document, my weblog allows the inclusion of dormant information and the capturing of ideas under construction. Flexible categorisation provides a way to replicate the spatial arrangement of documents on a desk: chronological archives, tags and links allow "piling" entries together and indicating relationships between parts of emergent

mental structures. While contextual cues around a weblog post do not support returning to an interrupted task in the way that the layout of papers on a desk do, they play a similar role in helping to recover the state of mind that was present at the moment of writing the post, which is useful when returning to an idea that has been "parked" for a while.

Finally, the public nature of a weblog gives others an idea of the work in progress, in a similar way to the papers on one's office desk. In that respect, a weblog bears more similarity to one's office than to one's digital spaces: as a personal space that others could visit as guests, a weblog serves social functions similar to paper archives in sharing resources, building a legacy and impression management (Kaye et al., 2006).

While existing publications and feedback on this study from other bloggers suggest that other bloggers use their weblogs to organise and develop their thinking, more research is needed in order to explore the frequency of such uses and the conditions stimulating them. In that respect, the view of blogging as an experience of flow states (Kaiser et al., 2007) provides an intriguing starting point.

A particularly interesting research direction would be the exploration of connections between a task at hand and specific blogging episodes: how much and in what cases blogging is used to "park ideas", and when it directly contributes to one's work on the task. Since those connections are too infrequent for an observation and difficult to reconstruct from memory or content of a weblog post, the best results are likely to be acquired in a diary study (for example, by inviting a blogger to fill in a post-specific questionnaire immediately after publishing a post, as in Carter, 2005).

The connection between the functionalities of weblog technologies and their uses for personal information management needs further examination. The similarity between the roles my weblog plays in supporting my work and those of paper collections in other studies indicate a need to explore the affordances of weblog technologies from a personal information management perspective and possibilities of learning from blogging when designing other tools. In addition, the potential for learning from information accumulated in one's weblog calls for a development of tools allowing the exploration of patterns in those traces that are aimed at bloggers themselves (supporting what Pousman, Stasko & Mateas, 2007, call casual information visualisation).

While focusing on using a weblog to develop ideas from an individual perspective, the research presented in this chapter also shows that the social nature of blogging is an important factor in this process. In the following chapter the perspective shifts: there the focus is on conversations between different bloggers.

## Conversations between KM bloggers

Weblogs are often perceived as low-threshold tools to publish online, empowering individual expression in public. Although a weblog is a personal writing space, its public nature suggests a need to communicate (Mortensen, 2004) and invites feedback.

A weblog conversation emerges when a weblog post triggers feedback from others, who either use comments to the original post or reply in their own weblogs, linking back. While using comments is not much different from many other online discussion tools, the practice of replying in another weblog creates complexity as the conversation spreads over multiple weblogs. Given that every weblog has its own audience, the conversation becomes exposed to new readers, who are often not aware of the earlier part of the discussion and have a limited ability to trace it.

My own research on weblog conversations started when I realised that conversational blogging as I experienced it was not necessarily the same for the rest of the blogosphere. Reading about the results of studies that found limited interactivity of weblogs (Herring et al., 2004; Nardi, Schiano & Gumbrecht, 2004) was the starting point for documenting and understanding rich conversational practices in my own weblog community.

This chapter integrates two studies of weblog conversations. The first one presents the results of an exploratory analysis of a single weblog-mediated conversation between KM bloggers. The follow-up study aims to evaluate and to refine the findings of the first one on a broader scale, by analysing the weblog posts of 34 KM bloggers over one year.

### 4.1 Weblogs as a conversational medium

Blogs and their associated technologies have unique characteristics as a conversational medium, which make their capabilities quite different from other internet technologies, such as mailing lists or newsgroups.

Herring et al. (2004) position weblogs as their own genre, situated on an intermediate point between standard web pages and asynchronous computer-mediated communication along dimensions of frequency of update, symmetry of communicative exchange and multimodality.

Early publications on weblogs suggest that they are interactive and heavily hyperlinked (Blood, 2002), creating "a massively distributed but completely connected conversation covering every imaginable topic of interest" (Marlow, 2004, ¶1). However other studies found limited interactivity of weblogs (Herring et al., 2004; Nardi et al., 2004). These discrepancies are explained by the uneven character of the blogosphere: while a random weblog might not contain many links or comments (Herring et al., 2004), there are also local-scale community structures that exhibit periods of heavy linking to each other (Kumar et al., 2003). It seems that weblog conversations are more likely to develop within specific communities, and that characteristics of these communities influence the frequency and manner of exchanges (Herring et al., 2005).

This is not surprising given specific problems of weblog conversations that those mediated by, for instance, a mailing list do not have (de Moor & Efimova, 2004):

- *Distributed and fragmented nature.* Fragments of conversations are distributed among multiple weblogs.
- *Lack of bi-directional links:* in most cases there is a link from a later post pointing to an earlier one, but not vice-versa.
- *Lack of tracking technologies.* While there are tools that allow links to a specific post to be found or the spread of ideas across weblogs to be discovered by analysing the propagation pattern of a particular URL (Adar, Zhang, Adamic & Lukose, 2004) or keyword (Glance, Hurst & Tomoyioko, 2004), those that help to map weblog conversations are limited to specific industries (e.g. Techmeme<sup>61</sup>) or recent time frame (e.g. Blogpulse conversation tracker<sup>62</sup>). In addition, using these tools also requires an extra effort, so it is unlikely that they would be used for all weblog conversations one is interested in.

Given the complexities involved, it is not surprising that weblog conversations are likely to emerge in clusters of weblogs, where members are likely to read each other's weblogs on a regular basis and see a conversation "unfolding" as they follow others, rather than tracing it retrospectively.

Those considerations have shaped the focus of this chapter, which integrates two studies of weblog conversations in the context of a single

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<sup>61</sup> [www.techmeme.com](http://www.techmeme.com)

<sup>62</sup> [showcase.blogpulse.com/conversation](http://showcase.blogpulse.com/conversation)

community. While there are different ways to define weblog conversations, here they are defined as series of interlinked weblog posts and comments.<sup>63</sup>

## 4.2 Research approach

This section discusses the research approach for the two studies presented in this chapter. I first discuss the reasons for selecting KM bloggers as a case to study conversational blogging practices, and then present and compare the methods of data collection and analysis for the two studies. Finally quality verification strategies and writing choices for presenting the results are discussed.

### 4.2.1 Case

This case focuses on conversational blogging practices in a cluster of weblogs in the area of knowledge management, where I belong as well. It's a dense social network of weblog authors, and may be classified as a community, given the many bonds and interactions between participants (see Efimova et al., 2005 for the discussion on it). Many of the authors are aware of each other: their blogs appear on several KM weblog lists, link to each other in blogrolls or are connected by subscription newsfeeds to each other. Participants engage in multiple weblog conversations over time, pick-up ideas and practices from each other (e.g. adoption of the Skype Voice-over-IP tool), and employ a variety of media to communicate. In most cases, first contacts were established via weblogs and some participants have even met face-to-face on various occasions.

The community members are early adopters of technology. Most weblogs use stand-alone weblog tools (Movable Type, Radio Userland, WordPress) that require skills for installation and maintenance; they use news aggregators to read weblogs and constantly experiment with new blogging tools and add-ons. As well as sharing interests in knowledge management and social software, many of the participants explore the use of weblogs in a business context, so their communication involves more meta-blogging – experimentation with weblogs and reflections on blogging experiences – than could be observed in other groups. The participants of the study could be characterised as lead users (von Hippel, 1986), who shape emerging technology and its uses to address their needs. Studying them allowed me to identify blogging practices that, while not necessarily

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<sup>63</sup> This definition is very close to what (Jenkins, 2003) defines as a *blogosphere story*. Although most of the blogosphere stories analysed by Jenkins are reactions to a media publication or external event, this chapter is focused primarily on conversations that emerge as a result of an initial weblog post.

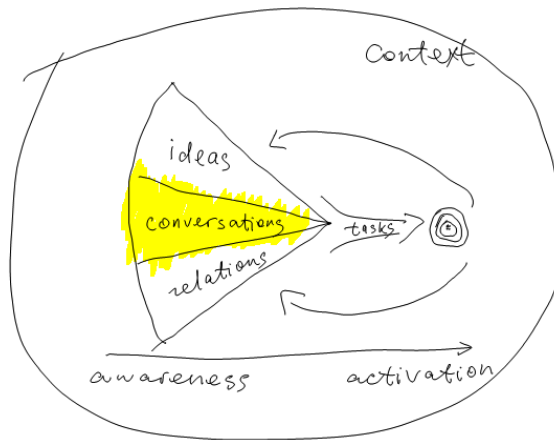
widespread, are useful in order to explore the possibilities of the medium and the implications for the future.

My willingness to include this case as part of the PhD research developed over time while I worked and reflected on several smaller studies (Anjewierden, Brussee & Efimova, 2004; Efimova & de Moor, 2005; Anjewierden, de Hoog, Brussee & Efimova, 2005; Efimova et al., 2005; Anjewierden & Efimova, 2006) that included studying KM bloggers or their weblogs. Over that time I not only accumulated deeper knowledge of the network, but also learnt to appreciate the feedback that helped me to move further,<sup>64</sup> and started to look for ways to accommodate interaction with other community members as part of my research.

In addition, the work on mapping knowledge flows in weblogs that I did with others as part of the Metis project (Anjewierden et al., 2004; Anjewierden et al., 2005; Anjewierden & Efimova, 2006), was based (at least in early experiments) on the corpus of KM weblogs. Given that getting hold of such data for other networks would not be an easy task, choosing this one for the study provides an opportunity to analyse blogging practices by examining digital artefacts that bloggers leave behind.

This case addresses one sector of the framework: it is focused on understanding blogging practices of knowledge workers in respect to conversations (Figure 4-1).

Figure 4-1 Parts of the knowledge work framework addressed by this study



In this case the research question "What are the blogging practices of knowledge workers in respect to conversations?" is translated into a more specific one "What are the conversational practices of KM bloggers?"

<sup>64</sup> E.g. [Blogging and paper writing](#) (Mathemagenic, 3 October 2004).

#### 4.2.2 Methods

The research question is addressed by two studies. The first one is an exploratory analysis of a single weblog-mediated conversation between KM bloggers, aimed at developing an understanding of blogging practices in relation to conversation. The second study aims to position the results of the first one on a broader scale by analysing weblog posts in the KM network within one year.

In both studies the research question is addressed by studying blogging artefacts (online traces left by bloggers who use their weblogs for conversations) to identify patterns of participation in conversations and then use those patterns to describe practices of conversational blogging.<sup>65</sup>

##### *Study 1. Actionable Sense conversation*

The study includes an analysis of a single weblog-mediated conversation. It was carried out in spring 2004 together with another researcher, Aldo de Moor. The results are published as de Moor & Efimova (2004) and Efimova & de Moor (2005).

The conversation studied started from one of my own posts, which discussed the fact that writing to a weblog makes visible one's "loose ends", ideas that do not turn into actions.<sup>66</sup> It was picked up by another blogger, Ton, who further elaborated on the idea, thinking aloud about how shared understanding and thinking in weblogs could turn into joint actions.<sup>67</sup> Ton's post resonated with many others in the network, leading to what became known between its participants as the "actionable sense" conversation. This conversation has led to a variety of outcomes: exploration of relations between blogging, networking and joint actions; emergence of a network of bloggers interested in pursuing joint projects; developing an organisational model that could guide ad-hoc joint work; and the creation of a private wiki space and mailing list for further discussion.

Except for the scale, the conversation is typical within the network described: it starts without an explicit intention to discuss the topic, develops in multiple directions according to the interests of people engaged, brings insights on the topic and some joint actions, and then dies.

The decision to study a conversation where I participated raises the question of bias. However, given that weblog conversations are difficult

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<sup>65</sup> For an extended discussion on artefacts and practices in weblog research see 2.2.

<sup>66</sup> [The power of visible loose ends](#) (Mathemagenic, 23 November 2003). This entry is also cited in the previous chapter (section 3.4.4); given that in the Actionable Sense conversation it takes a life of its own, it provides an interesting case to trace how the meaning of a blog post can differ between individuals, depending on what they pick up from it.

<sup>67</sup> [Making Actionable Sense](#) (Ton Zijlstra, 27 November 2003).



to find and demarcate, this provides an opportunity to select a rich and interesting case (confirmed by an anonymous reviewer of the paper describing the results,<sup>68</sup> who stated that it was "unlike the blogging that everyone else has written about"). It also allowed me to use my personal knowledge about the dynamics and norms in the network for the analysis.

For the purpose of this study we focused only on the weblog-mediated part of the whole conversation; (however we have included references to other media in weblog posts into our analysis, see 4.3.1) To trace the conversation, a combination of methods was used. The first week of the conversation was analysed in an earlier study (de Moor & Efimova, 2004), so it provided an initial set of posts for further analysis. Then outgoing and incoming links for each post were collected. Outgoing links indicated earlier posts, while incoming links revealed follow-up posts. In order to discover incoming links, trackbacks were analysed. The content of newly discovered posts was examined, to identify if they focussed on the topic of the conversation (turning online connections between bloggers into real-life joint action). Those that did were further examined for outgoing and incoming links to reveal new candidates. The exploration was stopped when incoming and outgoing links no longer led to any new posts on the topic.

In the next stage, weblog posts and comments to them were visualised to provide an overview of postings by an author over time. Further qualitative analysis was carried out to identify conversational practices of the participants in a two-step approach. First, we focused on blogging artefacts to identify patterns<sup>69</sup> of participation in the conversation (media choices and linking patterns). Then the observations were used to describe practices of conversational blogging.

To interpret the data I used my own experiences as a blogger, and my knowledge about the network and the conversation. Although I did not blog explicitly about the study while working on it, I did write in my weblog about my personal experiences and perceptions of conversational blogging, as well as the assumptions, examples and interpretations related to it, and incorporated the resulting feedback in the analysis of this specific study. When the draft paper that described the results of the study was finished, the participants had an opportunity to provide feedback on it.

### ***Study 2. Conversations with self and others***

Analysing a single conversation raises concerns about how representative the results are of the blogging practices of KM bloggers in general. Partly

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<sup>68</sup> Efimova & de Moor (2005).

<sup>69</sup> In the original study (Efimova & de Moor, 2005) those were framed as "socio-technical context".

inspired by the results of this study, the work on the development of tools for detecting knowledge flows in weblogs provided an opportunity to carry out complementary follow-up research.

The second study aimed at examining the results of the first one on a broader scale, using posts from KM weblogs in January-December 2004 (as defined in Efimova et al., 2005) as a dataset, and weblog analysis tools developed in a context of work on detecting knowledge flows in weblogs (Anjewierden et al., 2004; Anjewierden et al., 2005; Anjewierden & Efimova, 2006) as part of the Metis project. The study was carried out together with Anjo Anjewierden and Robert de Hoog in autumn 2007 and spring 2008.

The dataset is a result of a study that attempted to define the boundaries of the KM blogger community in an "objective way", based on linking between bloggers (Efimova et al., 2005). Although it provides only an approximate view of key KM bloggers at that time and relations between them, the feedback on visualisations of it posted online illustrates that it provides a realistic snapshot of the network at that time:

*Web quote 4-1*  
[Relationships above](#)  
[information exchange.](#)  
 Ton Zijlstra,  
 4 March 2006

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It depicts rather nicely the mental picture I have of part of my network of relations that emerged from my blogging in the past three years.

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The decision to use this dataset was made based on the fact that it was available for the researchers and provided an opportunity to ensure compatibility with the results of the first study (as it represents weblogs of KM bloggers at the time that followed the original conversation).

The dataset includes full-text of 34 weblogs in RSS-compatible format.<sup>70</sup> Weblogs were selected using a semi-snowballing approach that started from my weblog and used frequency and reciprocity of linking as inclusion criteria (for more details see Efimova et al., 2005). We excluded non-English weblogs, those authored by multiple people and those that presented persistent technical problems for collecting their data.

The analysis was focused on identifying patterns in the dataset that would allow the evaluation and refinement of the suggestions in Study 1 regarding practices of participating in weblog conversations, with special focus on conversations with self and others. For the analysis of the dataset we used tOKo, an open source tool for text analysis, with support for ontology development and exploring communities (Anjewierden & Efimova, 2006). The tool was used to map conversations of KM bloggers and to generate data related to participation in those conversations (linking patterns within and between conversations). In addition to the existing visualisation of conversations by KM bloggers, additional visual

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<sup>70</sup> It includes weblog and post metadata usually available in RSS feeds.

representations were developed specifically for this study. Visualisations were printed and annotated; additional data analysis was done in Excel. While working on the study, intermediate findings were documented in the weblogs of two researchers.

### ***Two studies compared***

*Table 4-1* summarises the research approach for both studies. Given the differences in specifics of collecting and analysing the data, it is not possible to compare the results directly. However, the two studies provide complementary perspectives on conversational blogging practices among KM bloggers.

*Table 4-1* Comparison between two studies

	<b>Study 1.</b>	<b>Study 2.</b>
Dataset	Created manually Conversation-centric (only posts in the conversation are included).	Created semi-automatically Network-centric; membership is defined based on a semi-snowballing sample starting from my weblog, based on frequency and reciprocity of linking (for more details see Efimova et al., 2005); some weblogs are excluded.
	23 Nov 03 – 18 Jan 2004 (only 1 post and 3 comments are in 2004) 17 blogs 32 participants (27 are bloggers) 30 posts, only those that are part of the conversation 59 comments Two languages (English and German)	1 Jan – 31 Dec 2004 34 weblogs/participants 6320, all posts in the weblogs included in 2004 No comments included Only English weblogs
Mapping weblog conversations	Mapped manually, by following outgoing links and trackbacks.  Includes linked posts between and within weblogs, as well as comments to those posts.	Mapped automatically, using tOKo, by extracting groups of posts that link to each other. Includes only linked posts between weblogs (conversations with others), only linked posts within a weblog (conversations with self) and linked posts between and within weblogs (conversations with self and others).
Analysis	Identifying patterns of participation in the conversation by analysing weblog artefacts and then using these to describe conversational practices.  Patterns analysed: media choices, linking patterns within the conversation.	Identifying patterns in the dataset to evaluate and to refine Study 1 findings in respect to conversational blogging practices and then using those to describe conversational practices Patterns analysed: linking patterns within and between conversations
Presentation of the results	Thick description that includes visual representation to illustrate the patterns.	Patterns (tables, graphs and visualisations) with commentary.

### 4.2.3 Quality criteria

Table 4-2 describes specific quality verification strategies applied in this study (for detailed description of verification strategies, see section 2.4.2).

Table 4-2 Quality verification strategies for the studies of conversational blogging practices

Verification strategy	Application for studies of conversational blogging practices
Theorising	The study was motivated by the contrasts between conversational uses of weblogs described in existing research and those that I observed in my own practice. The results are positioned with respect to existing weblog research and selected literature on computer-mediated communication.
Exposure	In both cases the conversations analysed were of a relatively limited scope; however, the analysis is informed by my long-term participant observation of KM bloggers and participation in other conversations.
Triangulation	The research questions were addressed by two complementary studies. Patterns observed in the weblogs studied were interpreted using my experiences of participating in conversations with KM bloggers. Both studies were carried out together with other researchers, with different personal experiences of blogging in general and knowledge of KM bloggers in particular. (Each case involved one researcher, who was not blogging himself.) In addition, the study of KM blogger networking (the following chapter) provides a view on some of the practices reported in this chapter, based on the interviews with the participants.
Participants as co-researchers	Participant feedback on the draft paper with the results of one study. Blog coverage for the second study; feedback on the chapter draft from some of the participants.
Transparency	Results include direct links to, and quotes from, participants' weblogs. The results are complimented with quotes from publicly available weblogs.
Thick description	Only for the first study
Reflexivity and purposeful confessional writing	Personal stories are included to illustrate motivation for the research. Analysis includes examples of my own patterns of participation in weblog conversations as well as the discussion of those points to the similarities to and differences from other participants.

### 4.2.4 Writing conventions

The following sections present the results of two studies. In each case I first describe patterns of participating in weblog conversations and then use these to discuss practices of conversational blogging. In the following text, quotes and discussion of specific weblog posts are accompanied by their URLs, all of which were valid as of January 31, 2008. Quotes include original text and emphasis used in the posts and comments; links are indicated as underlined text (clickable in a digital document). The rest of the formatting (e.g. colours) is excluded. The visualisations of patterns in personal blogging practices in my dissertations are treated in two different ways: when attribution to the real person is unavoidable or essential for an interpretation, permission to include names and links was acquired; in

all other cases, visualisations are anonymised. When discussing my participation in the *Actionable Sense* conversation I refer to myself in a third person (as "Lilia").

### 4.3 Study 1. The *Actionable Sense* conversation

This section presents the results from Study 1. I first describe patterns of participating in the *Actionable Sense* conversation and then use them to describe conversational practices.

#### 4.3.1 Patterns of participating in the conversation

This section presents the patterns of participating in the *Actionable Sense* conversation that could be observed based on the artefacts representing it (posts, comments and links). After providing an overview of the conversation, patterns related to media choice and linking are presented.

##### *Overview*

The weblog-mediated part of the conversation analysed took place between November 23, 2003 and January 18, 2004 and included 30 weblog posts (including 4 identified as off-topic) and 59 comments in two languages (English and German).<sup>71</sup> In total 32 people participated: 11 used both posts in their own weblogs and comments in weblogs of others, 6 posted to their weblog only, and 15 used only comments. Of the 15 people who used comments, 10 provided a link to their own weblog; for the other five it was not possible to identify whether or not they had a weblog.

*Figure 4-2* provides an overview of the conversation (due to limitations of space it excludes 12 people who commented only once). The figure illustrates only posts linked to other posts in the conversation; in most cases the participants posted on other topics in between. During the first couple of days an original post by Lilia triggers a few comments (only one is included in *Figure 4-2* and a post by Martin, but none of them generates further discussion. However, once Ton picks it up and reframes the problem, the conversation intensifies quickly.

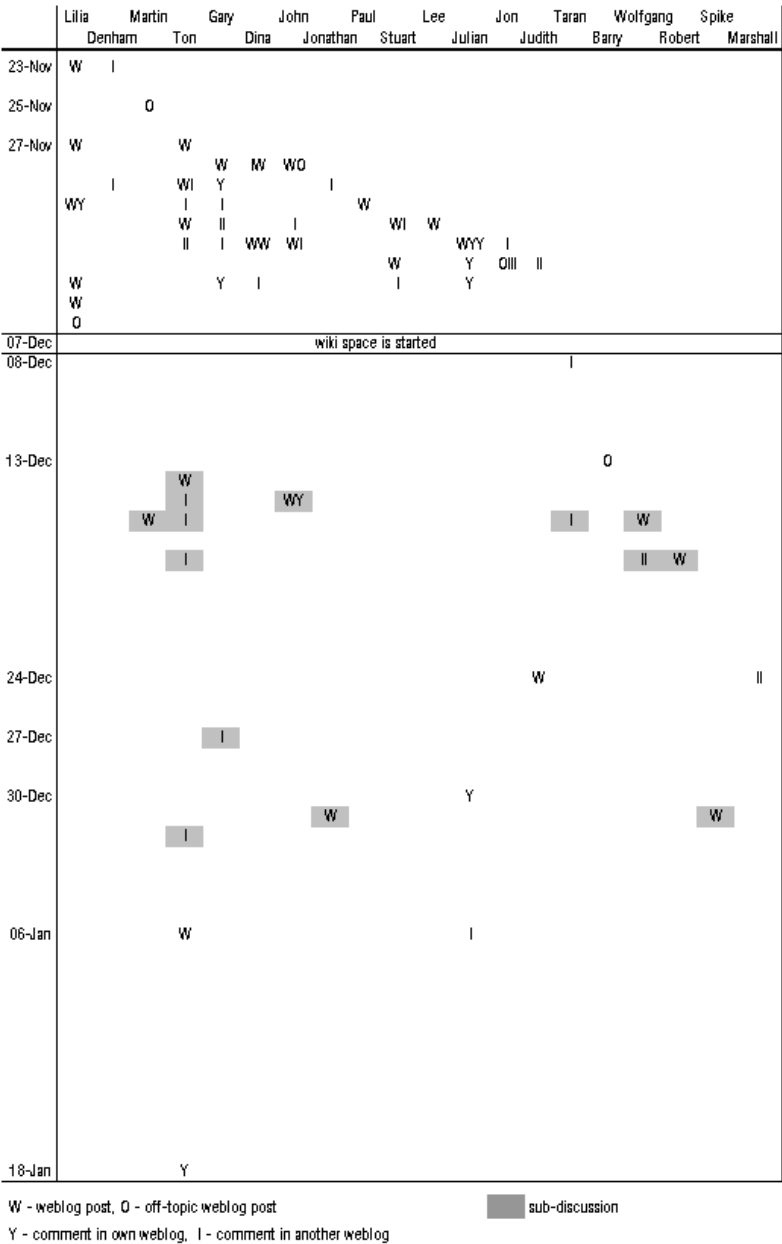
After several exchanges, the conversation almost stops for a week until Ton posts on December 14. The pause could be explained by the fact that

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<sup>71</sup> Some of the participants have moved their weblogs since the time of the conversation. Although some of them replicated old entries with new URLs, in this section I refer to the original ones to preserve the integrity of the conversation. This is also true for my own weblog entries: in this chapter references to my own weblog posts include URLs prior to changing weblog software.

a shared wiki space was established during that week and part of the discussion moved there.

Figure 4-2 Actionable Sense conversation overview



The second part of the conversation is different from the first. Not everyone from the first part participates and several new people join in. This part is also qualitatively different: most of the posts and comments are reactions to Ton's post describing an idea of organisational structure for an ad-hoc network of bloggers (marked as sub-discussion at *Figure 4-2*). Finally, it proceeds in two languages, English and German.

These two parts could be treated as two different conversations, however both are included in the analysis as they seem to be connected: several people participate in both; Ton keeps the running title (Actionable sense I, II and III) and refers to e-mail exchanges with Lilia and Martin inspired by one of the earlier posts.

### ***Media choices: weblog posts vs. comments in other weblogs***

Commenting in another weblog seems to be the easiest way to contribute to a discussion: it provides an obvious context, immediately visible to others, and doesn't require extra effort to provide necessary context and linking in one's own weblog. However, in many cases the participants choose a more complicated way and react in their own weblogs. Dina's comment on Ton's post shown below illustrates how commenting inspired her to write a post in her weblog:<sup>72</sup>

*Web quote 4-2*  
Commenting on [Making Actionable Sense](#),  
Dina Mehta,  
28 November 2003

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Saw this post in my news aggregator Ton – and i felt i have to say that i couldn't agree with you more and that i would love to see it happen. I had the very same feeling this evening – amazing synchronicity !\ I've only just returned from a meeting with a company that is more 'open' than many others to the idea using social software tools like blogs, both in their intranet and externally. And as i was driving back – i was thinking that how wonderful it would be to be able to brainstorm with other bloggers interested in this area on some of the barriers or stumbling blocks – and work out possible solutions or directions forward. There is much that i can already tap into in terms of the technology involved – but very little that makes me confident about really 'motivating' them to start. Aaaaah – i feel a blog post coming up ... :)

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*Figure 4-2* also illustrates different ways of using weblog posts and comments by the participants. In this conversation, some participants rarely use comments (e.g. Lilia, Dina), while others comment a lot (e.g. Ton, Gary). The choices of where to comment are different as well: Julian supports discussion at his own weblog, while Ton comments to posts at the weblogs of others.

There are two people (Jonathan and Judith) who first appear commenting in others' weblogs, but later on post to their own weblogs. This indicates their awareness of the conversation even if it is not

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<sup>72</sup> [Blogs – turning ideas into actions](#) (Dina Mehta, 28 November 2003); comparing the texts of comment and post reveals how the original comment got integrated into the post.

immediately visible from their weblogs. Judith's post on December 24<sup>73</sup> confirms this: she gives an overview of the discussion and links to earlier posts.

There are three cases where participants use comments twice without posting to a weblog (two of them link to their own weblogs, so they had the choice of writing a weblog post). Denham comments twice, but both times to Lilia's posts, Taran comments in two weblogs on different topics, while Marshall posts almost identical comments in two weblogs (alerting the authors and readers about the specific meaning of the word "actionable" and triggering Ton's post on January 6). Thus, there seem to be a variety in commenting purposes in the sense of either triggering posts in one's own blog (preparing to define one's own individual view), monitoring a particular thread, general conversation, and strengthening the coherence of the conversation.

### ***Media choices: other media***

Several weblog posts indicate that the conversation is spanning different media. This post by Stuart provides a good example:

*Web quote 4-3*  
[Actionable Sense](#),  
 Stuart Henshall,  
 3 December 2003

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There is a little trepidation when a troupe starts exploring whether it can really collaborate and how it can make money. I was serious about both [conversational blogging and jazz communities](#). I reread and reread new posts from overnight, spent time Skyping with [Ton](#) and [Dina](#) and then resorting to the phone with Ross Mayfield. In the meantime I've sent out yet more messages spoke to [Gary](#) this morning and it continues.

Ross Mayfield made the emerging **Actionable Sense Troupe** a very generous offer yesterday to aid in community building by offering a [SocialText](#) workspace<sup>74</sup> get things started. Having read many thoughtful posts I'm going to start inviting those in that have said they want to participate later today.

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Other participants refer to the use of different media as well. For example, several of them mention the wiki space, e-mail exchanges, phone conversations, instant messaging or Skype discussions. Dina posts a transcript of an instant messaging session with Stuart.<sup>75</sup> Lilia, Ton and Martin refer to an e-mail exchange between the three of them.<sup>76</sup> This use of different media is not unique for the specific group of bloggers studied: similar observations are done by other weblog researchers (Ali-Hasan & Adamic, 2007; Efimova & Ben Lassoued, 2008; Hodkinson, 2006; Nardi et al., 2004).

<sup>73</sup> [actionable cohorts...](#) (Judith Meskill, 24 December 2003).

<sup>74</sup> This refers to the private wiki space mentioned earlier.

<sup>75</sup> [Turning ideas into action \(2\) - corporate blogging](#) (Dina Mehta, 2 December 2003).

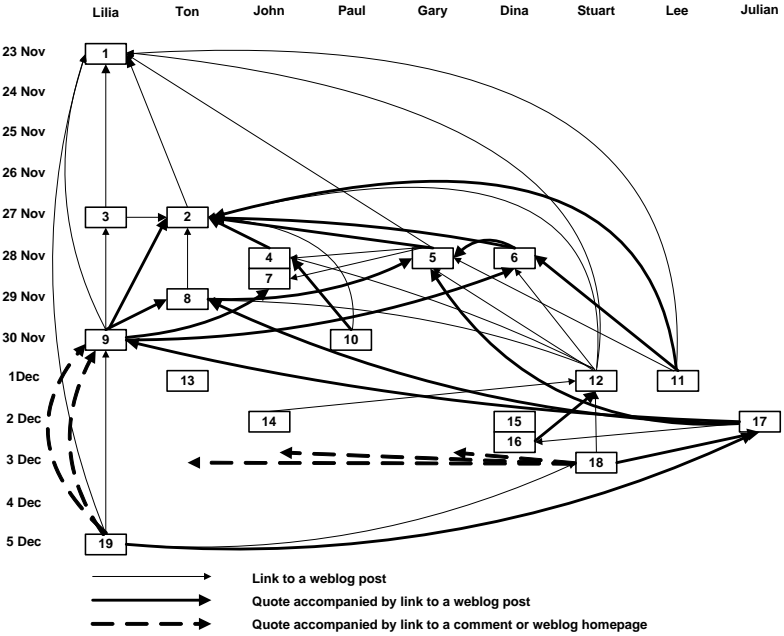
<sup>76</sup> [The power of loose ends \(3\) or the weakness of weblogs when it comes to joint actions](#) (Mathemagenic, 5 December 2003), [Making Actionable Sense III](#) (Ton Zijlstra, 14 December 2003) and [Unverfolgte Ideen, sichtbar](#) (Martin Roell, 23 November 2003).



**Linking: connecting, referencing and quoting**

Figure 4-3 provides an example of links between weblog posts in the conversation. It includes weblog posts between November 23 and December 5 and links between them. In order to simplify the presentation, comments, off-topic weblog posts and links to other weblog posts (one's own or someone else's) are excluded. Even in this simplified form, the figure illustrates the complexity of interconnections between weblog posts.

Figure 4-3 Linking and quoting in the Actionable Sense conversation



As the conversation spreads between multiple weblogs, links provide the main connection between different weblog posts.

In most cases, links are used to indicate previous argument(s) that a blogger refers to in a post. In this case, links lead to a specific post (or a comment section, e.g. post 19 links to comments to post 9). However, post 18 is an exception: while quoting Ton, John and Gary, Stuart refers to their weblog homepages, rather than to specific posts.

Apart from linking to earlier arguments in a conversation, links can play other roles. A weblog post by Jonathan (not included in *Figure 4-3*) illustrates this:<sup>77</sup>

*Web quote 4-4*  
Jonathan Smith,  
31 December 2003

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Following a [pointer](#) by Spike Hall, I came upon [Making Actionable Sense, Part III](#). Ton Zijlstra puts forward an interesting model, which he has been discussing via e-mail with [Lilia Efimova](#) and [Martin Roell](#). (It resembles some of the conceptualization by Peter Senge of his "[Learning Organizations](#)".)

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The first link provides a "discovery credit", referring to a post by Spike where Jonathan had discovered a post by Ton, referred to with the second link. The third and fourth links point to the homepages of Lilia's and Martin's weblogs, crediting their participation in the discussion. The last link points to an external source that enriches the conversation with Jonathan's own associations.

The participants of this conversation seem to care about crediting others. In most cases, quotes are accompanied by links to an original post. When referring to a post (quoting or just providing a link), most of the participants include the blogger's name (often only a first name suggesting familiarity, similar to Nilsson, 2003). When quoting others, the participants use a variety of ways to distinguish their own text from the text of others: indent, emphasis, colour or other visual cues.

### ***Linking: summaries***

Compared to conversations mediated by other discussion technologies, such as mailing lists (de Moor & Efimova, 2004), a relatively large number of summaries can be observed in the conversation analysed (e.g. posts 9, 11, 18, 19 on *Figure 4-3*). For example, Lee (post 11) provides an overview of the conversation:

*Web quote 4-5*  
[An interesting conversation about turning ideas into action](#),  
Lee Bryant,  
1 December 2003

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There has been an interesting little conversation going on between people we are connected with recently around the idea of making "actionable sense" through blogging – i.e. how to turn evolving ideas into action.

Ton [started it](#), prompted by Lilia's post about [exposing loose ends](#) (of thoughts) through blogging:

[Quotes Ton]

Denham Grey [chipped in](#) to suggest using a Wiki as a way of gradually dealing with the loose ends issue.

Then, in the midst of her house moving, Dina Mehta [got very excited](#) about Ton's ideas and pointed to an [interesting follow-up](#) from Gary Murphy. She also supported the idea that sometimes involving other people in your thinking network can help turn ideas into action:

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<sup>77</sup> The weblog post is no longer online; cited as in Efimova & de Moor (2005).

[Quotes Dina]

This is one of those cases where the form of the conversation matches its content, which suggests that Ton's original suggestion about communities of bloggers working together to turn their ideas into action may actually work.

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Summaries can play different roles in a post. Lee's post is a summary by itself, while, for example, Lilia and Stuart (posts 9 and 12 respectively) give an overview of an earlier discussion before providing their own contribution. However, these overviews look different: Stuart just links to relevant posts,<sup>78</sup> while Lilia quotes extensively.<sup>79</sup>

While posts are often summarised with a collection of links to various pieces of an earlier discussion, none of the posts links to all earlier arguments. This suggests either a lack of overview of all relevant parts of the conversation, or the conscious choice of a weblog author to link only to parts that meaningfully connect with his or her writing.

#### ***Linking: connecting one's own posts***

While linking to earlier posts of others seems to be a regular practice, the participants employ different strategies when referring to their own posts that are part of the conversation. For example, Lilia links to all previous posts, Dina and John do not link to earlier posts at all, Ton links in one case, but not in another.

While not necessarily linking to their earlier posts, several participants use running titles to connect posts together. For example, Dina uses the following titles for her posts: "Blogs – turning ideas into actions", "Turning ideas into actions (2) – Corporate blogging" and "Turning ideas into actions (3) – From conversational blogging to jazz communities" (posts 6, 15 and 16 respectively). While the second post clearly belongs to Dina's view of the conversation, no other participant links to it. A similar example includes a post by Lilia (3), where she connects it with her other posts during the conversation, but it is not linked to by any other weblog.

### **4.3.2 Conversational blogging practices**

Although several studies suggest limited interactivity of weblogs (e.g. Herring et al., 2004; Nardi et al., 2004), our case illustrates that weblogs could serve as a conversation tool: supporting fast and meaningful reactions, exchange of multiple perspectives and joint development of ideas. Contrary to a randomly selected weblog (as in Herring et al., 2004), in this case one can observe multiple comments, frequent linking and even summaries of

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<sup>78</sup> [From Conversational Blogging to Jazz Communities](#) (Stuart Henshall, 1 December 2003).

<sup>79</sup> [The power of loose ends \(2\)](#) (Mathemagenic, 30 November 2003).

earlier discussion. Although all participants have used weblogs as a conversational tool, their conversational practices differ. Example are the frequency of choosing to comment in other weblogs vs. writing to one's own weblog, quoting vs. linking, different ways of organising one's own contributions (linking to own posts and running titles).

Having given a description of some of the patterns of participating in the conversation, we can now use these to characterise the conversational practices in the case: choosing channels to communicate, linking as conversational glue, tangential conversations, and conversations with self versus others.

### ***Choosing communication channels***

Probably the main difference of weblog conversations in relation to those supported by other media is the lack of a single space where a conversation develops. For a blogger, this means constant decision-making with regard to the means of engaging into the conversation. As well as non-weblog alternatives (e.g. email or instant messaging), there is a choice between commenting and blogging. While responding to a weblog post using comments functionality is similar to replying in a forum or mailing list, doing so in one's own weblog is qualitatively different.<sup>80</sup>

*Web quote 4-6*  
Diane Greco, quoted by  
Mark Bernstein in [Social](#),  
4 December 2004

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...what no one has yet mentioned is *how the writing changes* depending on whether one is writing a comment or a post in one's own blog. And here's where I want to throw my hat into our ring. When I comment on a blog post, the context is made for me. I don't have to situate the author or her comments, as I have done, albeit sketchily, for Mark and Jill in this post. I don't have to engage with the ideas by filtering them through my own sensibility. I can just respond; I don't have to *write*, meaning I don't have to *engage with* other voices, other writers, other ideas while also presenting my own.

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In addition, while a forum or a mailing list discussion usually represents a space, guided by group norms and practices, contributing to a weblog conversation is essentially a choice between two places shaped primarily by individual bloggers: it is either in your weblog or in mine. Depending on the space chosen, these contributions result in different types of writing, different degrees of control over them (a comment in someone else's blog could be "moderated"), exposure to different audiences and different effects they potentially have on the reputation of their authors (readers of

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<sup>80</sup> The quote comes from a member of another tightly-knit weblog community, which I would address as "hypertext/game research bloggers".

a weblog can more easily see the blogger's own posts and are likely to miss comments in other weblogs).<sup>81</sup>

While there are situational choices for commenting vs. blogging (as the example of Dina switching between the two in section 4.3.1 illustrates), it seems that bloggers also have individual preferences regarding this. Although the results of a single conversation are not conclusive with respect to longer-term patterns, for me they provided an insight on differences between my own blogging practices and those of others in the community.

### ***Linking as a conversational glue***

As the conversation is distributed across many weblogs, the participants employ a variety of tactics to retain an overview: they link to others and quote their words, provide summaries, use trackbacks to find incoming links or even add incoming links manually (see Ton's post on November 27).<sup>82</sup> In many cases, those links are not just pointers to related information, but also "currency of the web" (Walker, 2002) that help to improve the visibility of a page being linked to or, especially in the context of weblogs, are a sign of value and personal recommendation (for the analogy between linking in weblogs and references in scholarly publications see Mortensen & Walker, 2002).

Linking practices seem to be the "glue" that holds the conversation together: without links and trackbacks posts across weblogs lose their "physical" connection even when they are connected to each other logically. This makes weblog conversations different from those facilitated by other communication tools: in other cases there is a shared space (e.g. a discussion thread in a forum) that holds the conversation together, while in the case of weblogs it is the effort of the participants that connects different contributions. Although the putting of effort into developing and reinforcing shared practices is observed in case of other media (e.g. Erickson, 1999), it doesn't go as far as creating a shared communication space by connecting different personal spaces.

### ***Tangential conversations***

Another interesting characteristic of weblogs as a conversational tool is their potential to support tangential conversations, those where parts of a conversation diverge from each other while still remaining connected. In the case analysed, several levels of tangential conversations are observed. First, next to the "global" conversation between different weblogs, many of

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<sup>81</sup> Unless the blogger uses tools that aggregate his/her comments to other weblogs such as CoComment ([www.cocomment.com](http://www.cocomment.com)); such tools were introduced after the period reported in the study.

<sup>82</sup> [Making Actionable Sense](#) (Ton Zijlstra, 27 November 2004).

them host "local" conversations supported by comments about specific posts. Second, the conversation seems to branch into subtopics that are discussed simultaneously. Third, there are language-specific conversations (English and German in our case). Fourth, "conversations with others" are accompanied by "conversations with self" that organise the thinking of a single weblog author (see the following section). Finally, the conversation we analysed is not limited to using weblogs as the only tool to support it: the participants employ a variety of other media to communicate in parallel to their discussion in weblogs.

Compared to the tree structure of conversations facilitated by other tools, such as mailing lists, distributed weblog conversations provide an example of a hypertext conversation: they can follow multiple paths simultaneously, engaging and connecting different audiences.

### ***Conversation with self vs. conversation with others***

Unlike other tools that support conversations, weblogs provide their authors with a personal space and a community space simultaneously. As a result, at any given time a blogger may be involved in two types of conversations: conversations with self and conversations with others.

In the simplest case, a weblog post is fully and only embedded into "a conversation with self", a personal narrative used to articulate and to organise one's own thinking. A single blogger could have several such conversations simultaneously, returning to ideas over time. Next, each of the posts can trigger a conversation with others that can take several rounds of discussions as well.

The choice between reacting to others' ideas with a comment in either other weblogs or one's own weblog is an illustration of the dynamics that emerge from the coexistence of multiple discussion spaces. Also, one's own weblog is much easier to search than one's comments all over the blogosphere.

This case includes other indicators of the role of personal space in a weblog conversation. For example, linking to one's earlier posts or the use of running titles indicates the author's attempts to maintain a personal line of thinking while contributing to the discussion (other ways to organise ideas within a weblog – use of categories or topics – are not included in our analysis). Summaries can serve as another example: adding a new argument, a blogger tries to make it meaningful in both personal and social contexts, by summarizing and connecting to earlier arguments.

The effort bloggers make to organise their ideas are not unique to this medium. It reflects a broader need for organising personal physical and digital artefacts (Kidd, 1994; Sellen & Harper, 2001), and contact and conversation management (Halverson, 2004; Whittaker et al., 2002).

However, a major weblog complexity is that the same tool is used for managing personal space and for engaging into conversations with others. In spite of the fact that weblogs are often perceived as personal "protected spaces", their authors take into account social consequences and shape their weblog accordingly (Gumbrecht, 2004). For example, the careful attribution of others' contributions may not be needed when writing for oneself, but it plays an important social role in public.

While the results of this study provide indicators that weblogs are used for conversations with self as well as conversations with others, an analysis of a single conversation provides only a limited view on this phenomenon. In the study reported in the following section the phenomenon is explored in more detail.

#### **4.4 Study 2. Conversations with self and others**

This study started from mapping weblog conversations in the content of 34 weblogs in a comparable way to the one in Study 1: extracting sets of interlinked weblog posts. One of the resulting conversations was abnormal: it consisted of 876 posts from all weblogs in the dataset. A scan of weblog posts in that conversation indicated that it covered many different topics and was a result of an extensive self-linking within some weblogs that connected different "conversations with others" via "conversations with self".

This incident, as well as the limitations of the dataset and tools at our disposal, shaped the focus of this study: exploring practices of using weblogs for conversations with self and others, and individual differences between bloggers in that respect. In addition, providing an overview of multiple conversations in the community allows positioning the conversation analysed in Study 1.

In this section the results of this study are presented: I describe patterns of participating in conversations with self and others that could be observed in the dataset and then use them to discuss practices of conversational blogging.

##### **4.4.1 Patterns of participating in conversations**

This section presents patterns of participating in conversations observed in the dataset that includes full text of 34 KM bloggers in the year 2004. First we focus on conversations with others and conversations with self independently, using linking patterns between and within weblogs respectively to provide an overview of the each type and to compare their temporal characteristics. Then we explore the picture that emerges when

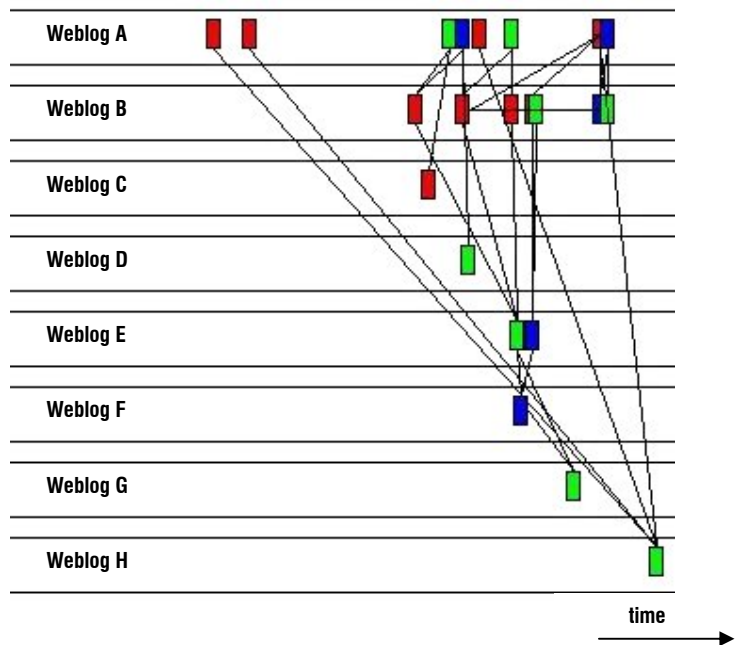
weblog conversations are defined to include both conversations with others and conversations with self, by providing an overview of conversations in the community as a whole, insights on differences between personal profiles of bloggers and the view into the mega-conversation that included 876 posts.

### ***Conversations with others in the community***

Conversations with others are defined as sets of posts connected by linking between different weblogs.

Figure 4-4 provides an example of such a conversation, which includes 23 posts from 8 weblogs. From left to right is time (about one year in this case). Weblogs are represented by horizontal bars. Rectangles symbolise weblog posts in the conversation, their position on a bar indicates the moment of posting. Lines represent links that connect specific weblog posts.

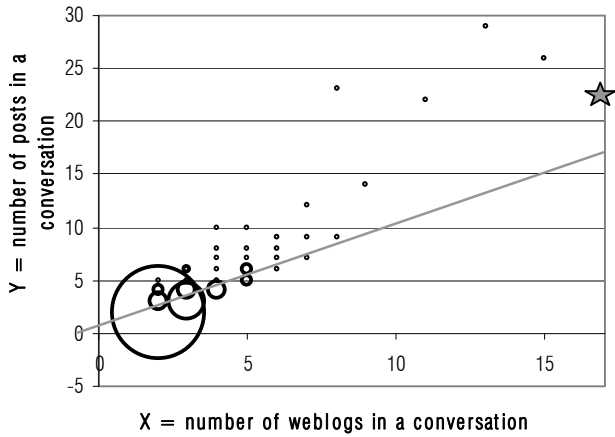
Figure 4-4 Example of a conversation with others





In total 276 conversations with others were extracted from the dataset. *Figure 4-5* provides an overview of the results as a scatterplot graph, where the size of the bubble represents number of conversations with X blogs and Y weblog posts. The star indicates the relative position of the conversation analysed in Study 1 (with comments and self-linked posts removed for comparability).

*Figure 4-5*  
Conversations with others



These conversations can be divided into two groups. Conversations on the diagonal line in *Figure 4-5* include N posts from N weblogs. Those we call *linear* as they do not include "back and forth" exchanges via weblog posts (although such exchanges might appear in the comments). The conversations above the diagonal line include *feedback loops* with at least one of the participants contributing to the exchange more than once.

*Table 4-3* presents the breakdown of conversation numbers for these two categories, according to the number of participating weblogs. The majority of conversations (184, 67%) include just two weblog posts linked to each other. As the number of posts in a conversation grows, it is more likely to include feedback loops, increasing the complexity of the conversations.

Table 4-3  
Conversations with  
others

Number of participating weblogs	2	3	4	5	6	7	8+	Total	%
Linear conversations	184	30	8	3	1	1		227	82%
Conversations with feedback loops	14	12	5	7	3	2	6	49	18%

These findings indicate that when defined narrowly, taking into account only posts *between* weblogs, complex conversations like the one described in Study 1 do not occur frequently. They also suggest that the conversations with more weblogs participating are likely to include multiple reciprocal exchanges.

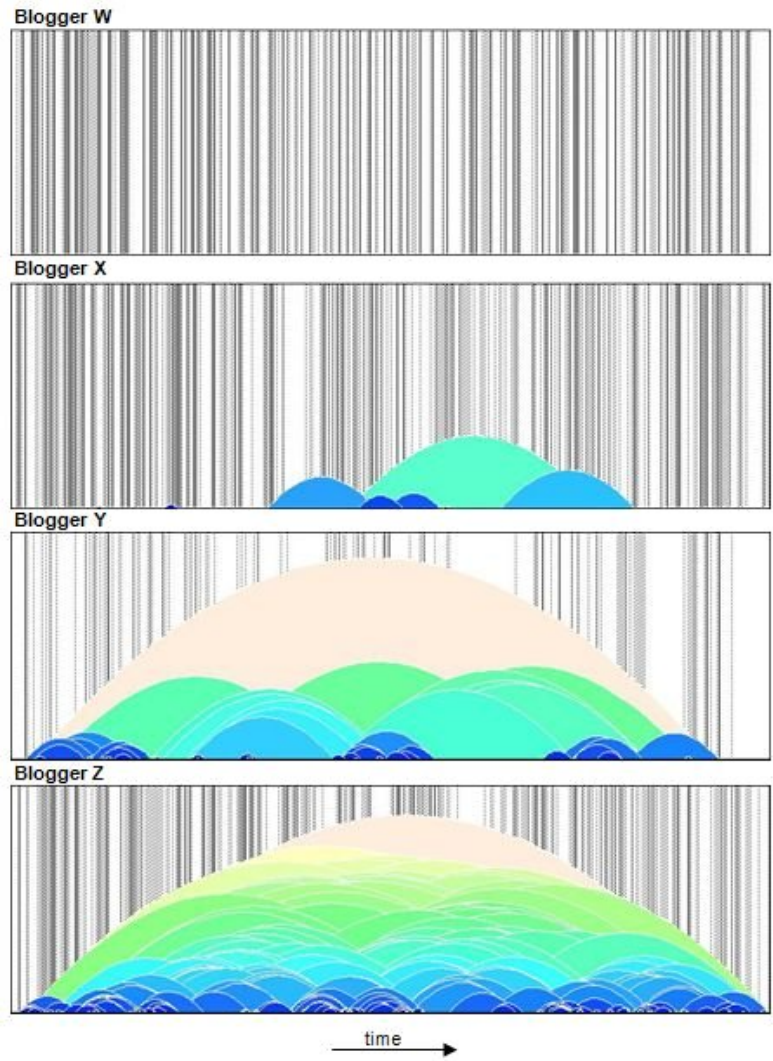
**Conversations with self: personal profiles**

We define conversations with self as sets of posts connected by linking within a weblog (self-linking). Since personal differences between bloggers in this respect were observed in Study 1 and also appeared in the abnormally big conversation from this dataset, this section explores individual bloggers' conversations with self. To do so, self-linking patterns are visualised for each blogger using the Thread Arc technique (Kerr, 2003) as an inspiration.

Figure 4-6 presents examples of self-linking profiles. Left to right is time in days; a dotted vertical line represents a day when a weblog post was written (multiple posts on the same day are shown as a more solid line). Arcs represent links between weblog posts and are filled with a colour: the darker the colour the shorter the time span of the linked posts.

The profiles of all bloggers in our dataset could be roughly divided into four groups. Profiles of bloggers W and Z give examples of the extremes: no self-linking at all and extreme linking to one's one posts (the last example represents my own weblog). Blogger X represents the majority in our sample, those with a few self-links; blogger Y provides an example of moderate self-linking.

Figure 4-6 Examples of self-linking profiles



The visualisation illustrates that conversations with self, as represented by self-linking, are more of a personal choice rather than something that all

bloggers do. Three out of four figures show a similar frequency of blogging, but very different self-linking profiles, indicating that the two are unlikely to be related. Interestingly, visualising linking to other weblogs shows a similar variety of profiles,<sup>83</sup> reinforcing the need to explore specific reasons behind these differences.

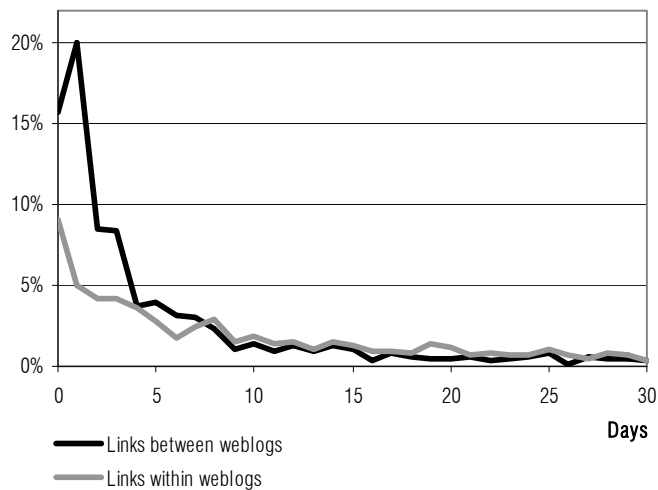
### ***Conversations with others vs. conversations with self: temporal differences***

Conversations with others and self are difficult to compare directly; however we can get insights into their temporal differences by looking at the time intervals between linked weblog posts.

In total, 635 links between weblogs and 1086 links within weblogs are found in the dataset. A relatively small number of links between weblogs might be surprising. However, it is reasonable to assume that the total number of links to others is much higher, since this count includes only links in the dataset that covers a fraction of weblogs that one might link to.

Figure 1-1 shows the percentage of links that appear within a month from a weblog post. Linking by others starts fast (17% of links appear on the same day, while 20% on the next day), while linking within the weblog is slower (9% of links appear on the same day, 5% next day). After a week the percentage of new links becomes similar, with a slightly higher rate of self-linking.

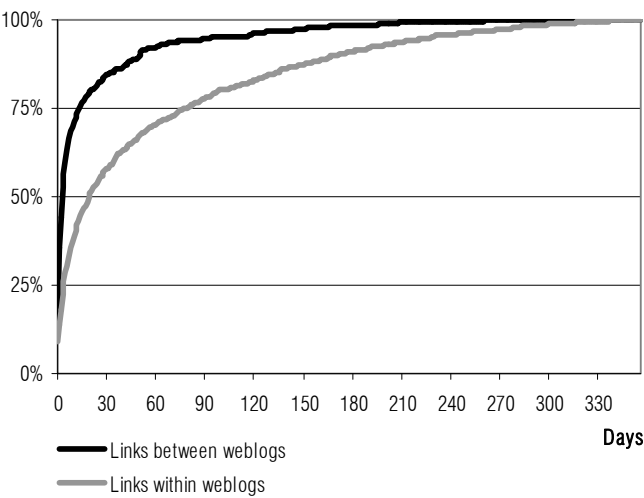
Figure 4-7 Links to a weblog post within the first month



<sup>83</sup> These are not reported in this study since they include only linking within the dataset, which does not represent networks of different bloggers equally well.

Figure 4-8 presents the cumulative percentage of links over time. Cumulatively, 50% of all links between weblogs appear within 3 days, 75% within 14 days, while for the links within a weblog it takes 20 days and 78 days respectively.

Figure 4-8 Links to a weblog post over time, cumulative



The results indicate a relatively fast pace of conversations with others, similar to the findings of Study 1. In contrast, speed of linking seems to be less important in conversations with self. Although in both cases, older posts are less likely to be linked (the number of links decreases over time), self-linking might go as far as 356 days back (compared to 283 days for links between weblogs).

**Conversations with self and others in the community**

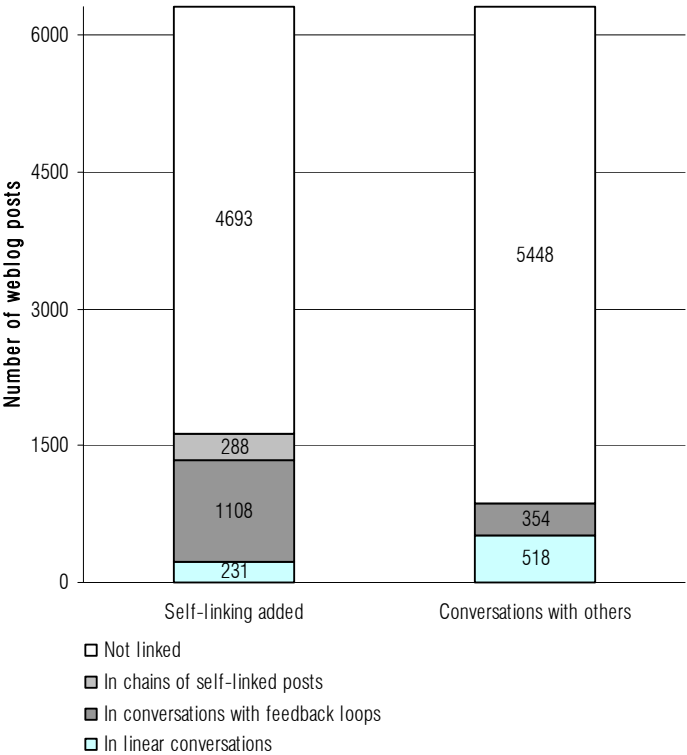
When conversations are defined broadly, as sets of linked posts between or within weblogs, 287 of them are found in the dataset; 127 of those are networks of posts by the same blogger (conversations with self, not connected to conversations with others). Removing these from the dataset leaves 160 conversations with others and self (Table 4-4).

Table 4-4  
Conversations with others and self

Number of participating weblogs	2	3	4	5	9	34	Total	%
Linear conversations	106	5	1				112	70%
Conversations with feedback loops	30	10	4	2	1	1	48	30%

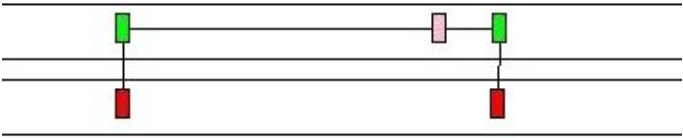
Redefining conversations to include self-linking decreases their total number as some conversations are now merged into a bigger one. It also results in a different ratio of conversations with or without feedback (30% conversations with feedback loops when self-links are included compared to 18% without them). The comparison becomes more illuminating when counting the number of posts within conversations, rather than the conversations themselves (*Figure 4-9*).

Figure 4-9 Number of weblog posts in conversations



When conversations are defined in a way that includes self-linked posts, not only does the total number of posts in conversations increase, but also many linear conversations "turn" into those that include feedback loops. *Figure 4-10* provides an example, where two brief 2x2 exchanges are connected into a single conversation by the self-linked post of the first blogger.

Figure 4-10 Two 2x2 conversations connected by self-linked post



To get more understanding of how conversations with others become part of bigger conversations connected via self-links we explore how this works from an individual blogger perspective.

***Conversations with self and others: personal profiles***

Given that bloggers differ with respect to linking to their own weblogs, in this section we look at different patterns of connections between conversations with self and others from a single blogger perspective.

Figure 4-11 provides an overview of conversations with others for a blogger. Each square represents a conversation: dark grey – linear ones (with N posts and N weblogs); black – conversations that include feedback loops. The size of a square is indicative of the total number of posts in the conversation. White square shows the number of posts that this blogger contributes to a conversation. While this blogger participates in multiple conversations with others, she does not have any of her posts connected to them by self-links.

Figure 4-11 Conversations with self others for a blogger

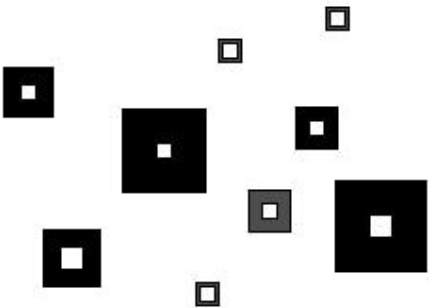
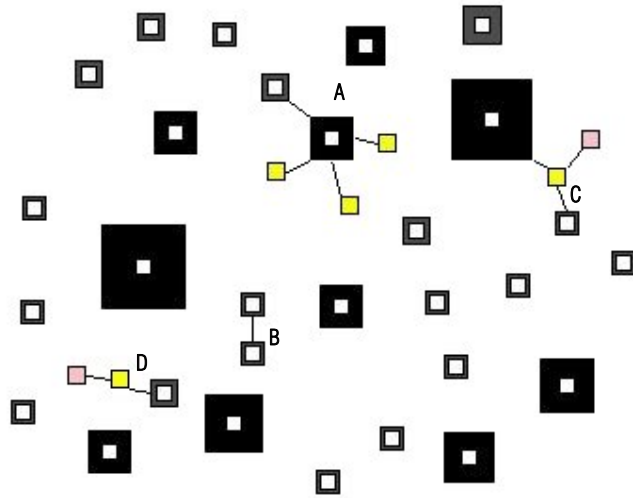


Figure 4-12 represents conversations for another blogger, who wrote several posts (light grey squares) connected to conversations with others via self-linking (lines that connect squares). The links connected several conversations with others: two pairs are directly linked (A, B), while one includes posts by the blogger in between (C). Another conversation has a "tail" from two self-linked posts (D): for this blogger the conversation continues in some sense even when others are not involved in it in a visible way.

Figure 4-12  
Conversations with self  
and others for a blogger,  
small scale connectivity

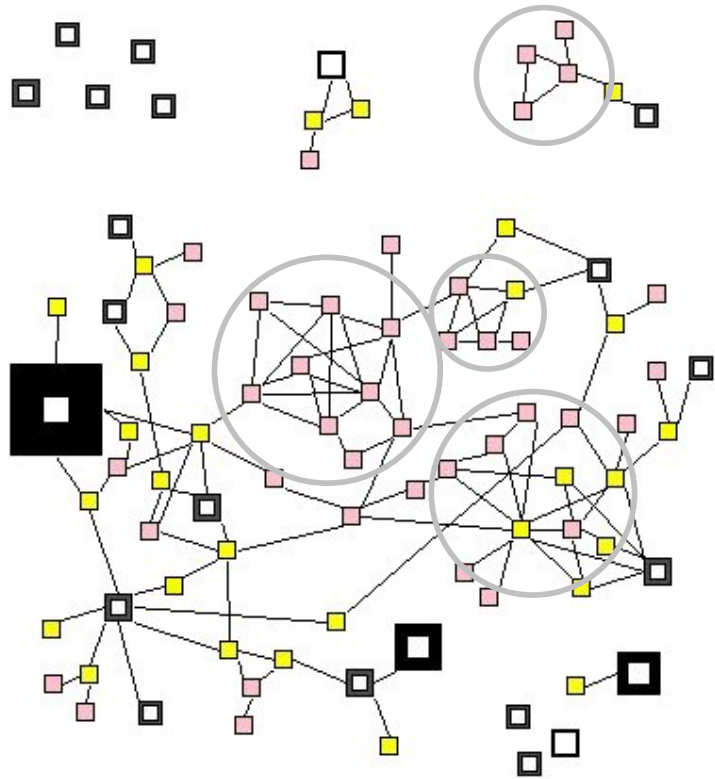


While those two figures represent the majority of bloggers in the dataset, the following three show more extreme cases.



Figure 4-13 represents conversations of Dave Pollard,<sup>84</sup> who blogs on a variety of topics including knowledge management and has a high number of links within his own weblog. It shows a large number of his posts, connected to conversations with others. In this case we can observe extensive conversations with self – clusters of own blog posts (indicated by circles) that are more than one link away from conversations with others.

Figure 4-13  
Conversations with self  
and others, Dave Pollard

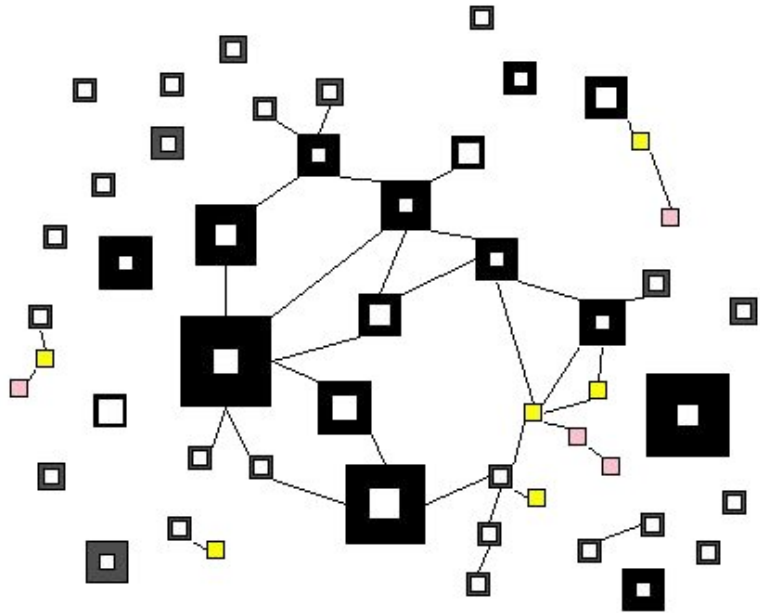


While Dave connects conversations with others via long chains of own posts, this is not necessarily the case with everyone, as the following figure illustrates (Figure 4-14). This blogger, Ton Zijlstra,<sup>85</sup> connects multiple conversations with others directly, by linking posts of his that belong to different conversations.

<sup>84</sup> Dave is blogging at *How to save the world*, [blogs.salon.com/0002007](http://blogs.salon.com/0002007)

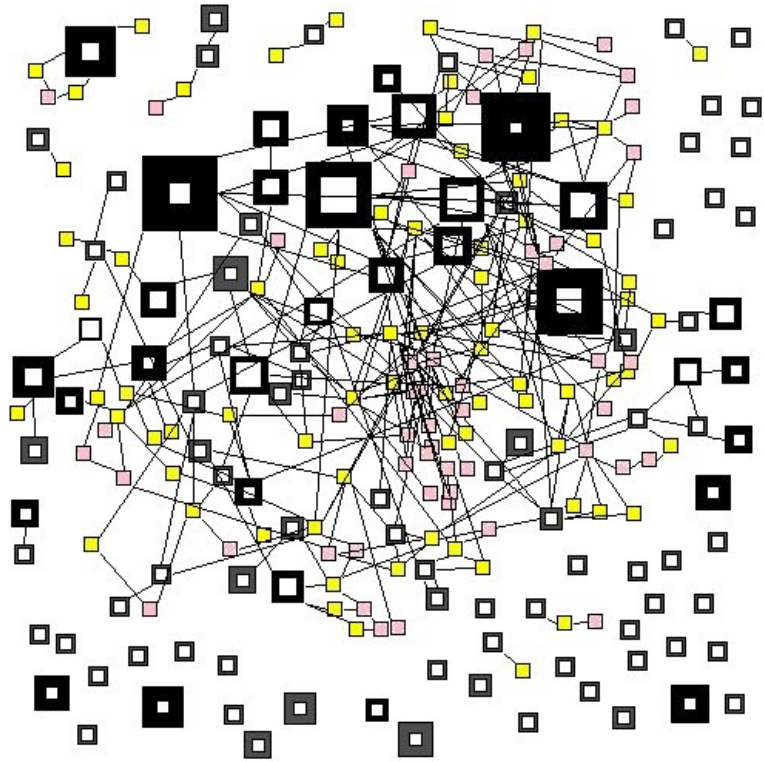
<sup>85</sup> Ton is blogging at *Interdependent thoughts*, [www.zylstra.org/blog](http://www.zylstra.org/blog).

Figure 4-14  
Conversations with self  
and others, Ton Zijlstra



Finally, *Figure 4-15* presents the case of my own weblog, which has a large number of conversations with others connected to many conversations with self. The extreme connectivity of it is explained not only by heavy self-linking (Dave has similar self-linking profile), but also by the fact that the dataset was built using a link-based snowballing approach started from my weblog, so my own conversations with others are more likely to be captured than those of other bloggers.

Figure 4-15  
Conversations with self  
and others ,  
Mathemagenic



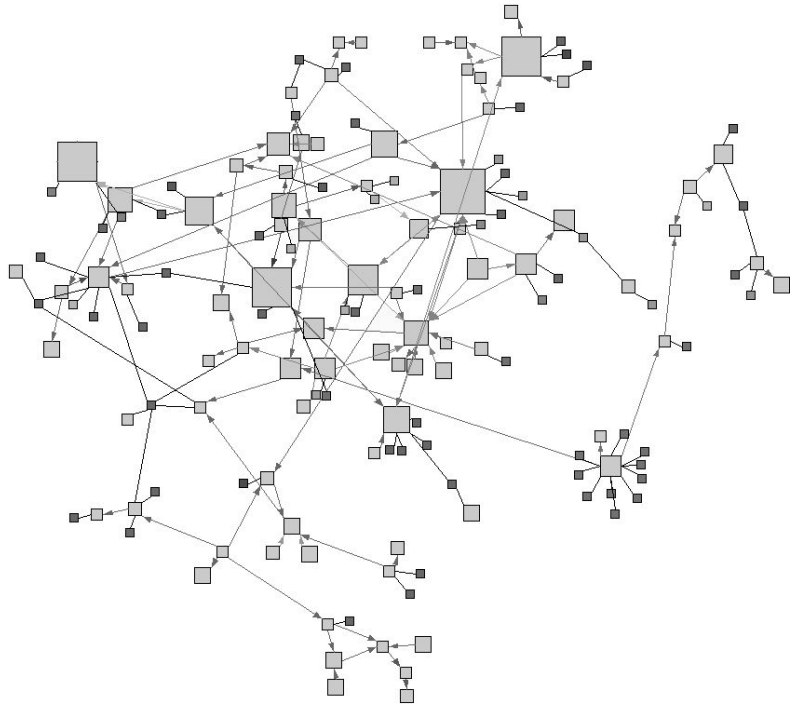
In addition to the degree of self-linking and position in the community, the differences between the figures above could be explained also by each blogger's style of writing. For example, while the last two figures represent relatively well-connected bloggers who link to their own posts regularly, the style of the two weblogs is very different. Ton (*Figure 4-14*) writes long posts that integrate a variety of sources and his own thinking, while my own blogging (*Figure 4-15*) includes many relatively short and frequent posts connected by links.

Despite the different ways of doing so, many bloggers in our dataset connect multiple conversations with others by the links between their own posts. In the next section we explore the effects of this on the conversations with others in the community as a whole, using the abnormally big conversation as an example.

### ***Conversations with self and others: mega-conversation***

Discovering a "conversation" of 876 posts that included everyone in the community was a challenge: existing visualisations did not have the scale to represent it and it was difficult to notice linking patterns by exploring the text of weblog posts. Later, given the patterns of connections between multiple conversations with others via self-links, we were able to develop a visualisation to look into it in detail (*Figure 4-16*).

*Figure 4-16*  
Mega-conversation



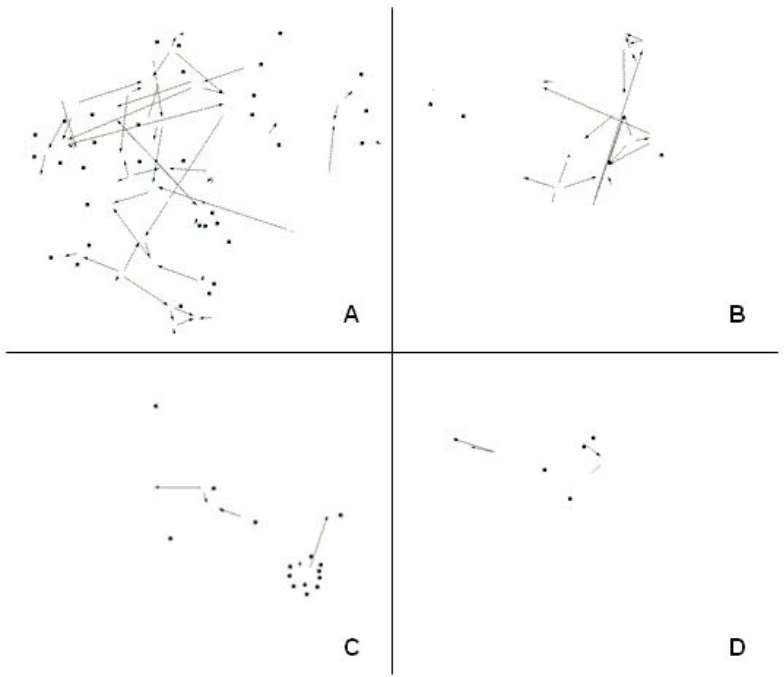
*Figure 4-16* illustrates that the abnormally big conversation that we found consists of multiple conversations with others (grey squares) interconnected by links within specific weblogs (lines). To simplify the picture, only self-linked posts directly connected to a conversation are shown (small squares); those that are more than one link away are removed, so chains of self-linked posts are not visualised.

While self-linking is rarely taken into account when analysing weblog conversations, this example illustrates that it is these links that can connect multiple conversations between weblogs into a single interlinked structure. This network of interconnected posts that includes many conversations with others and self provides an example of how weblog conversations might

look to search engines. Given the complexity of this mega-conversation it is unlikely that bloggers themselves are aware of it or realise that they might be playing a role in connecting different conversational fragments when linking.

The links between conversations with others are not equally established by the participating bloggers. *Figure 4-17* depicts links between conversation with others (lines) and self-linked posts that connect into one (dots) for four bloggers. Segments A and B represent myself and Ton, segments C and D - two other bloggers. The mega-conversation reflects patterns visible in personal profiles: most of the connections between conversations with others are provided by myself and Ton (most of Dave's connections are not visualised due to excluding chains of self-linked posts). However, there are other bloggers who add one or more links, adding new conversations with others or increasing the connectedness of those already linked.

*Figure 4-17*  
Mega-conversation,  
links by four bloggers



For me personally, working on visualising this mega-conversation revealed the impact of my own linking practices on the community as a whole. While my purpose in self-linking was to connect my own posts with links in order to be able to think better, but it turned out that these links accounted for a large portion of the connections in the abnormally big conversation in our dataset.

#### 4.4.2 Conversational blogging practices

In this section, insights on linking patterns in and between conversations in the community are used to discuss the conversational blogging practices of its members. I first focus on discussing practices of participating in conversations with self and others, and then focus on differences between bloggers in that respect. A discussion about the frequency of weblog conversations follows.

##### *Conversations with self and others*

The results of this study confirm the finding of Study 1 about the uses of weblogs for both conversations with others and those with oneself. They also provide insights into differences between these two types of conversations.

As indicated by the speed with which posts are linked, conversations with others display a faster pace compared to conversations with self. It is difficult to remember an old post by another blogger and to find it in someone else's archive, and fast reaction is important when others are involved:

*Web quote 4-7*  
[Not all feeds require the same polling frequency.](#) Paolo Valdemarin,  
 10 September 2004

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Quite often weblogs host conversations and in conversations timing is important. I want to know asap when people I often have conversations with post something to their blog, it can't wait 24 hours because it would make my reply old (let alone further replies).

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Not commenting in time in a conversation with others might result in a missed opportunity to participate; however, one's own ideas are always there to revisit and to refer to (although "staying in the flow" is important for the conversations with self as well, as the relatively large number of links on the first days illustrates).

The differences point to the distinct nature of what we call "conversations with self": these represent continuous thinking on a topic, reframing and connecting ideas at an individual level, rather than true conversation. Regardless of the definitions, these practices do influence conversations with others.

A network of self-linked posts may be a way to develop an argument, inspired by, or inspiring, a conversation that involves others. It may also link different conversations with others, increasing their complexity and connecting topics discussed in an unexpected way.

As the example of the big conversation in our dataset illustrates, at the extreme, personal practices of using links to connect own posts may result in "a massively distributed but completely connected conversation covering every imaginable topic of interest" (Marlow, 2004, ¶1). Although it is doubtful that any of the readers would actually follow this conversation, it is reasonable to assume that some might explore parts of it, using self-

linked posts as bridges between different conversations with others. Additionally, a network of linked posts like that influences the community by changing the way that weblog posts are indexed in search engines or ranked in blog directories, contributing indirectly to the emergence of shared ideas and reinforcing the feeling of being part of a community.<sup>86</sup> In that respect, participating in some parts of a mega-conversation is similar to being at the parallel track of a conference – while not being present at certain lectures or discussions, one is aware of shared discourse.

### *Personal differences*

The difference between the ways that self-linking is used among KM bloggers is striking: some do not link to their posts at all while others do it very actively. Of course, bloggers who rarely link to their own posts might have other ways to establish a connection, for example by using running titles (similar to the examples from Study 1), categories or tags that organise weblog entries by topic, or plug-ins that show "related posts" automatically. However, it is likely that they do not link to their own posts simply because they do not feel the need to do so. This might be due to the content and style of writing in their weblogs (e.g. posts are self-contained and not related to each other) or due to the function of their weblogs for them (e.g. using weblog to communicate with others has a higher priority than organising their own writing). For example, my own case of extreme self-linking is explained well by my use of the weblog as a space to articulate and organise ideas (see previous chapter) and by the style of writing, where short interconnected posts are used, rather than one longer one that could integrate them.

While self-linking patterns are reflected well in the visualisations, the degree of participation in conversations with others is not necessarily represented well for everyone, since conversations beyond the boundaries of the dataset are missing. Despite these limitations, variation in the number and scale of conversations with others per blogger could be observed as well – some are more active, others less so. As well as personal preferences (some might prefer lurking or using comments) those differences are explained by the relative position of a blogger in the community.

Differences between bloggers in respect to participating in conversations with self and others are also reflected in their influence of mega-conversations. The example from the study illustrates that there might be a few bloggers who provide most of the connections between conversations with others. While more in-depth research is needed to identify the impact

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<sup>86</sup> Anne Helmond (2008) provides an in-depth analysis of the influence of search engines on the practices of blogging.

those connections make (e.g. do they provide topical "bridges" in tangential conversations or connect different smaller conversations on a topic), they could be indicators of different roles bloggers play in a community.

### ***Frequency of weblog conversations***

The results of this study help to position those of Study 1, since they show that conversations of that complexity do happen in the community, although not frequently. They also indicate that the Actionable Sense conversation might be part of a bigger conversational structure.

Similarly to the findings of Herring et al. (2005), this study shows that bloggers do not engage in conversations permanently. In fact, only about a quarter of all posts in our dataset are linked to other posts within it, and more than half of those links are within weblogs, not between them. This is not surprising, given that discovering relevant parts of a conversation, linking to them and doing it fast enough to engage others before they move on to another topic takes time and effort. The fact that links that hold different fragments together are manually added naturally limits the scale of conversations between weblogs.

While every weblog post has the potential to become part of a conversation, it happens only for a small fraction of posts (this is probably also true for conversations in weblog comments, since the scale of those is correlated to linking to a weblog post (Mishne & Glance, 2006)). Knowing this makes writing to a weblog different to using a communication-oriented medium and, from my personal perspective, makes weblogs what they are:

*Web quote 4-8*  
[My definitions of a weblog](#),  
 Mathemagenic, 4  
 September 2006

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I'd call it "a possibility for an interaction". To be a weblog it has to be not private, not "intended for myself only" – those I would perceive as personal diaries or private communication that in a strange way ended up in public. It also has to avoid another extreme – being written for an audience in a way that expects interaction and doesn't make any sense without it (those give me suspicious feeling of "something else pretending to be a weblog"). For me a weblog needs some degree of ambiguity ("not entirely for myself, not entirely for my readers") – something that gives an excuse to the author to actually write in public and to a reader to read it and an opportunity for both of them to interact without feeling an obligation to do so.

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## **4.5 Discussion**

For KM bloggers, weblogs provide multiple opportunities to converse: one can comment on the posts of others or write in one's own weblog and link back. The choices made between multiple ways to react and multiple places to do so shape the way in which conversations develop.

When feedback moves out of comments to single posts into other weblogs, conversation becomes fragmented between different weblogs and



difficult to follow. In the community studied, bloggers are aware of this complexity. Similar to the authors of academic texts, they do not assume that the readers are aware of earlier arguments, and they make an effort to position their own contribution by quoting, linking and summarising the most relevant posts of others. By adding links, bloggers glue different fragments together, creating a shared conversational space between weblogs.

As discussed in the introduction of this chapter, existing weblog research indicates that randomly selected weblogs have limited interactivity and may not be engaged in any conversations at all. While bloggers, discussed in this study, are actively engaged in participating in weblog conversations, such conversations do not happen all the time and do not include all weblog posts, supporting the suggestion about the bursty nature of linking between weblogs (Kumar et al., 2003).

The findings of both studies illustrate the importance of conversations with self as a part of blogging practices, as well as personal differences between bloggers in that respect. While self-linked posts indicate how an idea might grow at an individual level before being added to the conversation with others, they also play a role in connecting different conversations with others, sometimes resulting in a mega-conversation like the one observed in Study 2.

This chapter started by focusing on the conversation sector of the knowledge work framework, however the results also provide an insight into the practices of developing ideas. They indicate that engaging into conversations with others and growing one's own ideas are closely related. In this respect weblogs are different from other communication tools, since they provide an opportunity to do both simultaneously. While giving some idea about the differences in the degree of participation in conversations, which ranges between writing one comment to active involvement through multiple comments, blogposts and summarisation, the results do not provide much insight on how blogging is related to specific tasks. However, references to uses of other media (email, wiki) along with blogging suggests that those tools might be more suitable for specific aspects of conversations, or indeed for "turning them into action".

In this respect the ambiguity of weblogs with regard to supporting a conversation (others might react or not) makes them less suitable for goal-oriented communication required for collaboration on a task. On the other hand, they help in conversations that explore fuzzy or unexpected ideas, since a blogger does not have to gauge the potential interest of others in discussing these ideas (which is likely to be the case in a group-oriented conversational space, such as a discussion group for example).

Compared to the tree structure of conversations facilitated by other tools, such as mailing lists, distributed weblog conversations provide an example of a hypertext conversation: they can follow multiple paths simultaneously, engaging and connecting different audiences. This is particularly interesting in knowledge intensive environments, as weblogs provide a space that helps both to develop one's own point of view and discuss it with others.

As I argue in the discussion of archaeology vs. ethnography in weblog research (see section 2.2), making conclusions about blogging practices based on the patterns observed in weblog artefacts provides a challenge: visible artefacts can have different meanings for those who use them. In both studies presented in this chapter, I use my knowledge of KM bloggers to interpret patterns observed and to discuss practices that correspond to them. While the authors of the weblogs represented did not disagree with my interpretations when they had opportunities to comment on the results, the results in respect to conversational practices have to be treated with caution, especially when attempts are made to extend them to other bloggers.

In particular, the connection between self-linking and uses of weblogs for one's own thinking has to be carefully examined. As discussed in the previous chapter, in my own case self-linking is closely related to such uses of my weblog; my knowledge of KM bloggers suggests that it is also likely to be true for them. However, for other bloggers self-linking might be more related to practices of self-promotion than to those of developing ideas:

*Web quote 4-9*  
[Self-linking could make you go blind](#), Mark Dykeman,  
 10 September 2008

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As I see it, there are four main reasons for linking to your own material, using any of the above techniques:

1. To point someone towards helpful information or material
  2. To demonstrate authority by showing that you've written significant, interesting, or cool content on a subject
  3. To market yourself, regardless of whether or not you're trying to establish authority
  4. To boost your post's results within Google searches or other search engines results (I first heard about this technique when reading a ProBlogger.net [quest post about improving blog traffic](#))
- 

Given that the participants of the conversations analysed could be described as lead users shaping emerging technology and its uses to address their needs (von Hippel, 1986), the results of this study could indicate future developments of blogging practices and inform further development of blogging tools. Work on developing weblog conversation tracking and/or visualisation tools would be particularly interesting as it could change the dynamics of weblog conversations, making them more effective by

providing participants with social visualisations (Erickson, 2004) of others' activities.

Understanding of the practices of participating in weblog conversations, distributed over multiple places is especially important, given that weblogs are becoming only a small part of the ecosystem of conversational tools:

*Web quote 4-10*  
[The Fragmentation of  
Identity and Discussion.](#)  
Internet Duct Tape,  
18 March 2008

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Once upon a time the way someone would comment on something you wrote would be to write a blog post of their own in response. Then blogs got a comment section and people could write what they had to say directly on the post. Now the discussion around a post has completely fragmented: people are saying stuff about your content on Twitter, Delicious, StumbleUpon, Digg, Reddit, Facebook... pretty much anywhere **except** for the post where you originally wrote it.

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In this respect, bloggers' experiences of not having a single conversational space are liberating: once conversations are distributed anyway, adding new spaces becomes less of a problem. Research-wise, however, the picture is different: while conversations between KM bloggers are still there, now far fewer develop through weblogs, so mapping and visualising the activity presents a bigger challenge compared to the work presented.

The studies in this chapter describe conversational practices of bloggers, but do not tell much about the effects of those conversations. An analysis of bloggers' networking practices presented in the following chapter provides an insight on the role of weblog conversations in relations between bloggers.

## Networking between KM bloggers

*Web quote 5-1*  
[Meeting imaginary friend](#), Mathemagenic,  
23 March 2006

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Somewhere in the morning he asks: "Have you actually met Andrea?"

"No." And, feeling that I need an excuse, I add – "but I have stayed myself in the houses of bloggers I never met". He smiles understandingly and I hope that he really understands, even if it looks a bit crazy...

Later during the day, in between work and cleaning the house, I think that indeed it's a bit crazy – that sort of crazy that became a lifestyle for me. Somehow, relations with other bloggers need to cross the boundary between online and offline. Somehow, being in a weblog-mediated contact often turns into a need (often an urge ;) ) to meet – to move on slow mediated conversations into real life exchanges, to see how much real person is close to that [imaginary friend](#) you construct while reading a weblog, emailing and skypeing in between, to confirm that you are indeed as close in the real life as it feels from online. And, blogging seems to create not only this need, but also the [trust](#) needed to cross the boundary with a bit intrusive "I'm in the city – shall we meet?" or "so, why don't you come here?", to go the extra mile of arranging the logistics and to sound convincing while explaining to others why you actually do those crazy things...

In the evening, when we meet for the first time, I feel strange. I know that feeling from before, meeting someone you feel you know quite good, while realizing that you probably don't really know the person. The appearance, the physical presence is unfamiliar, so my brain resists accepting that I could actually know her, but then small details start kicking in – the voice that I know from Skype, personal things that I knew or that fit well with those I knew, references to old blogging themes... And while the conversation develops, my brain is getting more and more convinced – this is not a total stranger, we do click in so many ways, starting a conversation from the point where it was left last time, we probably do know quite a bit of each other and those – unblogged – details that come up now seem to fit that fuzzy picture constructed over time of reading what was in the blog and what was in between the lines...

And, symbolically, first of this spring narcissi's stand in the sunlit living room – reminding of [those last year](#), the process of discovering my connections with [ethnography](#) that, beyond all other things, turned into connection with Andrea and brought her into my house...

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While blogging to organise my thinking and the possibility of having conversations around it were somewhat expected when I started, the breadth and depth of connections with other bloggers that came as a result of it were a surprise. Insights from the study on weblog adoption presented in Chapter 1 indicate that this is the case for some other bloggers as well: it is not necessarily obvious how publishing a weblog results in finding others, getting to know them and developing enough trust to invite a stranger to stay in your house.

Existing research documents social effects of blogging, but doesn't explain how bloggers get to know each other, how relations between them develop over time and what role weblogs (and other technologies) play in this process. This chapter focuses on describing practices of KM bloggers with regard to relations between them. I first introduce theoretical concepts and insight from weblog research that inform this study and then describe the research approach. The presentation of the results is then followed by discussing them in relation to the knowledge work framework.

## 5.1 Networking practices of bloggers

While there are multiple ways to look at one's relationships, this study is guided by the insights from the research of Nardi, Whittaker, & Schwarz (2002), which documents personal social networks in the workplace or, as the authors call them, *intensional networks*. Based on the results of an ethnographic study, they define "an ongoing process of keeping a personal network in good repair" as *netWORK* that includes three key tasks:

1. **Building a network:** *Adding new contacts to the network so that there are available resources when it is time to conduct joint work;*
2. **Maintaining the network,** *where a central task is keeping in touch with extant nodes;*
3. **Activating selected nodes** *at the time the work is to be done (p.216).*

In the context of this study bloggers are viewed as *netWORKers*. I use *networking* as a term to address a variety of practices in respect to relationships, and the distinctions between developing, maintaining and activating these, as a starting point to study those practices.

However, my blogging experiences and earlier research indicate that relation-building via weblogs might need a more complex structure to describe them. For example, the analysis Andrea Ben Lassoued and I conducted on our weblog-mediated relationship (Efimova & Ben Lassoued, 2008) shows an asymmetry in this process. It also shows that at an early stage the relation is similar to those between *familiar strangers* (Milgram, 1977), people that we observe repeatedly without any interaction, or "*hear and see*" contacts that can be a starting point for

developing more intense interactions (Gehl, 2001). Those considerations suggest a need for an exploratory approach that would allow weblog-specific categorisations of networking practices to emerge.

There is a body of research focusing on weblog networks, but a big share of it uses link and/or content analysis to identify relations between bloggers and is based on an "assumption that linking and topic similarity are in some way 'social,' imply 'ties'" (Marlow, 2006, p.3). While this research provides information about visible patterns of connections between bloggers, it does not necessarily describe relations between them. In this study I primarily draw on weblog research carried out using methods that give a voice to bloggers themselves: surveys, interviews or ethnography.

In that respect, the study of journals of UK goths by Paul Hodkinson (2006) is particularly interesting, since it suggests that what helps relations between goths to strengthen over time is writing that covers multiple domains and includes details of one's everyday life:

*Wellman and Gulia have distinguished between superficial "weak ties," which are confined to a narrow shared interest and take place within a single domain, and "strong ties," which involve extensive familiarity and are played out in a variety of domains. Through enabling individual goths to read about and comment upon a variety of aspects of one another's individual, everyday lives, rather than just those aspects directly related to the goth scene, online journals played an important part in the development of strong, intimate relationships between them, which nearly always extended to other forms of interpersonal communication, whether email, online chat, mobile phone, or, most importantly, face-to-face interaction (2006, pp.191-192).*

Existing research indicates that weblogs could be used for networking in a variety of ways. For example, while Nardi et al. (2004) report that weblogs are primarily used to maintain existing relations, the findings of other studies show that weblogs aid the development of new relationships (Ali-Hasan & Adamic, 2007; Aïmeur et al., 2003). Aïmeur, Brassard & Paquet (2003) show that blogging in professional settings results in connections across disciplinary borders. Those findings indicate the importance of paying attention to the types of blogging relations.

Weblog research also indicates that bloggers use multiple channels to contact each other (Ali-Hasan & Adamic, 2007; Efimova & Ben Lassoued, 2008; Hodkinson, 2006; Nardi et al., 2004). The study of the *Actionable Sense* conversation, reported in the previous chapter, provides an example of how a conversation started via weblogs moves into other channels. The content of it illustrates that weblogs are not necessarily the best tools when it comes to turning shared insights into a joint action, "activating" relations established via weblogs in terms of Nardi, Whittaker & Schwarz (2002).

Those examples suggest that a study of networking practices of bloggers should take into account their use of other tools. As well as phone, email and instant messaging, this also includes *social tools* that have appeared relatively recently, providing bloggers with new opportunities to connect and interact, as well as triggering the process of the increasing "specialisation" of weblogs, as some of their networking functions were better addressed by new technologies. *Table 5-1* provides an overview of tools that have had an impact on my own connections with other bloggers.<sup>87</sup> Although the selection is likely to be different for others, it provides an indication of possibilities and changes in blogging practices.

*Table 5-1* Tools that changed my connections with other bloggers

Technology description	Impact on my blogging practices
Skype (Voice-over-IP integrated with presence indicators and chat)	I was able to talk to bloggers in cases where a phone call would be impossible to justify. This contributed to stronger connections and joint work with some of them. Since Skype was broadly adopted in my weblog network, it also replaced multiple instant messaging accounts used to connect with bloggers.
del.icio.us (social bookmarking)	Posts that included links to interesting resources disappeared from my weblog. Some of my contacts subscribe to my links, so they have an idea what I'm browsing even if I don't write anything in a weblog.
LinkedIn, Facebook (social network sites, see boyd&Ellison (2007))	For me these serve as contact management tools, helping to remember who is in my network, acquire their contact details or keep up with major changes in their life. Early tools in this category (Ryze and Orkut) resulted in reflections about the differences between using them and blogs in respect to networking, contributing to my understanding of weblogs as a medium to communicate and to connect.
Flickr (photo sharing)	Using Flickr resulted in an easier integration of visuals in my weblog. It also provided an opportunity to keep in touch with other bloggers via photos instead of a weblog text (especially for not losing contact when I don't have time to read blogs and for knowing about more private sides of bloggers).
Dopplr (sharing travel plans)	Weblog posts announcing travel plans and current locations (and opportunities to meet in person) disappeared from my weblog. I know in advance about travel plans of those in my network, so there are more chances to meet.
Twitter (microblogging, see Java, Song, Finin & Tseng (2007))	I use Twitter to share what I'm doing or personal news that is not worth a weblog post, and to find out what others are doing without the overload of reading their weblogs. I also use it for direct interactions (usually instead of email or Skype) with bloggers or for a "small talk" conversations with others reacting to their recent updates.
Friendfeed (lifestreaming tools)	Friendfeed allows subscribing to various digital traces of a person in one place, without "watching" all of them independently. My own traces are aggregated there, so others could follow them in one space. Although I don't use it systematically myself, I go once in a while to get a richer picture of my network or a specific person

<sup>87</sup> It excludes weblog-related technologies (e.g. news readers or blog search engines) that also evolved over time. The table includes only those tools I use at the moment of writing.

This section introduces insights from existing research that shaped the study presented in this chapter. The study of intensional networks (Nardi et al., 2002) provides a conceptual view on personal networking as "an ongoing process of keeping a personal network in good repair", which includes developing, maintaining and activating relations. However, my blogging experiences and earlier research indicate that relation-building via weblogs might need a more complex structure to describe it. The categories of (Nardi et al., 2002) are used as a starting point in eliciting personal networking stories, but not used in the analysis, so that categorisation better suited to this specific case is allowed to emerge. In addition, existing weblog research indicates specific issues to pay attention to when studying weblog networking: types of relations established via weblogs, specific characteristics of blogging that aid relation development over time, and the specific role of weblogs in an ecosystem of tools bloggers use to connect with each other.

## 5.2 Research approach

This section discusses the research approach for this study: the reasons for choosing KM bloggers as the case for this study, methods of data collection and analysis, quality verification strategies and choices in respect to presenting the results in writing.

### 5.2.1 Case

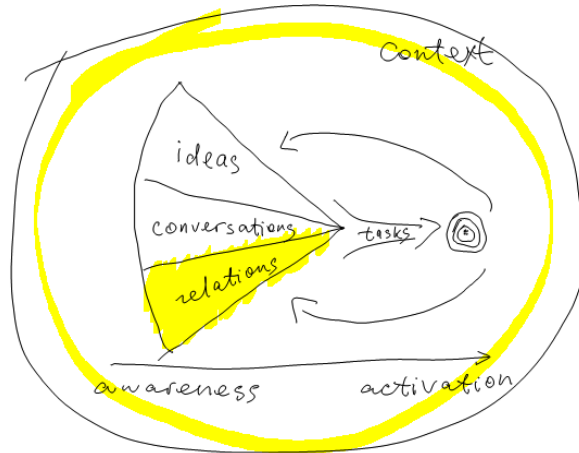
In this case I focus on the role of weblogs in networking between KM bloggers (see section 4.2.1 of the previous chapter for more detail). This group was chosen for the study to ensure continuity with the research reported in the previous chapter, and because of my own knowledge of it and experience of participation, which allowed me to put the blogging practices of the participants in their personal and social contexts. In addition, studying this group provides an opportunity to grasp longer-term effects of weblog-mediated networking.



The study focuses on the relations sector of the knowledge work framework (Figure 5-1) addressing the following research questions:

- What are the blogging practices of knowledge workers in respect to their relations?
- What are the practices of knowledge workers in respect to dealing with issues that arise as a result of blogging in specific contexts?

Figure 5-1 Parts of the knowledge work framework addressed by the study of networking practices



These questions are translated into the specific ones for this study:

- What are the networking practices of KM bloggers?
- What are the practices of knowledge workers in respect to dealing with issues that arise around weblog-mediated networking?

### 5.2.2 Methods

This study uses interviews as a main data source; however I also used my knowledge about the community members and existing connections with some of them to arrange the interviews and to interpret them.

When selecting bloggers for interviews I aimed to represent a variety of blogging and networking experiences, in particular focusing on finding bloggers different from each other along the following lines: occupation and type of employment (e.g. self-employed vs. working for a company), scale of personal network prior to blogging, position in KM blogger community (degree of being known by other KM bloggers), location (especially in respect to physical proximity to other KM bloggers), blogging patterns (e.g. style or duration of blogging).

The respondents were selected by what could be called a "diversity snowball" approach. I first consulted another KM blogger, Jack Vinson,<sup>88</sup> to discuss a list of KM bloggers that might be interesting to interview and then proceeded by asking the interviewees to suggest other bloggers they thought were different from themselves.

When asking bloggers to participate I indicated my intention to publish summaries of the interviews and draft results online, as well as using their real names and links to their weblogs in the research reports.<sup>89</sup> All people I contacted agreed to participate, but I did not interview everyone initially approached due to scheduling difficulties. In total ten bloggers were interviewed. Semi-structured interviews covered the following themes:

- Professional backgrounds of a participants and characteristics of their network in the KM field prior to blogging.
- Changes in the network or networking practices because of blogging.
- Uses of weblogs for developing, maintaining and activating relations (Nardi et al., 2002, as a starting point for articulating stages of the process at a more granular level).
- Place of the weblog in the ecosystem of networking tools (mainly focusing on what weblogs are good for and when they do not work).
- Important networking-related issues that haven't been discussed.

The interviews were carried out via audio-conferencing using Skype; I made notes and recorded audio, which failed in one of the cases. I used notes and audio recordings to write interview summaries; anonymised summaries were then used to discuss emergent themes with two other researchers (colleagues who are aware of my work, but not blogging themselves or doing research on blogging). Each of us read summaries while making notes on interesting observations on cards; each summary has been read by me and by one of the two other researchers. Then we used an *affinity diagram* technique (Hackos & Redish, 1998) to cluster the notes, in order to identify and discuss emergent themes and their relations.<sup>90</sup>

The discussion provided the initial structure for describing networking practices. I then arranged the fragments of interview summaries accordingly and started to work on the textual description of them, consulting interview recordings and notes and revising summaries to include relevant information.

Revised summaries were sent to the participants, edited to address their comments and then published online. I shared a draft version of the study

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<sup>88</sup> Jack is blogging at *Knowledge Jolt with Jack*, [blog.jackvinson.com](http://blog.jackvinson.com)

<sup>89</sup> The information I provided when contacting the participants is available online – [Networking practices of KM bloggers](#) (Mathemagenic, 23 June 2008).

<sup>90</sup> Photos of this process are available at <http://flickr.com/photos/mathemagenic/tags/ch5/>

results in my weblog, publishing sections as individual blogposts and cross-linking them to the interview summaries and relevant weblog posts of others.<sup>91</sup> The feedback received on those occasions was incorporated into the final text.

5.2.3 Quality criteria

Table 5-2 describes specific quality verification strategies applied in this study (for detailed description of verification strategies, see section 2.4.2).

Table 5-2 Quality verification strategies for the study of networking practices of KM bloggers

Verification strategy	Application for studies of conversational blogging practices
Theorising	Theoretical input was used to guide interview themes. In addition, existing research was used to position and discuss the results.
Exposure	While the study reports on the results of interviews with a relatively small set of bloggers, the interpretations of these are informed by long-term participant observation of KM bloggers. When selecting the interviewees, I consulted another blogger with a good knowledge of the network and asked the respondents to point to others different from themselves.
Triangulation	Two other researchers were involved in analysing interview themes.
Participants as co-researchers	Study participants and other bloggers had opportunities to comment on the Interview summaries and draft study results via my weblog; those comments were incorporated into the text.
Transparency	Interview summaries, emergent interpretations and challenges in the process of working on the study are documented in my weblog. There and in this chapter, bloggers' real names are used, and links to their weblogs given.
Thick description	Each blogger is introduced, and then a description of the network, direct quotes and links are provided.
Reflexivity and purposeful confessional writing	Although in the case of this study my personal experiences are not analysed along with the practices of other bloggers, they inform this work, particularly in respect to its focus and approach.

5.2.4 Writing conventions

In the following sections I first introduce the bloggers participating in this research and their networks. Then the results are presented in respect to two research questions, focusing the practices of bloggers in respect to weblog-mediated networking and dealing with the challenges that it brings. While describing the results, I focus on specific patterns or attitudes as articulated by the participants (e.g. statements on readers' perceptions of a weblog reflect what was said about it by the weblog author). While making statements I use real names to indicate which participant they belong to unless there are more than three bloggers who reported about

<sup>91</sup> See [Blog networking study: an overview](#) (Mathemagenic, 20 November 2008).

a particular issue. I use "connections", "relations" and "relationships" interchangeably to indicate ties between bloggers.

### 5.3 Participants and their networks

This section describes the study participants and their networks in more detail in order to provide context for interpreting the findings about the networking practices of bloggers. I first introduce the participants as well as key facts about their work and weblogs, and then discuss their blogging networks.

#### 5.3.1 Study participants

The participants of the study (*Table 6-1*) are professionals in knowledge management or related fields, although they do not necessarily explicitly associate themselves with KM. They live in Europe, the US and Australia, and they know English enough to write on professional topics in it (although only occasionally for Martin and Monica). They are established bloggers (2-7 years), some of whom have tried blogging with a variety of tools and have experience with multiple types of weblogs (e.g. KM and parenting blogs for Brett, internal and external for Luis, personal blog in Romanian vs. professional ones in English for Gabriela).

*Table 5-3* Study participants

Personal	Professional	Blogging <sup>92</sup>
Brett Miller, USA	System engineer in an "old school high-tech industry". Not active in KM work-wise at the time of the study.	Started blogging on KM in 2002 when studying for his Masters. Later started two weblogs to connect to other parents (on autism; trampoline and tumbling).
Dave Snowden, UK, frequent traveller	Founder and Chief Scientific Officer at Cognitive Edge (consulting: complexity and sense-making, software), formerly a director of IBM Institute of Knowledge Management and founder of the Cynefin Centre. Very well connected in KM prior to blogging.	Started blog as part of the company's website in 2006 when building his own business after leaving IBM.
Euan Semple, UK, frequent traveller	Independent consultant (social computing in business), formerly a head of KM in BBC. Well-connected in KM prior to blogging.	Started a relatively personal weblog in 2001, while working at the BBC.

<sup>92</sup> This column includes only key information about weblogs of the participants; for more details and links see [Blog networking study: interviews](#) (Mathemagenic, 20 November 2008).

Table 5-3 Continued

Personal	Professional	Blogging <sup>93</sup>
Gabriela Avram, Romanian, working in Ireland (worked in Germany and Luxemburg within 5 years prior to the study)	Research fellow, University of Limerick, studying KM and web 2.0.	Blogging since 2002: first with a project blog, then a personal blog in Romanian; work-related blogging in English since 2004.
Luis Suarez, Spain, frequent traveller	Social software evangelist at IBM. Recently well-known, in particular for his experiment to eliminate work-related email.	Internal blog since 2003, two external ones since 2005 in order to "connect with other KM bloggers".
Martin Roell, German, born and raised in Luxemburg, working in Germany	Worked as a freelance consultant for the last 6 years (internet, -ecommerce, KM, web 2.0), but leaving it in order to focus on personal coaching	Used to be one of the A-list bloggers in Germany, stopped blogging in 2007, slowly resuming with a new blog at the time of the study. Blogging primarily in German.
Monica Pinheiro, Portugal	Worked in a research lab in Lisbon (information behaviour and information management), but took leave to work on her PhD, which has not been supported by her group.	Started blogging by reading and commenting on other weblogs. Writing a weblog since 2002, had multiple work-related weblogs since (including those written anonymously). Blogging primarily in Portuguese.
Nancy White, USA, frequent traveller	Independent consultant (communities, learning and online facilitation, primarily for non-profit organisations), works online. Well-known online prior to blogging.	Tried blogging in 1999 with personal and work-related blogs, but those didn't work for her. Got back to blogging in 2004 to get hands-on experience to be able to advise clients on weblogs.
Shawn Callahan, Australia	Founder of Anecdote, a consulting company of three (business narratives in KM, learning, collaboration); formerly IBM.	Tried blogging in 2002, while in IBM, later experimented with another blog. Blogging at the company web-site since 2004, together with two colleagues.
Ton Zijlstra, Netherlands	Independent consultant (knowledge work, learning and social media) for about half a year at the time of the study. Previously with a small KM consulting company.	Blogging since 2002, after being active at the KnowledgeBoard, online KM community. Work-related blog in English and less active one in Dutch; also blogged for his former company.

Participants' weblogs have different degrees of connection to their work. Dave, Shawn and Nancy integrate blogging in the web-sites of their companies, while Monica has experience of blogging anonymously to hide the connection to her employer. All bloggers write about work-related

<sup>93</sup> This column includes only key information about weblogs of the participants; for more details and links see [Blog networking study: interviews](#) (Mathemagenic, 20 November 2008).

topics; however the degree of explicit connections (including linking) to their work varies.

It is important to note that for most of the study participants (except for Brett) visibility as a result of blogging contributes to their work as entrepreneurs, consultants or researchers. Also four out of ten participants have a connection with IBM – as a current or past employer for Luis, Dave and Shawn and as a research site for Gabriela (I didn't realise this when selecting people to be interviewed).

### 5.3.2 Blogger networks

All participants talk about their professional networks expanding as a result of blogging; some talk about "explosion", for example, Ton, who estimates that 85-90% of his contacts now came through blogging. The degree of this expansion is different and seems to have a relation to the size of blogger's network prior to blogging, the interest of developing new relations, as well as motivations for and the style of blogging. Nancy, who had a global distributed network prior to blogging was "shocked at the response" she's got from the people she didn't really knew who welcomed her weblog:

*[Blogging] revealed new network that I didn't reciprocated with. [...] Weblog revealed the people who were following my work [without me knowing about it or engaging with them]. [...] It was shocking to see that my network was bigger than I thought.*

Monica has a similar story: "Before [blogging] my network was known by me, now [it is] beyond my knowledge and my control".

However, for many the networking effects of blogging were not intended:

*I started to get information out there that I though was useful to me and someone else may be interested, so it's kind of side effect that I met people I wouldn't meet otherwise. (Brett)*

Dave started blogging because it "made sense in terms of getting publicity", however, he enjoys it for getting in touch "with lots of unexpected people". Euan notes that he has never been "consciously cultivating a network, just meeting people, remembering people, staying in touch with people", but adds "as I became more aware of the online ways of doing that it became a skill worth cultivating". Shawn gives an example of another blogger who was ready to help with their business while "his daily rate was far greater than [they] could afford":

*And it was at that point I realised that this whole blogging thing is extremely powerful way of building relationships. People you've never met face-to-face and they are willing to do important things for you.*

Using Martin's terms, blogging networks of the participants could be characterised as both "diverse and not diverse". From one side

the connections that bloggers establish tend to cross topical, geographical, organisational and hierarchical boundaries:

*I only have so much face-to-face time available on the planet and I want to make the best use of that. And previously I was subject to geographical constraints or social constraints or organisational constraints as of who I was likely to meet and suddenly with online networks I've been able to connect to [...] the whole bunch of interesting and interested people whom I suddenly had an access to in a way in a normal life I would never ever had that chance. (Euan)*

Brett tells about getting to know people representing a variety of views on KM and connecting with those he wouldn't be able to reach otherwise. Nancy, who does not see herself being in KM, says that blogging also made her more connected with "people in the KM world", but also "process people" (facilitators, Open Space, Appreciative Inquiry), or edubloggers. Gabriela talks about connecting to start-ups and local Irish bloggers next to those in KM.

However, next to the variety of connections that bloggers make, there seems to be "a certain attitude of expecting diversity, expecting other perspectives" (Martin), contributing without direct expectation of a gain (Dave, Nancy) and shared interests and professionalism (Ton, Luis). Ton talks about the energy of finding others with similar interests, providing an example of the BlogTalk conference in 2003, the first time for many bloggers to meet each other in person – "'coming home' may be a strong term, but at least a warm bath' of social interaction". Luis and Gabriela also talk explicitly about a sense of community that emerges in those networks.

*I feel being part of the community of passionate people around KM.[...] I'm not longer alone. Many people in most companies were facing the same issues I was facing. Sharing those experiences was a tremendous experience – that's why I'm still blogging. (Luis)*

Blogger networks (and practices associated with them) change over time. For example, when more people start blogging it changes not only the number of potentially available others to connect to, but also the intensity of connections with them and topics that connect bloggers. Euan tells that in the past interactions between bloggers were "more intense": "we had much more time to read each other posts because it was fewer of us". However, now there is more "breadth and diversity": "to be blunt it was people interested in blogging about blogging, now there are much more people talking in different ways about interesting things". Gabriela notes that the changes are due not only to the numbers of bloggers, but also to the new tools that appear and change blogging practices. Monica tells about making fewer connections today compared to the first years of blogging, she thinks that this is because of the change in

a writing style, which now more frequently includes "business motivation, hidden agenda, competitiveness..."

### 5.3.3 Summary

The study participants represent a variety of blogging and networking experiences, however all of them are experienced bloggers for whom visibility as a result of blogging is an important part of their professional activities. Networking is often a side-effect of blogging; however it results in extending professional networks to include a diversity of new contacts. The following sections take those aspects into account when describing networking practices of bloggers.

## 5.4 Results: networking practices

This section provides an overview of the study findings in respect to the first research question: "What are the networking practices of KM bloggers?"

The categorisation of networking practices presented in this section emerged from the data based on clustering the interview notes (done with two other researchers in a session that involved creating an affinity diagram). Each of these practices corresponds to the specific function in weblog-mediated networking:

- *finding others and being found* refers to a variety of ways bloggers discover each other;
  - *getting to know other bloggers from a distance* refers to uses of a weblog to learn about another blogger without direct interaction, which then often influences the decision about whether to engage further;
  - *bonding through interaction* refers to growing trust and shared understanding through interacting via weblogs and other tools;
  - *getting things done together* refers to engaging to work on specific tasks together;
  - *staying in touch* refers to low-threshold monitoring activities to sustain a relationship and to identify opportunities for more active engagement.
- While this section provides a linear description of these practices, they are likely to overlap once bloggers discover each other. Even when directly interacting, bloggers continue to learn about each other from a distance; periods of bonding through interaction might include those when bloggers get things done together, and then alternate with lower-key engagements when staying in touch.

When describing specific practices I not only discuss the role of weblogs in supporting them, but also focus on other ways bloggers engage with each other (meeting in person and using other tools). At the end of this section



I discuss publishing and interaction, two ways bloggers engage with each other via weblogs, while the discussion of other channels used appears later in the text (section 5.5.3).

#### 5.4.1 Finding and being found

How do bloggers find each other? Study participants find new bloggers by attracting them with their own writing, through their network, and in places where they meet bloggers they already know.

One way to discover others is writing one's own weblog, which then serves as "a conversation starter", "a big neon sign that invites others to come and comment" (Ton). With multiple instruments that weblogs provide it is easy to get notified about comments to one's weblog or links from other blogs. Bloggers follow trackbacks or subscribe to notification about referrals to their pages (e.g. via Technorati or Google blogsearch). Nancy "discovered" people in her network that she was not aware of by paying attention to incoming links to her weblog.

Those who comment on one's blog writing are not random people. Bloggers appreciate the attention to their own work and the effort taken to comment: "The people who link to you are interesting, because they found your ideas interesting, they comment" (Dave). Comments on a weblog post are often a starting point for developing relationships, as "there is something special about somebody coming to your place to leave their words there" (Martin). However, when starting commenting on weblogs of others is not the obvious way to grow one's network: "I didn't realise that linking and giving credits to someone's work would extend my professional network very quickly" (Monica).

Another way to find other bloggers is through following links from people already in one's own network, who provide filtering and recommendation:

*It's a collective pointing that helps to find stuff, once you have an established group of bloggers you read and trust. And their ability to find good stuff to point to it increases your signal to noise ratio on the web. [...] Blogs do that better than other tools because of the context – you have to say why that is important, why you are pointing to something. (Euan)*

Finally, bloggers find other bloggers in places where they go to interact with those they already know. Although usually these are events that bloggers attend to meet each other in person, they could be online places as well: Ton gives an example of a German blogger whom he first "met" in the comments section of an American weblog.

Given that bloggers indicated that their blogging connections are often extremely diverse, I asked what exactly contributed to finding others across

boundaries. Nancy suggests that it is the public nature of weblogs and their discoverability as a result of cross-linking. She adds that compared to communities, where there is usually an "agreement what it's all about even if it's about nothing", with a weblog it is easier "to cross over" between topics, both when writing and reading.

This crossing becomes easier as weblogs are person-centred – "a weblog is about 'me' even if you think you write about a topic" (Martin). They also represent the different interests of their authors: ("Most of the times I read them for KM, but find something else", Gabriela) and readers may value the diversity of topics covered ("good bloggers are eclectics, they do different things, they surprise you [...] that is what keeps you going back", Dave).

In addition, at first blogging is "connecting through content" (Nancy). When one follows a link to a new weblog, blogger's words are visible, while the details about the author (such as age, gender, professional affiliations or place in various hierarchies) are not necessarily on the surface or made explicit at all. As a result, with blogging "you can't live off your reputation, you live off what you say" (Dave).

In the process of discovering interesting others, weblogs serve as attractors and filters. From one side, presenting oneself to the world through writing a weblog attracts others who resonate with this writing and comment or link back. From the other side, weblogs work as filters: links by bloggers one reads provide not only an indication of potentially interesting others, but also personal recommendation. Since weblogs are person-centred, rather than strictly focused on a predefined topic, a blogger often writes about a variety of personally relevant issues, exposing readers to potentially new and unexpected topical areas and other bloggers within those.

While finding others may result in a direct interaction (e.g. continuing a conversation in weblog comments), this is not always the case. The following section describes how it is possible to get to know other bloggers from a distance, without any interaction.

#### 5.4.2 Getting to know from a distance

Since it is possible to read weblogs without making yourself visible, they provide an opportunity to get to know their authors "from a distance" (Martin), to learn about them so as to be able to decide on engaging further or not, and do so without a "commitment of giving time and attention to the relationship" (Nancy) and to allow others "to build up an opinion without knowing you" (Luis).

In this process a weblog provides a representation of a blogger through their writing. Luis compares a weblog to an "internet business card" that

not only tells "who you are and what you do", but also allows others to "get an introduction to your community" by seeing who comments.

Shawn suggests that weblogs provide "some level of reputation", exposing people and their interests:

*It is not explicit; you intuitively get a feel for the type of person they are and whether that [...] is your type of person. It's almost like a pre-dating.*

Bloggers point out that although a weblog is a form of publication, it works differently from publishing an article: "If you read somebody's paper you get to know their ideas, if you read their weblog, you get to know them as a person" (Dave); "When you write a blogpost you are giving yourself out as a person" (Luis).

What exactly helps to get to know a blogger as a person? Several bloggers mention passionate writing and "personal things" that appear on a weblog (for example, when talking about Bill Ives both Luis and Shawn mention his passion for food and restaurant reviews next to his KM writings).

However, it is more than that. Euan suggests that there is also:

*...something about the pacing and the size of the blogging window, two or three paragraph idea that's weighty enough [...] That's why I still blog even if I have Twitter: you can put more thoughts into a blogpost. You are expressing something hopefully slightly more profound about yourself and your ideas.*

For Nancy, blogging helps to get to know others by providing "a window into their life over time", "exposure of their thinking over time", however it depends a lot on how well people write, so "you don't get to know crappy writers via their weblogs". Martin explains that the type of weblog writing that helps him to get to know others is that which shows "willingness to expose what you don't know [...] willingness to learn... not yet finished thinking"; or the opposite, "being brave and bold", taking a radical position that invites criticism. Shawn says that "photos seem to give you more than just the text", "you also get a sense of the people in terms of links and depth of their posts".

Learning about other bloggers comes through an aggregation of various signals:

*You can pick up little subliminal or subconscious or peripheral bits and pieces about people through what they write, how they write, how their blog looks, how they react to things. (Euan)*

Euan gives an example of observing how bloggers engage in an interaction in weblog comment that gives signals about them similar to observing their behaviour in a face-to-face conversation.

Since the process of getting to know others "from a distance" involves reading and browsing that does not leave many traces, a blogger does not

necessarily know about it. Monica tells about an invitation to come as a keynote speaker that she thought was a joke until she got a confirming phone call:

*I didn't know I was followed by them. If [people] leave comments, you have a clue, a footprint. It turns out that the guy who was reading my blog suggested that I would be a good person to talk as a keynote speaker.*

Gabriela is aware of people using her weblog to find out more about her. She gives an example of a job interview for her current job, where her boss knew a lot of things about her from the weblog. However, she says, "I never had a bad experience with exposing myself through my blog. I didn't feel threatened."

Shawn gives an example of meeting readers of his weblog at a conference:

*...people come up to you and they know you through your blog, but you have never met them before. It's a kind of a disarming experience... you feel it's quite an asymmetrical relationship. They have a really good sense of who you are, what you do, what interests you, and you don't even know their name. I think that's kind of peculiar to people who blog and have some sort of readership...*

Luis, who has similar experiences with meeting previously unknown readers of his weblog at events, finds it "fascinating". He says "that person gets my attention full at that moment" because "they took the effort to read what I write".

In sum, blogging provides a "living portrait" that not only shows ideas and interests of a blogger, but also helps to get to know the blogger as a person, by observing writing, linking and interaction over time. Such observation is not necessarily reciprocal, so asymmetrical relations are something that bloggers have to live with. While it may be one-sided, learning about other bloggers from a distance provides an opportunity to make informed choices about possible closer contact with them, knowledge of their interests and personalities, as well as enough starting points for an interaction.

#### 5.4.3 Bonding through interaction

As well as providing an opportunity to learn about others from a distance, weblogs support interaction that may grow into a relationship between bloggers over time. When Ton describes how interactions that start from comments help relationships to grow and strengthen, he talks about his weblog as a "gravity pull": "It's like they are entering your gravity field, falling towards you."

Luis emphasises the importance of reacting to comments in his weblog as a starting point for an interaction ("last thing you can do is to ignore your comments"), saying that others appreciate the feedback. While Shawn also believes that interaction in the comments is important, he admits that he is not good at it, as he uses his weblog mainly to organise his thinking rather than "as a network building or communication device, if you like". He says that he is "not much of the typer" and leaves comments only if he "can add to a conversation in a constructive way" and then starts wondering what other people "read" into this behaviour. He also gives an example of Johnnie Moore, saying that his blogging style "seems to have the interaction going".

Nancy echoes this point, emphasising that engaging in personal connections (as opposed to "information relationships" described in the section 5.5.1) depends a lot on personalities of people, as some are more likely to initiate contact and to "reach out". Brett provides an example of others "reaching out":

*I've had people I've left comments on their blog and by doing that they discover mine and they initiated contact with me. [...] they commented on the weblog and followed it more closely [...] I guess [they were] more involved, did more steps for a relation than I did. I just commented once and they came to my site and commented frequently. To some extent it makes you feel an obligation almost to go back to theirs to read it more, to comment more. [...] I feel that I should look at their stuff more closely to see if I want to reciprocate.*

Although initial contacts often happen in comments to a weblog post, at the later stage cross-linking between weblogs and trackbacks that notify bloggers about them becomes more important. For Luis, linking conversations between blogs helps to "corroborate what someone else said" while also adding his own experiences and sharing with others. For Euan, a permalink that allows others to link directly to a weblog post "is another big thing" as "each of those little ideas could be linked to and that allows to distribute sense-making networks". Martin describes conversations that "travelled around weblogs" as "collective intelligence" ("if we talk about questions long enough the idea would emerge somewhere"). In discussing how blogging helps to develop trust, Dave talks about it as "fragmented frequent conversation" and draws parallels between blogging and the way human brains work: "We don't tell stories to each other, we swap anecdotes and blogs are very similar to that."

When I ask Ton about the differences between comments and conversations across weblogs he refers to the differences in format and length, as well as different types of conversations they enable:

*...the comments are usually short-lived [...] they are immediate responses to the blog post. And a blog conversation spread between*

*weblogs goes on longer. And you can connect it to more things since if you would add links to six different blog posts in your comment it would probably be classified as a spam.*

However, he thinks that those different weblog conversations are part of the same process, talking about difficulties of reconstructing paths one follows between comments, people and what they write.

Interaction via weblogs often serves as a starting point for getting in touch via other channels. Shawn suggests that "if someone got the weblog, they are inviting people to contact them" and adds that this is usually the case when he attempts to contact other bloggers by email. He adds that when contacting another blogger, the fact of both blogging creates a commonality, even if content is very different – "I am a blogger, you are a blogger, we should catch up". Brett calls it "instant credibility":

*Even if I don't know someone just the fact that I saw something on their blog, posted a comment, asked a question and they see that I have one. It establishes almost an instant credibility: that this person is worth the time to respond, to read, as to say.*

Gabriela explains that having weblogs that provide the context and the history of previous interactions makes contact easier: she feels she can "tap into knowledge of fellow bloggers without [providing] any details".

Many participants talk about connecting with fellow bloggers via multiple channels. Gabriela gives an example of Jack Vinson, a KM blogger she has never met in person, and says they are mutually connected on different channels. Shawn does not constantly interact with other bloggers via the blogosphere, saying that if it happens it's often an email, phone or meeting in person. Luis talks about enhancing his connection with KM bloggers by knowing about their day-to-day life from Twitter.

For Martin, other, more personal channels are needed to get to know others really well, "to have a more secure exchange which is not public, to be vulnerable", which is difficult to do in a weblog "once you become an A-lister".<sup>94</sup> Ton adds that for those relationships that are established via a weblog, most of the more personal communication happens via other channels (email, Skype, sharing photos and videos).

Meeting in person is often an important part of the process of building a relation: bloggers tell stories about making an effort to meet other bloggers or synergies of connecting in person after discovering that those they knew via blogging were actually in close physical proximity.

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<sup>94</sup> From "A-list" – most popular weblogs with audiences compared to those of mainstream media.

When bloggers meet, the history of their interactions comes into play. Luis talks about meeting Bill Ives for the first time, having known him via his weblog for several years:

*It was amazing. [...] It was like two old pals talking about KM and picking it up where we have left it in the blogs.*

Euan gives a similar example:

*First time I met Doc [Searls] there were hugs and smiles and really energetic enthusiastic conversation in a restaurant. And we said at that time that if others in the restaurant had known that we've never met each other they would think we were mad.*

Ton explains that meeting in person brings relations to a new level. He gives an example of meeting Chris Corrigan and how walking in the forest having "the same conversations" they would have had online, created a deeper level of understanding:

*Rereading his postings I now hear his voice, but I also know in what kind of context he wrote it, and this additional information helps me interpret what he means on a deeper level.*

Martin has similar experiences: "[realising] that they actually have a body helped to appreciate their writing more and use their writing more effectively".

However, Dave is not sure whether meeting in person after getting to know each other online is good or bad, as some people "create a different persona in their blog" and meeting in person might result in "identity structure shifts". When I refer to other bloggers who are eager to meet in person, he tells it depends on a scale: "I can't afford the time to meet everybody I track or listen to".

Interacting via multiple channels over time not only helps the connections grow and strengthen, but also contributes to the development of shared understanding and a sense of community. Gabriela talks about other bloggers as a "permanent support network", "a sort of fraternity" that she can rely on. Luis comments, "And then you are talking not about silos [...], but interconnected complex network of blogs", where bloggers know whom to go to for help or advice (Luis).

Initial interactions between bloggers often happen via weblogs.

In the process of relation building conversations created by linking between weblogs play a special role: those "fragmented frequent conversations" support both collective development of ideas and strengthening of the bonds between bloggers. Over time meeting in person and other channels are added to the mix, to continue blogging conversations, to interact in more private and secure settings and to get to know others better. Over time those interactions create a foundation that might enable bloggers to collaborate to get things done together.

#### 5.4.4 Getting things done

When I ask about the role of blogging in making it possible to do something together, Martin describes how relations grow from shallow to more deep, starting from a shared interest and then eventually building an image of someone as trustworthy. Others describe a similar process of gradual engagement that builds a foundation for working together: the knowledge of common interests and shared context (Gabriela), "a feeling that just talking is not enough and there is a shared need to do something together" (Ton) and "trust which is crucial for collaboration" (Luis).

In addition, weblogs help to make a decision about "doing business" with a blogger. For example, while Nancy doesn't keep track of how her weblog has contributed to her business, she assumes it to be "a kind of screening device" where potential clients can check her background. Ton tells a story about a client worried that he would take a technology-driven approach to work on a case, who then became reassured that that wouldn't happen after reading Ton's weblog. Such "screening" might also work in the opposite way, as for Dave who "certainly used weblogs of some people to decide not to collaborate with them".

Sometimes bloggers find it difficult to isolate the role of their weblogs in working together. Shawn gives an example of getting to know Nancy through her blog and other online activities, inviting her to stay in his house when she travelled to Australia, and their collaboration that followed. He also talks about potential clients contacting him as a result of blogging to ask for a meeting: "it might turn into business or may not, it's a beginning point". For Ton, joint work often "started somewhere in a weblog" and then "spilled over to other channels". For him, meeting people in person before being able to work with them is essential; he has to "look in their eye", to see "the whole person", as well as knowing about their shared interests from blogging.

While meeting another blogger in person is often cited as part of the process that led to working together or a prerequisite for it, this is not always the case. Martin talks about several "only online" relations that turned into joint work: "The way we worked together fits the image I've got from blog interaction, there were no big surprises."

When it comes to doing the work, often a weblog is not a primarily tool to do so. For Gabriela "email or twitter is the easiest way" for contacting bloggers, rather than a weblog, which is "slower":

*When I don't need a quick answer and its something related my blogpost, I leave a comment or write a post myself. If I have a concrete idea and want to put it in practice now, I use other tools.*



Luis comments that embedding blogging into the workflow of day-to-day interactions is not easy: while email is part of work, blogging still feels like an extra.

For Martin, blogging is good for learning and exploration, but "a different mode is needed" to get things done. He notices that for him it is easy to confuse work with online interactions, indicating that at times blogging might have a negative impact on work: "I have to pull myself out of conversations and learning to do my work [...] to get things done offline... to write that article..." He adds that for some jobs blogging might be a better fit, giving research as an example.

Euan suggests weblogs are good for supportive activities: "In a sense of establishing, sharing [...] they are great tools, probably better than face to face", however, "in a context of making something happen there is a limit to how far you can go." He explains that weblogs have a different rhythm: "If you want to set up a meeting you wouldn't pontificate about life, the universe and such..."

While weblogs of the study participants are work-related, they do not necessarily document their work. Ton says his weblog includes reflective writing "on the edge" of what he is doing. He explains that he does not chronicle what he does in his weblog since it would involve his colleagues and clients. He adds that he started to feel more free to do so after starting to work for himself: "They are completely my projects, so it says more about me now," and, although content-wise his work didn't change much, now he also needs "to be a bit more visible as an individual consultant".

Working in organisational settings adds other concerns to blogging about work. For example, while Gabriela did field studies with IBM, she couldn't blog about work as the "smallest detail could provoke some damage"; she wrote about concerts instead. Euan talks about the challenges of blogging in a case when individuals are exposed to an audience "only in controlled circumstances". He talks about writing while in the BBC as "generalising the topic" so that "it stays interesting without compromising anything."

In sum, blogging provides a foundation for working together by allowing bloggers to choose with whom to work with and by building shared understanding and trust. When it comes to doing the work itself or reporting about it, a weblog is not necessarily the tool to choose, since such work requires a different mode of writing and interaction and might not benefit from being visible in a weblog.

### 5.4.5 Staying in touch

When connections are established weblogs provide a way to stay in touch regardless of the degree of interaction between bloggers at any particular moment. Martin noticed that after he stopped blogging, reading other weblogs becomes even more important, "to see what [his contacts] are up to without having to interrupt them, to contact them directly". Gabriela gives an example of former colleagues who are following her weblog to find what is happening in her life "without sending an email".

When the participants talk about the weblogs they read regularly, those usually include weblogs of people they know well. "For the people I know I read to find out how they are going," says Shawn. He does so to find out "if there is something important to ring them up" and says that it often prompts "some other way of communicating with the person".

For Ton keeping up with others' "online traces" (blogs and other channels) helps to maintain a relationship. He emphasises the importance of trivial exchanges (e.g. updates on Jaiku or Twitter – "I'm having a coffee") that create a sense of connection similar to the same type of exchanges with people in a close physical proximity. It is similar for Luis, who says that Twitter provides a space to share "titbits on what I'm doing" resulting in a sense of "ambient intimacy",<sup>95</sup> while his weblog is for "more elaborate thought", or for Gabriela, who "keeps an eye on people via microblogging [Twitter and Jaiku] and other tools", picking up their weblogs once in a while to read in more detail.

Ton suggests that once connections are established the intensity of interactions might decrease:

*In the beginning you also have to show each other that you are making an effort to maybe seduce each other a bit. Network starts by giving [...] and part of it is an attention and an empathy; you have to make the effort first.*

He says that after a while it's different, still an effort, but very different types of interactions:

*Even if there is no interaction I still see the connection [...] I see other people coming online with their status updates [e.g. on Skype]. There is no real interaction, but I know that he sees me coming online as well.*

When connections are established and there is less need to interact, weblogs provide a way to keep up with life and the thinking of their authors without directly contacting them. However, many bloggers also stay in touch via other tools. Microblogging tools are mentioned often in this context; they are used for sharing mundane updates and details of everyday

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<sup>95</sup> See Reichelt (2007).

life, creating a sense of connectedness similar to that when sharing a physical space with co-workers.

#### 5.4.6 Changing modes: publishing vs. interaction

A closer look at the networking practices in the previous sections indicates two different uses of weblogs in that respect: weblogs are used for publishing and for interaction (*Figure 5-2*).

*Figure 5-2* Publishing vs. interaction



When attracting or finding others, getting to know them from a distance or staying in touch, the roles between blog writers and blog readers are distinct: bloggers present their ideas to the world, readers learn from them. The relation is similar to one of book *authors* and their *audience*: lack of reciprocity and direct interaction appear as an advantage, allowing bloggers to write "to the world", since their readers can pick and choose what to read and what to do with it. The coverage of one's life and thinking in a weblog is similar to the coverage of celebrities by mass media; it helps the audience to learn about the blogger, but does not really help to build new relations.

When it comes to bonding through interaction or getting things done together, blogging is different. During his interview Martin talks about weblogs as "alive, living, published now". For him "it's a conversation going on instead of publishing exchange" that gives the feeling that "people are there". To have such a conversation, both reading and writing are essential; bloggers and their readers become *participants*. While some bloggers are more likely to "reach out" than others, once a conversation has started, it is about give and take that comes from all parties involved; reciprocity and direct interaction become essential.

The study results indicate that blogging supports both, publishing and interaction. Blogging as personal *publishing is about broadcasting* to a broad and often unknown audiences allowing efficient communication, while

blogging as *interaction is about engagement* with specific others that builds shared understanding and enables bonding. While those two functions result in positioning blogging as a hybrid genre that has elements of personal webpages and asynchronous communication tools (Herring et al., 2004) the results of the study suggest that weblogs might be used as both *at the same time*.

Michelle Gumbrecht (2004, p.2) uses the common ground theory (Clark & Schaefer, 1989; Clark, 1996) to explain how it is possible to address both close friends and strangers in a single weblog post. She discusses one of her respondents, Lara, who blogged about "an ongoing personal situation that she needed to resolve, but she never detailed in specific":

*The sweeping generalizations ("I know that everything will work out in the end, because it always does") and the undefined context of the situation illustrated that Lara believed that her intended audience (probably close friends) knew what she was referring to, she didn't want to bare all of the facts to the entire Internet audience, or both.*

*The manner in which she framed her post is key to manipulating what is termed "common ground"—the way in which people achieve mutual understanding [2]. Common ground is used generally within the confines of immediate social interaction, but the terminology is applicable here as well. Through accumulation—the manner in which common ground is constructed—Lara and her close friends accrued a great deal of shared knowledge through their previous encounters [4]. By virtue of this knowledge, Lara's friends would be able to understand her posts without her going into excruciating detail. On the other hand, acquaintances and strangers are privy only to the surface information presented in the post. Without the benefit of shared knowledge and experiences with Lara, they do not have the inside track on her situation. In a paradoxical manner, Lara managed to maintain privacy within a public medium.*

In a similar way Ton discusses two roles that his weblog plays in respect to networking. In the case of people he is already connected to, it's a place to think aloud and to reflect, to get to deeper exchanges: "when I write, my network is imagined audience". At the same time, weblog is a "gravity pull", "a starting point for new relations", that may or may not grow as a result of people stumbling upon his posts.

From this perspective, writing a weblog post makes it possible to communicate with both close friends and unknown others. Viewing blogging as publishing allows writing in a way impossible in direct interpersonal communication: it is easy to write on "whatever I find interesting" for "whom it may concern" knowing that friends will read between the lines and pick it up when relevant. If others react to a weblog post, it also becomes part of an interaction that contributes to bonding.

In the course of a particular relationship, bloggers alternate between publishing and interaction to choose what works for them at a particular moment in time.

In addition to changing modes when blogging, there are other factors that aid networking between bloggers. The power of weblogs in discovering others across various boundaries is explained by the personal nature of blogging. Compared to more group-oriented online spaces (e.g. forums), a weblog provides less restrictions on what and how to write, as well as the ability and the need to contextualise writing in a personally meaningful way. This explains the power of discovering new people as a result of blogging: interest in multiple topics allows writing and connecting beyond boundaries of a particular domain, while linking to a new weblog by a blogger provides context and personal recommendation.

A weblog provides a space to be visible as an actor, and a medium to engage with others through reading and writing, while also making visible the history of one's thinking and interaction. This, as well as passionate writing, personal details and cues about one's personality picked up by observing one's thinking and interaction over time, serve as a blogger's "living portrait", helping the audience to get to know the blogger as a person from a distance, without necessarily committing to a relationship.

Engaging in conversations in comments and those between weblogs not only starts bonding through interaction, it also provides a space for a collective intelligence, growing ideas and trust through fragmented frequent conversations. In this process other channels and meeting in person come into play, providing opportunities to strengthen the connections. The knowledge of each other, trust and a history of interaction then enable bloggers to collaborate to get things done together. However, joint work is usually carried out outside of a weblog. Where relations are established, blogging provides a way to stay in touch without necessarily interacting directly, but usually it is complemented by use of other tools as well.

While those characteristics of blogging support building and maintaining relationships between bloggers, they also bring a number of challenges, discussed in the following section.

## **5.5 Results: challenges of weblog-mediated networking**

This section provides an overview of the study findings in respect to the second research question: "What are the practices of knowledge workers in respect to dealing with issues that arise around weblog-mediated networking?"

In this section the discussion of blogging practices is structured according to the themes that emerged from the analysis of specific issues that appear when weblogs are used for networking: those related to expansion of personal networks and information brought via them, representing oneself in a weblog text and dealing with the various tools that are necessary when networking with other bloggers.

### 5.5.1 Dealing with a network expansion and filtering the information it brings

By providing an easy way to find and connect to interesting others, weblogs accelerate expansion of one's network and increase the volume of potentially interesting information flowing through it. Such growth is not easy to sustain, so bloggers develop a variety of ways to deal with it, described below as practices of managing expansion of the network and information it brings.

Nancy discusses how expansion of networks as a result of blogging creates a need to make choices: "If you choose to follow what your blogging network exposes you to, you may accelerate expansion of the network and then you have to make a choice as how much to keep up with that". Not only it is difficult to maintain the large number of meaningful connections that extension of one's network brings, but it is also the case that "relations that these tools enable do not scale" (Euan). Contrary to offline relations that often fade as shared context disappears, weblog-mediated relations "do not go away" as the context and the interactions are "there" (Ton).

One way to deal with the challenges of a growing network is to limit its expansion. When discussing the fact that she does not make as many connections now as when she started blogging, Monica suggests that she is "not looking" for more people to connect:

*...maybe I have enough friends now. Like after getting married, you are not looking anymore. (Monica)*

While not necessarily setting limits on the number of new connections, bloggers use the opportunity weblogs provide to get to know others from a distance to make informed choices about those they want to engage further. Caution about the degree of engagement with new people is especially visible with Nancy, Euan and Dave, who had extensive professional networks prior to starting blogging:

*There are in a modest way more people who want to talk to me than I want and can talk to. So I have to manage that. (Euan)*

*I can't afford the time to meet everybody I track or listen to. (Dave)*

*There is no way I can have a relation with everyone who has something important to say about the things I'm trying to learn. (Nancy)*

Another way to manage network expansion is choosing not to connect personally with other bloggers. Nancy talks about "information relationships": not engaging with people at a personal level but still having a meaningful interaction, as well as "trust in what they are producing, which may have nothing to do with trust in them as a human being". When I try to discuss it in terms of weak and strong ties, she addresses this distinction as insufficient to describe the relations around artefacts that do not necessarily engage the person.

While others do not use the same term, they often distinguish between weblogs of people they know and others that they read to monitor particular topics. For example, Dave says that he reads some weblogs "just to keep an eye on things", without engaging at a more personal level. Shawn mentions not having any connection with some of the authors of the weblogs he subscribes to: "The majority are weak ties or not ties, 5% strong ties."

Even when not engaging personally with all authors of interesting weblogs, the amount of potentially available information might be overwhelming. Bloggers deal with it by reading weblogs they follow selectively. Some participants describe elaborate strategies for using their networks to scan and filter information for them. For example, Dave has "about fifty science bloggers" in his reader – "they scan journals for me, so I don't have to myself", "I've learnt to trust them over the years", "it's much better than a summarisation service".

Ton is watching "two-three hundred people" via their online traces and such monitoring of what they are doing and writing gives him a "sense of what's going on in the world" (he has stopped reading newspapers and watching TV). He adds that those interactions are different from those with strangers on the street, as he knows the context behind what people write. He is primarily interested not in specific information, but the patterns in it, so he deals with the extended nature of his network by "taking a helicopter view" and then "diving deeper" when he has specific questions.

While not all participants describe such strategies, most of them talk about scanning through their subscriptions, not reading everything ("I read what I can, but I don't feel bad if I don't read everything", Brett) or even not reading at all ("mostly I open new items just to see the bold <sup>96</sup>disappear", Monica). Some explicitly talk about not being afraid to miss important information and relying on their network to bring it to their attention:

*If it's important it will come back (Gabriela).*

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<sup>96</sup> Referring to the bold font that marks unread weblog updates in a newsreader.

*People will keep talking about it and it will come to me via different paths (Ton).*

Relying on the network to make sense of what is happening in the world, bloggers explicitly search for a diversity of topics and points of view in what they read. For example, when I asked about the risks of being in an 'echochamber' of likeminded others found through blogging, Euan told that he likes to "be provoked to think differently" and selects weblogs accordingly. Although he admits that it might be a personal trait, he suggests "you can still choose to be in an echochamber, but it's easier to choose not to be" as there are so many choices.

Bloggers deal with the expansion of their networks and the information it brings in multiple ways. They choose to limit the expansion by not connecting with new people or engaging in depth. Some of their connections could be described as "information relations", where weblogs are used as sources of interesting information, rather than as a way to connect personally with their authors. Bloggers manage the information that weblogs bring by reading them selectively (scanning, looking for patterns or not reading at all), at the same time maximising their exposure to a variety of perspectives and trusting that the network brings back what they might miss.

### 5.5.2 Presenting oneself through blogging

Given the visibility for a weblog author as a result of blogging, and the persistent nature of it, weblogs often become a central part of one's online representation, creating a need to shape how one is represented by one's weblog. Participants talk about their weblogs as "the core" (Ton), "the record" (Dave), their online presence and a "long-term commitment towards yourself and your personal brand" (Luis), and something that continues to represent them as they change ("I can change my job or interests, but the URL will be the same" Martin.) Euan provides an example of the role of blogging in that respect when talking about someone he works with who does not have a weblog:

*He is using Twitter and some other things... It feels like a miasma – I've got nowhere I can point people to because he hasn't got a blog and the other bits are too dispersed. So [the weblog] is like a core, a gravitational pull.*

The interviews bring several choices in respect to bloggers' own presentation through blogging. First, they need to make themselves visible through writing to those they would (potentially) like to reach. Then they shape their writing to address the demands of different audiences that their



weblogs expose them to. Finally, they just "let it be": allowing their "true self" to be revealed through blogging and to be constructed by others.

In order to be present, to exist, bloggers need to be visible to others by writing their weblogs. For Luis the need to start blogging in public came from experiences of blogging internally and his dissatisfaction with a "half-way conversation" with KM bloggers who couldn't see comments and links from his internal blog. He talks about the need to blog externally to have proper conversations, to become one of the KM bloggers, "to build up a community of people to share", "to help me to position myself as a thought leader within the field". He says, "[blogging externally] allowed me to have a public face, a public voice".

For Monica, it was important to be able to put her name on a previously anonymous weblog once her authorship was discovered by a journalist and became known in her organisation. She talks about her own practice of checking others' weblogs to find out who they are, and dissatisfaction of not being visible in the same way. She also provides an example of a need to become invisible when her former colleagues commented on her presence with them even after leaving the research group (that didn't support her PhD aspirations), as a result of continuing to blog about her ideas:

*I had mixed feelings, so I stopped posting work-related things there. [...] I felt used. (Monica)*

However, it is not enough just to write a weblog and be present as a blogger; it is also important to use the language that the potential audience will understand. Gabriela talks about creating a blog in English, as well as the one she writes in Romanian, to be able to connect to bloggers she met at a conference. Monica and Martin, who write primarily in Portuguese and German as a way to connect with their national audiences, talk about struggles to make choices between languages. For them connection with local audiences comes at the price of being invisible to their English-speaking network, which they address once in a while by writing in English.

With a weblog one may be also present to different types of audiences: peers, existing or potential clients, and friends. Relations with those people involve different ways of writing and interacting that do not necessarily coexist well, resulting in a need to shape the way one is represented by a weblog.

Martin provides an example by saying that one of the reasons he stopped blogging 1.5 years ago related to the dynamics around his weblog. In the German-speaking internet his weblog became "quite famous" and got exposed to a "different sphere of people", who expected him to "be

a pundit who knows everything". On the one hand he wanted to play that role, as it allowed him to get more business, but on the other hand, catering for these expectations in his weblog collided with the open and vulnerable style of blogging necessary for learning and networking with peers. At one point there was too much confusion, so he decided to stop blogging. According to Martin, blogging for marketing purposes "has a different attitude and you get a clash of contexts".

Even when blogging is supporting one's business, as in the case of Dave, it is important "not to push your ideas":

*If you say interesting things or link to interesting stuff, people will come and talk to you anyway (Dave).*

In addition to managing tensions that might arise around different professional uses of a weblog, there are also choices about the degree to which one wants to reveal personal details of one's life in it. While many respondents discuss the blurring boundaries between personal and professional for business in general and blogging in particular, they also limit the degree of exposing personal details in their weblogs. Euan notes that weblogs "rely on you having an opinion and expressing it, and it's not the most easy thing in a work context". Monica considers many bloggers she knows as friends, not professional contacts, as she observes the details of their lives that "only friends have a privilege [to see]". However, she is also not comfortable revealing too much on her weblog: "I will not talk about myself. For me blogging and being in public are the same."

Given the impact of blogging on one's reputation, it is tempting to think of it as a way to construct a favourable image of oneself. However, the interviews hint that while weblogs may be viewed by bloggers as their online representations, their uses in that respect may not be fully intentional and directed. Not only do bloggers comment on networking as a side effect of blogging rather than an explicit purpose for it; they also seem to believe that there are limits as to how much their image could be controlled.

For example, when talking about his weblog as a "trustworthy anchor point" for his clients, Ton explains that it works that way "because you can't fake six years worth of blogging". Dave, reacting to my comment about his experiences of presenting to big audiences says "keynote is a performance, blog is more intimate" and then talks about being surprised by "the degree you reveal yourself on the weblog", sharing "half-formed ideas" and starting to "chat with people as they were your friends".

Blogging under one's own name, as a professional, might be one of the reasons not to "fake it" as others can eventually get into a closer contact anyway. For example, Euan tells about the temptation to become "more guarded" in order to address increasing business risks of blogging when

going self-employed, and his decision against it: "It's better if people know what I'm thinking before starting to pay me." Martin, reflecting on his experiences, says that now he would rather express what he thinks and, "People will appear who appreciate that."

In addition, bloggers are not only "revealing themselves" to others, but also exploring who they are, through their writing and people's reactions to it:

*I existed and had a life apart from my existence, just because of the insights I put in the blogs I created. . . I also discovered things about myself I didn't know. . . when more people started saying something about me. (Monica)*

One can have a preferred image of oneself as a professional, but readers of a weblog construct their own anyway, based on weblog writing, as, for example, with Nancy, who talks about others positioning her weblog as a "KM blog" or "educational blog", when she doesn't view it this way.

Participants view their weblogs as their online representations and also shape their actions accordingly. In order to "exist" for the audiences they may want to reach and potential connections to emerge, bloggers not only need to be blogging, but also to do it in a way connected to their name, continue blogging over time and write in a language that the audience can understand. While doing so, they have to draw boundaries about what to include in their writing and how to include it. They also have to accept that they let their image to be shaped by their writing and their audiences.

### 5.5.3 Choosing channels

The variety of channels bloggers use to engage with each other creates the need to choose which of them to use.

As results presented in section 5.4 indicate, specific networking practices are supported by uses of different channels to connect with each other. Weblogs serve primarily as a channel for discovering bloggers and getting to know them from a distance. While bonding through interaction starts via weblog conversations, eventually it is likely to include meeting in person and the use of other channels, such as email, Skype, phone or microblogging. While finding and "screening" each other via weblogs, as well as shared understanding, trust and a history of interactions enable bloggers to get things done together, such collaboration mostly happens outside of blogging. Although weblogs are used to stay in touch, other tools increasingly support this, especially those allowing broadcasting one's current status to the network, for example with presence indicators in Skype or microblogging updates.

When it comes to bonding through interaction, doing work or staying in touch, bloggers pick and choose tools that suit their needs and specific circumstances. My interactions with the participants during the course of this study provide an illustration.

As I did not have much contact with some of the participants prior to the study, I looked through their weblogs for an appropriate means of contact. I used existing connections on a variety of channels, but also added more connections during the study (email addresses, Twitter, Skype, social network contacts). I used Twitter, email or Skype chat to contact bloggers: Twitter and to a lesser extend their weblogs to see what was happening in their lives to decide when and how to contact; Skype chat to coordinate before the interview start and to exchange links and names during it; Twitter and Skype chat to discuss their preferences for receiving interview summaries; Google documents and email attachments to edit the summaries, email to communicate around them.

Given that bloggers have many tools at their disposal, what are the reasons to choose for or against blogging? While the interviews do not provide enough input to identify such reasons in a systematic way, it is possible to discern a number of weblog characteristics that influence the choice for or against them:

- space to express one's ideas without pushing them to others;
- slow and open-ended, so not good for direct interaction with a particular goal in mind;
- contextual (at the post level and as a whole as they include a history of the blogger's writing over time);
- persistent, so are better used for posts that make sense in a long term, not for trivial updates;
- individual-centred, providing history over time, ability not to restrict oneself to writing on particular topics and strong association between blogger and content;
- personal, representing own space and own ideas;
- public, providing a big potential audience, so not well suited for private, confidential or vulnerable writing;
- take time and effort.

In addition to choosing which channels to use when engaging with others, bloggers also make an effort to discover which tools others use, and to connect there. Gabriela says that meeting a new interesting person usually results in searching for them and connecting in different places:

*I've never seen someone giving me the details [...] you go and see what you can find there. After I attend an event I usually have ten requests [to connect].*

Given the number of channels bloggers use to engage with others, maintaining all of them might be a challenge. Luis talks about the risks of "spreading yourself too thin", since it takes effort to maintain one's presence on multiple channels.

Another issue to deal with is the fragmentation and aggregation between different channels, especially when they are used, as in a case of Ton, to connect to different audiences. Gabriela is concerned that information about a person that used to be in a weblog is now fragmented across multiple channels, as well as the need to "follow" her contacts to the channels they choose for their activities. However, she is also "a bit annoyed by the fact that social tools are getting more aggregated" and provides an example of her students who started to follow her on Jaiku (used as part of the course), but then turned to other channels (including her weblog) and picked up all kinds of personal details about her.

While at the beginning bloggers connect with each other primarily via weblogs, over time meeting in person and other tools are added to the mix. Bloggers pick and choose tools to engage with others. They also enable those choices by creating connections with others and maintaining their presence on different channels, and by dealing with fragmentation and aggregation of their bits between different channels.

#### 5.5.4 Summary

This section describes practices relevant to managing the specifics of weblog-mediated networking. As bloggers' networks expand and expose them to more people, they manage this exposure by limiting the number of new contacts or degree of engagement with others, as well as making choices not to engage personally with everyone. They read weblogs selectively, rely on their network to filter information for them and try to maximise their exposure to a variety of perspectives. Treating weblogs as their online representation, living and persistent at the same time, bloggers make choices about their own public images, deciding on the degree of exposure of personal details or explicit business uses of a weblog. Bloggers also manage the different channels used to engage with other bloggers, selecting which ones to use, maintaining their presence and managing fragmentation and aggregation across channels, so as to be able to choose an appropriate one when the need for it arises.

## 5.6 Discussion

While blogging does not necessarily start as an activity intentionally aimed at developing relations with others, it does impact bloggers' networks. For the study respondents it brought an expansion of their professional networks, allowing them to connect across topical, geographical, organisational and hierarchical boundaries with people with similar professional interests and shared values.

In the process of developing relations with each other, bloggers in finding others and being found, getting to know other bloggers from a distance, bonding through interaction, getting things done together and staying in touch. Those practices are supported by two modes of blogging, publishing and interaction, as well as the use of other channels and meeting in person (*Table 5-4*).

*Table 5-4* Uses of weblogs and other channels to support networking practices

<b>Ways to engage Practices</b>	<b>Blogging as publishing: author + audience</b>	<b>Blogging as interaction: participants</b>	<b>Other channels</b>
Finding others and being found	Weblogs serve as attractors and filters.	Rarely.	Rarely.
Getting to know others from a distance	Observation of bloggers' writing, interactions and community via their weblogs.		
Bonding through interaction		Conversations in weblog comments as a starting point for a relationship. Conversations between weblogs, growing ideas and trust through fragmented frequent conversations.	Conversations started via weblogs "spill over" to other channels (email, phone, instant messaging, etc). Meeting in person is often an important to develop strong connections. Over time bloggers connect in other online spaces (social networking and photo sharing sites, microblogging tools, etc).
Getting things done		Provides a foundation by building shared understanding and trust.	Email, phone, online audio, instant massaging, meeting in person.
Staying in touch	Monitoring activities via weblog to contact when necessary.		To stay in touch, microblogging tools are often used: compared to weblogs they are more personal and more efficient (i.e. include short updates)

Finding others is primarily served by browsing and reading, while writing one's own weblog is essential for being found by others. Writing a weblog allows others to get to know the blogger from a distance through browsing and reading. Bonding through interaction usually starts by engaging in conversations in comments and those between weblogs; as a relationship grows it is likely to include meeting in person and engaging using a variety of other tools. Those experiences enable working together; however, most collaboration is likely to happen outside of weblogs. When connections are established, weblogs provide a way to stay in touch without a direct contact. However, at this stage other tools are used as well, primarily microblogging tools that provide a sense of connectedness via sharing details of everyday life.

While the initial focus of the study was primarily on the relations sector of the knowledge work framework, the results show how conversations between bloggers are essential for developing relations between them, while also being part of the idea development process.

As the study shows, blogging provides opportunities for both, building strong personal connections and establishing other, non-personal relationships, those that Nancy calls "information relationships" and Shawn addresses as "not ties". While providing an opportunity to "keep an eye on things" (Dave) those relations do not require as much effort and commitment as goes into personal relations. Anoush Margaryan, reacting to the summary of the interview with Nancy, discusses this aspect in her weblog:

*Web quote 5-2*  
[Blogs, information relations and imaginary friends](#),  
 Anoush Margaryan,  
 22 November 2008

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In this interview Nancy talks about information relationships vs human relationships emerging as a result of blogging. The notion of information relationships is that blogs allow to connect in a meaningful way to a wide range of people and their ideas without necessarily engaging with them on a personal level – as Nancy says "[trust in what they are producing, which may have nothing to do with trust in them as a human being](#)".

I like this concept, and this quote formulates very well what I have been thinking about as the liberating aspect of the sorts of instrumental, utilitarian (in the good sense) social networks that can develop in the blogosphere.

When I think about various types of aggregations of individuals and knowledge – groups, communities, network, and the [collective](#) – I always have a bit of a problem, a sense of discomfort, with the notion of "community". For me, "community" – in the social as well as learning-related sense – has always had something oppressive about it, like being stuck in a village where everyone gossips about everyone else and where there is a pressure to fit in, to fully participate.

In contrast, information/knowledge networks you can form in blogosphere do not require such full engagement on such a personal level. I am not an avid blogger myself (this blog is very new and I am still trying to get into the habit of writing regularly). However, over years, I have accumulated a list of around 50 blogs that I read/scan daily. In most of the cases, I don't know the authors personally, and with many of them I have never had a conversational exchange, yet I feel I know them professionally,

their ideas have shaped mine, they helped and are helping me every day tremendously to learn and feel intellectually connected and stimulated, not to mention helping me find, filter and evaluate resources for my research (books, papers, etc).

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Although Anoush contrasts blogging networks and communities, the function of "information relations" between bloggers is not that different from lurking in communities (Nonnecke & Preece, 2003): they provide an opportunity to learn without the exposure and the effort that interaction requires. However, this learning is person-centric: observing the writing of a single person over time helps to develop trust in "what the blogger is producing" and a feeling of "knowing her professionally", resulting in a relationship that bloggers can not classify easily.

However, beyond those non-personal relationships, blogging also enables creating true personal connections;

*...not pretend or unreal or virtual relationship, the real relationship, where you build up trust and affect and those powerful things that make people work together. Online. (Euan)*

What exactly helps to establish and maintain personal relations via blogging? The insights from the research on strong and weak ties (Granovetter, 1973; see also Haythornthwaite, 2005, for a summary of the follow-up research) indicate that the type and frequency of interaction, as well as the number of channels used for it, are important, since stronger ties include frequent and more intimate interaction via a number of channels. While the study results do not provide data on changes in the frequency of interactions between bloggers when their relationships strengthen, they do indicate that those with stronger connections interact on multiple occasions, use different channels and communicate about personal issues as well as professional ones.

An additional view on the factors in the process of growing and maintaining a relationship is provided by Bonnie Nardi (2005), who draws on the research on instant messaging and face-to-face communication (Nardi, Whittaker & Bradner, 2000; Nardi et al., 2002)<sup>97</sup> to propose that communication includes relational aspects as well as information exchange. The relation between a pair of people creates "a state of communicative readiness in which fruitful communication is likely" (Nardi, 2005, p.91) and includes three dimensions of connection: affinity, commitment and attention. Those dimensions are recognisable in the study presented in this chapter.

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<sup>97</sup> The second study is the one that proposes the concept of intensional networks that this chapter is based on; however Nardi's work on the dimensions of connection came to my attention only when I searched for theories that would explain the findings presented in this chapter.



According to Nardi *affinity* is achieved through activities of social bonding - touching, eating and drinking together, sharing experiences in a common space and informal communication - that make people feel connected with each other.

Three of the social bonding activities appear in the data. Although not easily supported by blogging itself, *eating and drinking together* is clearly important: restaurants are mentioned frequently as a place to meet other bloggers, "Having a coffee" is an important part of microblogging updates and it is food reviews that bloggers mention when talking about Bill Ives, not other items from his weekend blogging list that include, according to the header of his weblog, "art, music, travel, and food".<sup>98</sup>

*Informal communication* is supported by the personal nature of blogging: the freedom to choose what to write provides enough opportunities to share jokes, talk about hobbies or "pontificate about life, the universe and such" (Euan). KM bloggers refer to "personal details" on weblogs that help to get to know others, but those serve as conversation starters as well (it is similar in other studies, e.g. bloggers in the study by Kendall (2007) report that posts with something amusing or trivial received more comments than others).

KM bloggers talk about their experiences of connecting to others in terms of *sharing spaces*: Dave refers to getting to know others in a way similar to how it works in a "common room in a university", Brett talks about blogging as casual conversations at a water-cooler, Ton talks about "shared spaces" online, neighbourhoods and global villages, Martin appreciates others "coming" to his "place" to leave comments... My own blogging experiences resulted in similar feelings and multiple attempts to explain what might create them.<sup>99</sup>

Web quote 5-3  
[Communities, shared spaces and weblog reading](#), Mathemagenic,  
 7 June 2004

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I know that it's hard to believe that many individual weblogs, even linked, can provide a shared space, but it feels like that (and I tend to trust my feelings :)))

For me the closest metaphor is a city, a shared living space. Usually we don't know many others in our neighbourhood, but we walk on the same streets every day, see the same familiar strangers, get wet under the same rain, miss the same bus... We have a lot of context to share and meeting each other abroad we will connect easily. Living in a same city creates a sense of belonging and a sense of community...

Weblogs do as well. Of course, not for everyone (as in a city, you may not feel it). I was thinking what creates such shared context in case of weblogs. I guess it's weblog reading.

I'm thinking about my own weblog ecosystem. We don't read same weblogs, but they are interconnected, so at the end we get exposed to similar names, events, ideas, books. For example, once you get into KM blogging, you will quickly learn about wikis, join Orkut or find out who Dave

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<sup>98</sup> *Portals and KM*, [billives.typepad.com](http://billives.typepad.com)

<sup>99</sup> I return to city metaphor in the final chapter, see section 7.2.3.

Pollard is. Our experiences of blogging are never the same, like experiences of living on different streets, but in some cases they overlap enough to create a feeling of sharing the same space.

I think that those "some cases" of overlapping weblog experiences have to do with several things: density of a network, speed of ideas travelling around and time that one devotes to reading weblogs of others. The last one is important: getting to know your community takes time and you will never connect with a city when you jump in and out of a tourist bus.

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*Commitment* is another dimension that Nardi introduces as important.

In the case of KM bloggers, expressing commitment to others is manifested through the effort of reading their weblogs ("they took the effort to read what I write", Luis), repeated interaction and maintaining their own presence via weblogs and other channels.

Finally, *capturing and monitoring attention* includes, for example, eye contact or negotiating availability of others. In the case of bloggers, linking is often perceived as a sign of attention, and considerable effort goes into monitoring incoming links that help to find new bloggers or keep track of fragments of conversations between weblogs. While weblogs are rarely used explicitly for negotiating availability for an interaction (this is where other channels come into play), they do provide an opportunity to indicate one's interest in communicating, via comments or linking to a weblog, and leave it open as to if, when and how much one wants to engage in a further exchange.

In creating relationships, publishing and interaction modes of blogging play a role. For non-personal relations to emerge and be sustained, the publishing mode of blogging is enough; in this case, uses of a weblog are informational. For establishing and maintaining personal relations, both publishing and interaction are important. Interaction through weblog conversations helps to develop and renew relations, but it does not happen all the time. Publishing mode (both, reading and writing) provides a backdrop for a relationship: sharing ones' updates to the network without needing to worry about "spamming" others, developing knowledge of each other, feeling that others are "present" or monitoring when the right moment occurs for an interaction. The power of blogging in respect to networking seems to come from an opportunity to combine two modes with one tool.

By providing visibility of one's own expertise and interest, as well as an exposure to a diverse group of others and an opportunity to get to know their thinking from a distance, blogging could be viewed as creating *latent ties*, those that "technically possible but not yet activated socially" (Haythornthwaite, 2005, p.137), but can possibly turn into weak and strong ties. Weblogs seem to be especially useful at early stages in a relationship, creating awareness of each other and providing opportunities

for bonding that establish a foundation for "activating" connections for collaboration rather than directly supporting it.

Given that weblogs support the establishment of unexpected connections across boundaries, they hold a lot of promise to address common targets of knowledge management efforts in organisations: knowledge sharing across silos and innovation enabled by unexpected connections and cross-fertilisation between different domains. In addition, they could be better suited than other tools in supporting relational characteristics that enable successful knowledge sharing: knowing what another person knows, access, engagement and safety (Cross et al., 2001).

However, according to the study results, weblog-mediated networking involves effort in managing expansion of one's network and filtering the information it brings, maintaining one's own online representation via a weblog as well as choosing and managing different channels to engage with other bloggers. Mastering those practices involves time and effort necessary for discovering the specifics of blog networking, such as strategies of selective blog reading, drawing boundaries when writing a weblog, or identifying when and why a weblog works to engage with others.

Given the small scale of the study, it is not easy to generalise its results. However, it provides findings comparable to other studies and insights that require further exploration. Since existing weblog research does not present a uniform picture of whether weblogs are used primarily to maintain existing relationships (e.g. for students in Nardi et al., 2004) or result in extending one's network significantly (e.g. for professionals in Aïmeur et al., 2003; or country-specific blogger communities in Ali-Hasan & Adamic, 2007) further exploration is needed to identify the conditions for both. Given the similarities in the dynamics of networking and emergent community practices between KM bloggers and UK goths (Hodkinson, 2006), very different groups in other respects, it is reasonable to assume that strong interest in a specific domain might be an important factor in establishing new relations.<sup>100</sup>

The results of the study suggest that weblogs could be useful for expanding one's own network. However, they also indicate that such expansion might slow down with time and show that bloggers make an effort to limit it by managing degrees of engagement with others or establishing "information relationships" rather than personal connections. While these could be natural processes of managing one's network, they might also indicate that those who come into blogging much later than

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<sup>100</sup> This assumption corresponds to the findings about establishing new relations in a case of interest-driven practices vs. maintaining existing relations in a case of friendship-driven practices of US youth online (Ito et al., 2008).

the early adopters described in this study might have to deal with a deficit of attention as a result of the sheer number of available weblogs. In addition, while all bloggers in the study described establishing new connections as a result of blogging, those who had more established networks prior to beginning blogging were more cautious about engaging with new people. Given the results of the study, it is not unreasonable to assume that extending one's network through blogging might be more beneficial in the domains not well covered by existing bloggers and for people who don't have an extended network yet. However, this assumption needs to be tested with further research.

While the study findings indicate that weblogs support building relations across various boundaries, the conditions that make such boundary-crossing connections possible have to be investigated further. In that respect, the boundaries that are not crossed by blogging are particularly interesting, for example those of different languages or certain values. In addition, more work is needed to understand the nature of, and the conditions for, the different types of relations that blogging supports: asymmetrical relationships and information relationships, as well as personal ones.



## Employee blogging at Microsoft

Companies are starting to recognise that weblogs written by their employees can be valuable communication and knowledge management assets, providing ways to speak in a human voice within or outside the organisation, to find previously undocumented expertise, and to create unexpected connections between people and ideas. This can motivate a company to engage with blogging by providing support to maximise positive effects, or setting boundaries to minimise risks. However, for employees, the activity of authoring a weblog, even when clearly work-related, often feels outside the corporate sphere of influence. The personal nature of blogging means that companies have no straightforward way to mandate the content, timing, or manner of blogging. Rather, to successfully exploit weblogs, a business must understand the personal interests and concerns of bloggers and create an appropriate environment.

This chapter provides a view on personal blogging practices in an organisational context, focusing on issues that arise when this personal medium is used in relation to work. It describes the results of a study of employee blogging at Microsoft.

### 6.1 Employee blogging

Because weblogs are often highly visible, easily accessed, and indexed by search engines, their use by employees raises issues for teams and organisations. With a few keystrokes, information traverses the wall separating an organisation from the outside world. Planning and social convention goes into erecting and maintaining such walls; it can be unsettling to have them so easily crossed. Although in principle posting to a weblog is not unlike sending an email attachment or newsgroup post, the instantaneous, wide visibility can feel qualitatively different, amplified by ripple effects or information epidemics created by blogger networks (Adar

& Adamic, 2005). The effect is most strongly felt when readers can identify an author or the author's organisation.

For a large company, weblogs present a largely untested middle ground between public relations handled by professional staff and the usually inconsequential employee discussions of work with family and friends. Whether pitched to family and friends or to a larger public audience, weblog posts may be picked up and indexed by search engines and delivered by watchlists minutes after being written.

Blogging while working for a company is not risk-free. In widely-publicised events, a Google employee was fired for discussing everyday life at work (Cone, 2005), a Microsoft contractor for posting a photograph of a company site (Bishop, 2003), and employees at Delta Airlines, ESPN, and Waterstones Books for blog content. (Searching on "fired for blog" yields hundreds of hits.)

At the same time, employee blogging is starting to be seen as a potentially useful communication channel. Zerfaß (2005, discussed in Jüch & Stobbe, 2005) describes eight functions of corporate blogs. One is pure public relations, two deliver internal communication (knowledge transfer and contract negotiation), and five focus on market communication: product blogs, service blogs, customer relationship blogs, crisis blogs and CEO blogs (which we broaden to executive blogs, e.g. (Dudley, 2004), which can also serve an internal communication function).

Accounts of employees blogging openly about work appear regularly (see for example Edward Cone's "Rise of the Blog", 2005). Weblog authors in major technology companies can be found by searching for "[company name] bloggers", with the relevant company name, such as Amazon, Google, Microsoft, IBM, Sun, and so on, inserted. The resulting lists are neither official nor comprehensive, but they reveal that employee blogging is widespread. The growing familiarity of young people with the form and analyses of its potential (Grudin, 2006) motivate a look at early adopter organisations, teams, and individuals.

While research on corporate blogging is starting to appear (for an overview see Lockwood & Dennis, 2008), at the moment of the study reported in this chapter there were not many publications to draw upon. Here the focus is primarily on understanding uses of weblogs for supporting knowledge work and the dynamics around them, especially those related to the issues that arise when this personal medium is used in business settings. To reflect this the term "employee blogging" is used instead of "corporate blogging", which suggests action that is authorised, acknowledged, or in a formal way associated with an organisation.

## 6.2 Research approach

This section outlines the research approach for this study: the selection of the case and research questions, research methods used, writing conventions and evaluation criteria.

### 6.2.1 Case

This case focuses on employee blogging practices at Microsoft. While reports indicate that even within high-tech companies, weblog use varies considerably, many individual incentives and experiences, and organisational opportunities and sensitivities, are likely to be common.

Selection of Microsoft for the study was the result of an anticipated opportunity. Microsoft bloggers were part of my interest in corporate blogging long before the study: I would occasionally come across interesting examples and discuss them in my weblog or bookmark them, and I also read several weblogs by Microsoft people on a regular basis.<sup>101</sup> However, while the company was on my list of possible options for studying blogging in corporate settings, I didn't work actively on getting access to it until the moment I discovered a comment in my weblog by a researcher from Microsoft with reference to an internal study on weblogs. The exchange that followed and a meeting at a conference resulted in a 10-week internship at Microsoft Research in Redmond, Washington State, USA, focused on studying employee weblogs (see Knies, 2005 for the story in more detail).

The study had an exploratory nature and aimed to understand weblog adoption in the company. The results were published and presented to academic and business audiences on various occasions (Efimova & Grudin, 2006; Efimova & Grudin, 2007), including a presentation at Microsoft.

In this chapter I present the results of the study in a way that allows addressing the blogging practices of knowledge workers<sup>102</sup> in an organisational context. Since it focuses on all parts of the framework (*Figure 6-1*) it is not possible to achieve the same level of detail as in other

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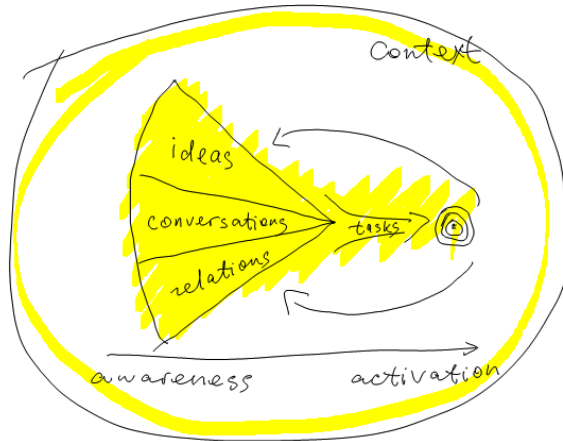
<sup>101</sup> For more details and links see [Studying weblogs at Microsoft: ethnography?](#) (Mathemagenic, 19 September 2005).

<sup>102</sup> Being part of the software development industry, Microsoft presents a knowledge intensive working environment. Although one might argue that not all of the company's employees could be considered knowledge workers, those we interviewed did belong to this category. Also, given the content of the weblogs by Microsoft employees I assume that most bloggers in the company are likely to be knowledge workers.



studies. However, it provides an opportunity to examine how blogging practices of knowledge workers are shaped by an organisational context.

Figure 6-1 Parts of the knowledge work framework addressed by the study of employee blogging at Microsoft



This chapter addresses the following research questions:

- What are the blogging practices of Microsoft employees as knowledge workers?
- What are the practices of Microsoft bloggers in respect to dealing with tensions between personal and organisational perspectives around blogging?

### 6.2.2 Methods

The main data collection and analysis for this case was carried out from July to September 2005, in collaboration with Jonathan Grudin,<sup>103</sup> senior researcher from Microsoft Research. However, preparation for the study, further analysis and writing spanned several months before and after this period. While doing the study I was employed by Microsoft as an intern, which put me in a position similar to other bloggers in the company and facilitated access to people and information. Also, as I found out at the beginning of the study, my participation at a Social Computing Symposium hosted by Microsoft in April 2005 simplified contacts with the key informants as I had already met them and could use shared experiences in another context as a reference.

Over ten weeks we browsed and read employee weblogs, followed weblog email distribution lists, attended meetings organised by others to discuss weblog issues, read documentation covering weblog guidelines

<sup>103</sup> Gina Venolia, another researcher from Microsoft, contributed to the study in the beginning.

and policies, and interviewed 38 people in the organisation.<sup>104</sup> We had access to data from internal surveys that covered weblog awareness, attitudes and behaviour.

My personal experiences of figuring out how to be a blogger who works for Microsoft provided a good insight into the company blogging culture and resources, as well as questions to be asked.<sup>105</sup> Being a blogger as well as a researcher simplified contacts with the participants and helped in contextualising their blogging practices, but also resulted in difficult ethical and methodological choices (see section 2.3). I documented some of the emergent findings and issues arising from working on the study in my weblog.<sup>106</sup>

Interviews were the main source of data used for the analysis (see *Table 6-1* for an overview of categories of interview respondents). We first interviewed employees who had supported, promoted and authored weblogs, gathering relevant history and identifying significant groups and roles: active bloggers, infrastructure support (e.g. those managing servers) and policy-makers (e.g. attorneys). These people suggested other interview candidates, and yet others were found by exploring employee weblogs and contacting authors whose weblogs complemented those in our sample.<sup>107</sup> These included well-known and less well-known bloggers, employees in different roles or located in different countries, those with diverse blogging styles (strictly work-related, mixing work and personal, product blogs, internal weblogs, and non-English weblogs).

*Table 6-1* Interview respondents

	Total	Male	Female	Responsible for blog-related infrastructure or policy
Bloggers	34	29	5	7
Non-bloggers	4	3	1	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>11</b>

The interviews were for an hour or more, most in person and some by phone. Except in the cases where we didn't get permissions or experienced technical problems, the interviews were audio recorded; notes were made in all cases. Semi-structured interview questions addressed history, perceptions of blogging in the organisation, and personal blogging practices.

<sup>104</sup> For more details and links see [Studying weblogs at Microsoft: ethnography?](#) (Mathemagenic, 19 September 2005).

<sup>105</sup> See for example, [Walking on ice](#) and [Preparing your armors?](#) (Mathemagenic, 8 July and 19 August 2005 respectively)

<sup>106</sup> For an overview see [Studying weblogs at Microsoft](#) (Mathemagenic).

<sup>107</sup> For the notes on the selection criteria and activities see ['Those that belong to the Emperor' \(on weblog types\)](#) (Mathemagenic, 17 March 2006)

Specific questions about events or blog content were based on insights gained from reading respondents' blogs. Over time some emphases shifted. For example, discovery of product weblogs as a distinct category led to more exploration of the related issues.

Virtually everyone we approached agreed to be interviewed and engaged enthusiastically with the research. This may partly reflect the verbal, discursive nature of blogging, but many of our questions clearly resonated with people's perceptions and reflections on this rapidly evolving communication medium.

The interview notes were annotated to indicate themes and specific examples. Interpretations were documented and discussed in multiple ways: as posts on my weblog, in informal discussions with other bloggers and/or researchers, by developing concept-maps representing the study of its specific aspects, in presentations on the study results inside and outside of the company, and in publications. At all stages of this process I was going back to the original data, searching through the notes, listening to audio fragments, adding additional notes or transcribing parts of the text for quotes. I also continued to read Microsoft blogs, although to a much lesser degree, which helped to contextualise and to interpret the study data and added extra details to the portraits of people I interviewed.

6.2.3 Quality verification strategies

Table 6-2 describes specific quality verification strategies applied in this study (for a detailed description of verification strategies, see section 2.4.2).

Table 6-2 Quality verification strategies for the study of employee blogging at Microsoft

Verification strategy	Application for studies of conversational blogging practices
Theorising	Not used.
Exposure	Descriptions of time spent in the field, getting access, data sources, interview sampling strategy, effort to reach "minorities" are provided.
Triangulation	The study is done by two researchers. Interviews are complemented with data from other sources. Facets of employee blogging (discussed in section 6.6.2) are refined using non-Microsoft sample.
Participants as co-researchers	Results are presented at Microsoft.
Transparency	Interview quotes are complemented with quotes from publicly available weblogs (direct links to these are included).
Thick description	The context of the study is described. The results include extensive quoting from the interviews and weblog posts.
Reflexivity and purposeful confessional writing	Weblog as a reflexive journal; references to relevant entries are included. Articulation of personal biases and role conflicts. Personal stories are included to illustrate some of methodological dilemmas and to provide examples of the researcher's personal experiences of blogging while working for the company as parallels to those of the participants.

#### 6.2.4 Writing conventions

The following section first describes the organisational context for the study, providing background on the history, policies and infrastructure around blogging at Microsoft, necessary to position and to interpret the findings. The remaining two sections address the results in respect to two research questions, focusing on blogging practices of Microsoft employees in relation to work and on their choices with respect to dealing with tensions between personal and organisational perspectives around blogging.

While describing the results I focus on specific patterns or attitudes as articulated by the respondents (e.g. statements on readers' perceptions of a weblog reflect what was said about it by the weblog author). Specific practices are discussed without specifying numbers of people<sup>108</sup> addressing them, since the nature of the research question calls for an overview of possible practices rather than estimations of their relative popularity.

The results are also intentionally presented so that multiple interview quotes can not be linked to a single person. This is done in order to protect the respondents: since a weblog gives extended visibility to the circumstances of its author, some of the examples that appear in the text would easily allow someone familiar with blogging in Microsoft to trace them back to the specific person. The quotes from weblogs included in the text are fully attributed and include links to the original posts (last checked as working on 18 September 2008). Inclusion of those quotes does not necessarily indicate that their authors were interviewed for the study.

Since another researcher was involved in doing the study and co-authored publications (Efimova & Grudin, 2006; Efimova & Grudin, 2007) were reused for this chapter, both *we* and *I* are used in the text; *we* is used when referring to joint actions.

### 6.3 Blogging at Microsoft

This section describes the organisational context for the study: the evolution of perceptions and policies around blogging and weblog infrastructure in Microsoft.

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<sup>108</sup> I use "many" and "often" when a particular reply is presented for at least half of the respondents, "some" and "few" when talking about several people and indicate explicitly if there was only one person.

### 6.3.1 Evolving perceptions and policies<sup>109</sup>

The first Microsoft bloggers were students with externally hosted weblogs who were hired as interns or employees, starting in 2000 and 2001. Their weblogs attracted little attention. By mid-2002 employees were manually hosting weblogs on company machines and arguing for externally visible weblogs. An internal weblog server, maintained through voluntary efforts, hosted a few dozen weblogs by the end of the year. Late in 2002, a list of employee weblogs, including some hosted externally, was published by someone outside the organisation (Mary Jo Foley in *Microsoft Watch*). This helped create a sense of a community engaged in externally visible blogging. The attention led to internal meetings and reflection.

By mid-2003, a server hosting externally visible weblogs was operating. Because some managers perceived a benefit in using weblogs to communicate with customers, this server had formal budget support. The wisdom of letting employees blog was actively debated by those aware of these efforts. Early bloggers felt that legal and public relations representatives wanted to shut them down. In an open internal panel discussion in June 2003, a legal representative benignly encouraged bloggers uncertain about the wisdom of publishing particular content to seek guidance. Four months later, however, a contractor was dismissed for what many considered a relatively minor disclosure in a blog. Many in the weblog community had made similar disclosures, so there was great concern. The resulting discussions among bloggers, human resources, legal, and public relations were seen as producing healthy mutual education and clarification of policy.

We interviewed two senior attorneys charged with considering weblog activity. They noted that long-standing policies covering email and newsgroup posting applied to weblogs. They recounted examples of employees saying unwise things in public weblogs—often humorous in retrospect—but noted that similar incidents occur in other media. The attorneys appreciated that employee weblogs enabled the company to very rapidly counter misinformation in press coverage.

The attorneys noted that Bill Gates and Steve Ballmer had spoken positively in public about weblogs. A senior vice president began blogging in May 2003. Not all executives showed the same level of enthusiasm, but by the summer of 2005 the climate had shifted. The attorneys suggested that an event like that of two years earlier would not lead to dismissal today.

Guidelines for weblog practice had occasionally been circulated. People were sensitive about how to characterise them. Repeatedly we were told,

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<sup>109</sup> There is a number of personal accounts about the history of blogging at Microsoft, written by the company employees who blog; for links to some of them see my bookmarks at [del.icio.us/mathemagenic/MSFT+blogHistory](http://del.icio.us/mathemagenic/MSFT+blogHistory)

"the policy is that there is no policy," or "the policy is 'be smart.'" Some worried that even these would lead to the charge, "You have instituted a blogging policy!" The attorneys backed a mild "be smart" policy, while noting pointedly that other policies covering the disclosure of proprietary information applied in this medium.

Public relations staff are potentially affected in two ways: weblogs can create problems for them to handle, and weblog success could undermine their role. Indeed, we were told that some managers were considering diverting some publicity funds into hiring a blogger. Blogger concern that PR would be antagonistic was not unreasonable. It was company policy to bring in PR when interfacing with external media. This was not applied to online newsgroup participation, but weblogs are more likely to be noticed by external media and disrupt carefully timed media campaigns.

In an interview, a senior manager in the public relations group demonstrated a very sophisticated understanding of weblogs. She saw them as a channel that would affect, but not supplant, other channels, bringing benefits and risks. Her job was to understand and shape effective practices in a shifting terrain.

We interviewed two vice presidents of product development. One, unabashedly enthusiastic, had hired a well-known blogger. He argued that the company had much to gain from being seen as open and transparent. The other vice president was sceptical. He had concerns about self-appointed spokespeople for a project or for the entire company. Although perceived to be antagonistic by bloggers with whom we spoke, during the course of our study he initiated a blog himself, with a focus on recruiting. He also supported the initiation of a product blog in his organisation. He realised that weblogs must be credible and relatively informal, but stressed strategic planning, with careful consideration of consequences, including possible effects on team members should one person become well known based on the group's work.

The attitude towards blogging varied in different parts of the organisation: in some, blogging was clearly legitimised and supported (especially as an alternative way of communicating with customers); in others it was perceived as risky and not to be encouraged, or not considered at all due to a lack of awareness among managers.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Those examples come from the countries and groups somewhat distant from the core of the company and developer groups that led the adoption.

6.3.2 Weblog infrastructure

At the time of our study a complete overview of employee blogging in the company was impossible. Company-hosted weblogs were visible, but were only a fraction of the activity. The server administrators estimated two to three thousand bloggers in the company, but an internal survey carried out in June 2005 put the number at over seven thousand (over 10% of all employees). This imprecision is understandable: employees were not obliged to use official company servers, to report that they were starting a weblog, or to identify themselves or their affiliation. Drawing on data from different sources, we were content with identifying weblog types and estimating their numbers when possible (*Table 6-3*; choices between different types of weblogs are discussed in the section 6.5.2).

As the table illustrates, company support for different types of blogging varies, presumably reflecting how much blogging was seen as an instrument to support specific business goals (e.g. communicating with external developers in the case of msdn.com blogs<sup>111</sup> or creating a consumer blogging product in a case of spaces.msn.com). Internal weblogs provide a good example: they were considered with scepticism and therefore not supported formally. An internal blog server was maintained by volunteers and intermittently down (while we worked on the study a new server was donated by unhappy users to solve this problem).

*Table 6-3* Weblog types and estimated numbers of weblogs/bloggers for each of them

Weblog types	Estimated numbers
<b>Internal</b>	
- self-hosted	
- on the central server	800+ blogs
<b>Corporate external servers</b>	
- company-wide (blogs.msdn.com, blogs.technet.com)	2000+ blogs
- country-specific (blogs.microsoft.fr, blogs.microsoft.nl)	30+ blogs
<b>Company-supported external servers</b>	
- for company-supported community initiatives, including country-specific ones (gotdotnet.ru, thespoke.com)	
- company-supported consumer blog platform (spaces.msn.com)	
<b>Other external</b>	
- public blog platforms (e.g. blogger.com, typepad.com)	
- self-hosted	
<b>Total</b>	<b>7000+ bloggers</b>

<sup>111</sup> MSDN stands for Microsoft Developer Network.

In addition, there were two email lists dedicated to blogging issues and some document repositories, discussing specific blogging aspects and sharing experiences and advice. However, these resources originated in different groups of the company and were not necessarily known by all of the respondents of our study.

### 6.3.3 Summary

As this section illustrates, blogging at Microsoft has developed bottom-up, with perceptions and policies evolving as employees and management learned about business benefits and risks of blogging. While at the moment of the study the attitude towards weblogs was generally supportive and some infrastructure existed, there was no single orchestrated effort to use weblogs to support the business; moreover, there was no one in the company who had a complete picture of employee blogging. Although documents and email lists circulated some advice on blogging, the decision-making on how to "be smart" while doing it was left to bloggers themselves.

## 6.4 Results: blogging practices of Microsoft employees

This section provides an overview of the study results in respect to the first research question: "What are the blogging practices of Microsoft employees as knowledge workers?"

In the interviews, blogging practices were described in a complex system where motivations to blog, blogging and the effects of it were interrelated (for an extended discussion on the complexity of blogging practices see 2.2.2). While writing a weblog post might be explicitly motivated (e.g. by the desire to get an answer to a question), sometimes other reasons emerge in the process of writing it. Specific weblog posts, as well as accumulated writing over time, bring certain effects as a result (e.g. feedback on a post or visibility of a blogger as an expert). Those effects influence both the motivations to blog and the form blogging takes (e.g. one might discover how one's weblog might be useful for keeping track of one's own ideas and start using it that way).

This section discusses the blogging practices of Microsoft employees in relation to their work, (those not related to work are covered to some degree in the section 6.5), focusing on uses of weblogs for direct communication, showing the human side of the company, documenting and organising ideas, finding and being found, as well as communicating about a specific product. The results below combine blogger's responses on *why they are blogging*, *what they do with their weblogs*, and *what effects their experience*, with a varied emphasis on these categories.



### 6.4.1 Direct passionate communication

For bloggers in the company, blogging is a way to share passion for their work and to communicate directly with others inside and outside the organisation:

*Web quote 6-1*  
[Intense desire to blog.](#)  
 Volker Will,  
 18 August 2005

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In the beginning when I started posting it felt like ... something new, a new way to communicate, something you have to try to be able to talk about. One-way communication in the beginning of course ☺. Then, without too many comments and very little feedback I almost forgot about my blog. The/My first hype was over. When I picked up posting again it was more to prove myself I had information and such to share with others. And when the number of comments rose, it felt like: Yeah, people read my stuff and some even really care and either share my opinion or think I am an idiot. They even spend some of their precious time to relpy. Man, that felt good – and still does! Today I am very grateful for any comment and email I receive but can it does no longer influence my blogging frequency. I am passionate. Today I feel I must post because I want to share knowledge, thoughts, findings, experiences and more. It has become another means of communication for me. It has (almost) become a part of my daily life and I value the time writing a post as well as everybody's time reading my stuff.

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Often, people who design and develop a product have unique information but are separated from customers and users by intermediaries in sales, marketing and field support, and by the time to reach market. Writing formal articles that could be published on the company web site was not appealing to our informants, due to the time and rounds of reviewing required in order to publish via official channels, and the lack of visibility or feedback associated with such materials. In contrast, a weblog is an easy way to provide information, share tips, and engage in direct interaction with peers outside the organisation or with consumers of one's work. The visibility of blogs via search engines ensures that posts are relatively easy to discover.

One respondent noted, "We were trying to ship something and [in my role] I have no external exposure to people... so [starting a weblog] was partly to talk about it with outsiders." Another respondent received permission to publish internal FAQ materials in his weblog, to benefit external readers.

Most bloggers found it gratifying to inform or help others, to learn about the destiny of their work in the "real world," or to become visible as an expert in a specific area. Company encouragement to interact with customers and engage with communities provided a supportive atmosphere and eliminated potential barriers, but did not seem to directly induce blogging. As one person put it, "Blogging doesn't come out of fear, it's about passion."

### 6.4.2 Showing the human side of the company

As employees of a company that can seem impersonal to those outside it, many described a desire to show the human side of the company. They wanted to demonstrate that people in the organisation care and are passionate about their work. One respondent said, "I'm tired of being called evil." Another blogger wrote in his weblog:

*Web quote 6-2*  
[Keeping it light](#),  
 Alfred Thompson,  
 15 August 2005

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Some Microsoft employees showed up at an [Open Source event](#) dressed as Darth Vader and a pair of Imperial StormTroopers. I can't say that I'm surprised. Working for Microsoft pretty much means that you learn to expect attacks on the company and even you as an individual. You either learn to live with it and see the humor or, well, I don't know what "or" is in this case. All the Microsoft employees I know seem to take this sort of thing in stride. Or at least if it does upset them they keep it under wraps.

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Writing in their weblogs Microsoft employs could recount stories behind products to help people understand why particular choices were made and share details of daily routines to give outsiders a sense of the context of their work. Bloggers also felt they could respond in crises with greater credibility based on a history of objectively sharing useful information.

The quote below provides an example of the effect blogging might have on external readers (non-Microsoft blogger about one of the Microsoft bloggers):

*Web quote 6-3*  
[What Raymond Chen wants to be sure we know \(PDC\)](#),  
 Julie Lerman,  
 15 September 2005

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I'm sitting in [Raymond Chen's](#) "5 Things Every Win32 Developer Should Know" talk. Ray is one of those "oh my god" Microsoft big brains, however, his blog has definitely made him feel like an old friend. I always appreciate his perspective and expression of what he sees in the world. Whenever I get any type of Windows Error message, I \*always\* click on yes, I want to send this to Microsoft button because I think that it's going right into his inbox and I know it will get taken care of.

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In countries where the company's primary language, English, was not spoken, bloggers stressed the importance of writing in local languages to provide a "local" face for the company and to connect with the community. Some took the step of setting up country-specific blog servers.

Humanising the company in the eyes of potential employees was also emphasised. Three informants (two HR employees, one vice president) consciously crafted weblogs for recruiting. Their weblogs told everyday work stories for different roles in the company, provided insight into selection or promotion procedures, and shared tips and tricks. These authors felt their weblogs had measurable impact on recruitment. However, other bloggers also reported about new hires who had applied to their groups after reading a group member's weblog.

### 6.4.3 Documenting and organising ideas or work

Some employees used a weblog both to communicate with others and as a space to document and organise their own ideas and work. Several described their weblog as a personal archive enhanced by feedback from readers; "Either I could have written that down as an internal note and just kept that, or now it's out there on internet, so I can find it more easily and also get hints from folks." Several internal weblogs, including one by a team, were used to document work in progress in a space where others could benefit from it.

Bloggers who do not mention documentation as a major motivation for blogging sometimes use old entries to save time answering a frequently asked question by sending a link to an existing post or for drafting more formal documents. An example from a blogger documenting usability studies in his internal weblog:

*I had to do a presentation to management – what activities have taken place, main results, some other issues. So I looked at details of earlier studies to look what the issues were and why they occurred for the presentation.*

Several people indicated that they could avoid "spamming" others with experiences and ideas by placing them in an easily-accessible weblog post.

That weblog content can have long-term value for an individual is seen in this comment on future access to an internally-hosted, externally-visible weblog:

*If I leave the company they say it could be archived, but you will not be able to update it [...] if they said they would delete it, I'd be thinking why am I blogging here and not externally... and grab my old content.*

Two respondents had aspirations to write a book based on entries from their weblogs.

### 6.4.4 Finding and being found

In employee weblogs, ideas that were previously unarticulated or hidden in personal archives become visible, interlinked, and searchable. Collectively, this produces a wealth of information about products, practices, tips and tricks. Many respondents reported time saved by blogging: re-using entries, quickly helping others or learning, getting answers to questions, receiving feedback on ideas, finding people inside or outside the company with similar interests or needs. This section describes how visibility of weblog content affects the work of their authors.

Several bloggers mentioned that posting to their external weblog helped them connect serendipitously to a person or relevant information inside the organisation. One noted that an idea posted to a weblog resulted in a prototype developed in another part of the organisation:

Web quote 6-4  
[Prototype of Forums  
 Instant Answers](#),  
 Josh Ledgerd,  
 3 August 2005

I recently posted [my ideas for cutting off the duplicate questions in online web based forums](#). I'm enjoying all the feedback, but I was most impressed when [Lee Holmes](#) who took my PM art to the next level and created a [functioning prototype](#) to further the feedback process. [...]

**Side Note:** Not to blog about blogging, but I've never met Lee or had any agreements with anyone that he would do this. Nor would I ever have been able to send mail to the right group of interested people that might be able to spend the time building a prototype. I simply blogged my idea, the idea found the right people, and we've made a bunch of progress that will help ensure the right feature is delivered to our users.

A weblog also gives visibility to its author, whose expertise can be exposed beyond his nearest circle of colleagues. Our informants told us about invitations to publish articles or speak at events as a result of blogging:

*After a few months I was asked to write an article for a journal based on the blog posting... So I wrote it and it was published in a few months and then I've got even more feedback on the article and the blog... As a result I've been asked to give talks in different universities based on our work... Nobody knew that we were doing it [specific activities described in the weblog]... It became public through the blog and through the journal article. I never thought it would be an outcome for the blog, but it has been one of the big advantages... Now we have partnerships with different universities that we never had before, we engage them in specific projects.*

Others noted that being recognised as an expert gave them greater confidence in their career prospects. Several reported that their job responsibilities evolved as their interests were exposed via blogging:

*[After reading my weblog my manager said] "If you are so externally focused, you can be our community lead"... Now I'm a community lead... I enjoy it.*

Blogging externally was also seen as a way of helping to accelerate internal change: customer feedback can confirm ideas, giving a proposal more validity; suggestions made in public may get more attention than those delivered internally. However, drawing public attention to internal issues is not without its risks, since the discussion can be easily taken out of context and misinterpreted. Below is an example of aftermath of one blog post<sup>112</sup> that resulted in a negative publication (the quote is from an email addressed to the blogger team members and posted in her blog):

<sup>112</sup> [The talent landscape, and why I'm ready to lose it](#) (Gretchen Ledgerd in JobsBlog, 1 June 2005).

*Web quote 6-5*  
[My thoughts on  
the CNET article](#),  
Gretchen Ledgard,  
8 June 2005

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First, I want to apologize to each of you. We have worked really hard on building a positive image for our team, and the last thing we needed was negative press from a member of this team. My blog entry, while true to my thoughts and balanced with my other positive spins MS issues, was extremely unpolished and unprofessional. I have learned a big lesson. It's one thing to be edgy and controversial; it's another thing to say things that can get you and your team in trouble. For all that I advise others about how to be good corporate bloggers, I sure didn't take my own advice.

I also want to apologize to our management team. They are the flag-bearers for our team, and I know I've just handed them some grief they shouldn't have to deal with. While they should be touting the great things coming out of our team, they'll likely be quieting the masses over the next couple days.

The good news is that our General Manager sent a supportive email to me, so it doesn't look like Security will be escorting me out any time soon. :) This doesn't make my actions right, but it does give me a lot of faith in the support we have from upper management.

The other good news is the overwhelming response I've gotten due to this publicity. I wrote my blog entry to create dialog. While my message was serious, I did write it in a tongue-and-cheek manner, and I just wanted to get people talking. And it did. Over the last 18 hours, I've received tons of feedback from external customers about the Microsoft Recruiting process, several positive comments about how Microsoft's candor makes them want to work for the company that much more, a *load* of resumes, and ... here's the kicker ... a personal invitation from a Sr. VP to talk with him about what's on my mind!

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Externally-visible blogging provides publicity that the role and position of a blogger would not normally entail. Some bloggers acquired more negotiating power or security as people realised that making them uncomfortable or dismissing them could have repercussions with customers or partners.

Of course, these power shifts can lead to tension, so visibility can be a mixed blessing. Some bloggers dislike the limelight and experience or worry about tensions within their teams when readers credit them for a team effort: "You are not trying to expose yourself or to be a star." Also, becoming a contact point for customers raises expectations for blog coverage and the blogger becomes a focal point for questions and suggestions. Bloggers with large audiences complained of e-mail overload and discussed preventive measures. Some felt they were doing other people's jobs on top of their own.

#### 6.4.5 Communicating about a product

While practices of using a weblog to communicate about a product include many elements described above (e.g. providing an unmediated way to engage customers or revealing personalities behind the product), from the interviews they emerged as a distinct type of blogging. Strong association of a weblog with a product in the eyes of weblog readers creates

specific issues that product weblog authors have to address. In this section those practices are discussed for two types of product weblogs: those intentionally focused on a product from the beginning, and emergent, de facto product weblogs.

Comparing to other employee weblogs, *intentional product weblogs* focus less on individual personalities; they provide informal views and timely information behind specific products, and engage with customers who use them. They supplement, rather than replace, formal PR and marketing, providing stories about the decisions that shaped the product, time-sensitive information that would take too long to publish through formal channels, and tips and tricks.

For readers, such a product weblog can be a single place to get news about a product and to communicate directly with people behind it. It feels more official than a personal employee weblog. This can yield a bigger readership and greater impact, but has risks as well. With a product blog written by a team, more is at stake: readers' expectations about content quality and regularity are higher than for a personal blog. The authority of a product blog increases the potential impact of a mistake; if the weblog creates news it can engender a PR crisis. One respondent noted that PR specialists responsible for a product asked his team not to blog on Fridays: "You gonna impact their lives [if an emergency arises over a weekend]."

Most product weblogs authored by our respondents were team endeavours, although one person might lead the effort and exhort other team members to blog. In all but one team's product blogs, entries appear with an author name, showing the personality and style of each team member and ensuring personal accountability. Some respondents considered this a critical aspect of team blogs and complained that their weblog technology did not support including author as metadata for searching or filtering.

Given expectations of a topical focus and stronger ties with an official product or company image, product weblogs generally include some constraints on content or style. Personal entries were considered less appropriate in this context, but no one indicated that was a strict rule; in fact, one noted, "We didn't get killed for personal stuff [on the product blog]."

Every intentional product weblog we saw had an editorial process. The specifics varied greatly. Some product teams collected and reviewed ideas or drafts via a group mailing list, document server, or in meetings. In some cases agreement of all team members including marketing representatives was required before posting. In others, reviews were only used to get opinions about questionable content. Reviews were variously used to ensure regularity of postings, obtain consensus between personal

opinions and overall team perspectives, and to block information with high risk of misinterpretation or misuse by the external audience.

Editorial processes can reduce risk and increase uniformity, but of course they can have negative impacts as well. Review and negotiation take time - in some cases up to a couple weeks - which reduces the immediacy that is integral to blogging, making it more like other forms of corporate web publishing. Review can reduce the informality and the motivation of individual contributors; one respondent mentioned the "pain of being edited by your colleagues". Some contributors to a product blog write even more about the product in their personal work-related weblogs, where they have more freedom and flexibility. One noted, "The problem with team blogs: because everyone can contribute, doesn't mean they will." On the other hand, blogging together lowers the pressure on any one person to provide interesting material regularly, and reduces the time required of a solo weblog author; some team bloggers definitely appreciated that.

Believing that group posting and an editorial process can kill the personality and immediacy that appeal to potential readers, some bloggers are extremely critical of group product blogs; "My feeling is that people don't like team blogs as much as personal blogs... [Product blog of another company, written by a team] feels like a press-release." It is unclear why team product blogs are perceived that way. It may be due less to the group authorship per se than to the editorial process it often implies, and to self-editing of style and content to avoid possible negative impact.

An alternative form of blogging that has similarly strong ties to a product is a *de facto product weblog*. De facto product weblogs are created as personal weblogs, often written outside job responsibilities, and not as the focal point for product information. The product focus emerges as their authors post on themes they are knowledgeable and passionate about. Their authors feel less pressure to conform to product group norms or official PR initiatives. However, some become strongly affiliated with a particular product or initiative in the eyes of external readers, giving rise to the same risks and potential business benefits as intentional product weblogs.

Management may see a de facto product weblog as a potential communication channel to reach customers or an external community. One person in a public relations role (a blogger himself) described a complex situation that arose with a de facto product blogger:

*We wanted to get into the community and asked him to post something, asked him to post our press-releases, so enthusiast groups can get them... media alerts... what's happening officially... It is not the best thing for him or us [...][We] don't want him to be the official spokesperson. For him it is also putting official information and he feels less free to comment*

*on that. Also some of his readers would suspect that his weblog is written by a corporate guy – 'You are not one of us, but one of them.'*

He then described his plan to start a "proper" weblog for the product that would provide a more person-independent, objective space for informal communication and engagement with customers.

Another potential problem arises when an author of a de facto product weblog moves to another position in the company, leaving old interests behind and wishing to shift the focus weblog posts to describe new job challenges. For the audience it could be an abrupt loss of a space to receive information about the product and to engage with others using it, and this could have negative consequences for the company. To transfer the weblog to another author wouldn't work here: the content and connections with readers depend much on the personality of the author, and the sense of personal ownership of the blog is very strong.

#### 6.4.6 Summary

In Microsoft weblogs are used to support work in a variety of ways. They provide a space where bloggers share passion for their work and communicate with others across hierarchical, geographical or organisational borders. Weblogs are used to engage with customers and to change the image of the company. They help to organise ideas, serving as a personal knowledge base, and to document work practices, all in a place where others could benefit and provide a feedback.

Using a weblog also results in an increased visibility of specific ideas, expertise and opinions of its author. This visibility often brings unexpected reactions and connections with new people, and can affect work both positively and negatively. Blogging also creates tensions as it often crosses hierarchical borders and results in power shifts.

The case of product weblogs illustrates how reader expectations and visibility-related risks shape the content, style and process of blogging. The differences in practices around intentional and de-facto product weblogs also show that, despite similar contributions business-wise, weblogs might be very different in how they are created and maintained, their degree of affiliation and integration with the business, and relations between weblog authors and their readers.

### 6.5 Results: tensions between personal and organisational perspectives

This section provides an overview of the study findings with respect to the second research question – "What are the practices of Microsoft



bloggers in respect to dealing with tensions between personal and organisational perspectives around blogging?"

At the time of the research, blogging was still an area of experimentation at Microsoft and it was generally up to a given individual to decide if, when, why and how to blog. Examples provided by other bloggers, including executives, and the existence of company-supported servers signalled that employee blogging was a legitimate activity, but blogging was very rarely, if ever, an explicit job requirement. (A salient exception was one employee whose weblog was instrumental in the decision to hire him).

With no formal policy, the lack of explicit rules created risk; each blogger was ultimately responsible for "being smart". My weblog post written at the beginning of the internship in the company illustrates the problem:

*Web quote 6-6*  
[Walking on ice](#),  
 Mathemagenic,  
 8 July 2005

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What I find out interesting is that all those tensions between personal and corporate that I thought I knew how to deal with are coming again in a fresh way – it's three years since I keep personal blog while working for a company. Not really... I'm still figuring out what I can blog and what not...

From what I've seen so far blogging is about bending rules. Yes, it's encouraged, but if you want to stay on the safe side and follow all policies you probably wouldn't blog. Blogging is about taking risks and making your own judgment of what is not confident and how to say it. I think this judgment is culture-specific and I guess this is the root of my own problem. I don't know the culture yet, so even knowing how to be a blogger in a company I'm still trying to figure out how to be a blogger in this specific company.

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This section describes different ways of "being smart" as a Microsoft employee. Dealing with tensions between personal and organisational sides is discussed with respect to the decisions that Microsoft bloggers have to make about various aspects of blogging.

### 6.5.1 Starting a weblog

Most of our respondents who started weblogs did it on their own initiative, often without prior discussion at work. Some would check only with their immediate manager:

*I asked only my direct manager [about starting a weblog] and it was on purpose: I knew if I would ring my manager's manager or manager of my manager's manager it would become impossible.*

Bloggers would quote experimentation, examples or pressure by bloggers around them as one of the reasons to start a weblog. ("The reason I started is because [prominent blogger in a group] suggested it and I value his opinions.") Those respondents who maintain multiple weblogs (e.g. personal and work-related, internal and external, individual and contributing to a team product weblog) usually cite how their experiences with one of them were useful for initiating another one.

Almost everyone we talked with would bring a work-related reason to start a work-related weblog, referring to envisioned use that could help to fulfil one's job responsibilities better (e.g. accelerate use of Microsoft tools, get feedback on features, provide information to customers, advertise events, recruit employees) or help change the company's external image. In most cases such uses are not explicitly required as part of the employee's work; maintaining a weblog is often an additional activity or the blogger's own choice of several alternatives to reach work targets.

In cases of intentional product weblogs, the ties between blogging and work are explicit from the beginning: these weblogs have clear purposes in relation to supporting a product and the decision to start is likely to be more formalised, discussed in a group and supported by a managers.

Of course, personal reasons for starting a weblog are cited as well. Those are extremely important for strictly personal weblogs: "I blog to document my life", "to keep in touch with family and friends", but also appear in weblogs with different degrees of personal and work-related content. In those cases, personal motivations appear next to work-related envisioned uses: "I always wanted to write", "I enjoy helping people", "I like the conversations that come out of blogging: it's challenging".

### 6.5.2 Weblog location

While preparing for the study we expected that the main choice when starting a weblog would be deciding on blogging internally or externally, guided by a straight-forward decision on anticipated content and audience. However, we found that our respondents were discussing more fine-grained choices for a weblog location and a broad variety of criteria that guided them. This section first presents the main choices on where to host a weblog and then summarises the criteria used for these.

*Internally hosted weblogs* could be authored and accessed only by Microsoft employees, creating a space to reach audiences inside the company and allow writing about confidential topics. Internal weblogs are indexed and appear in the results of intranet searches, which makes them a good tool "to add to that index" as one active internal blogger suggested. Strong connection with intranet infrastructure comes at a price: internal weblogs are only accessible to employees who are logged on to a corporate network, which substantially obstructs the access to one's own internal weblog while on the move.

However, internal weblogs were not seriously supported: most of the recognised value of blogging in the company has been with respect to reaching customers, so there was a lot of scepticism regarding the potential of internal weblogs. One respondent articulated this perspective saying, "There is not clear business purpose for it". In addition,

given heavy use of email distribution lists and document repositories, there were questions around whether another channel was needed. Sceptics also mentioned that internal weblogs might not achieve a critical readership mass or produce rewarding feedback. That said, some bloggers had begun with an internal weblog, then realised that their content was not particularly proprietary and shifted to an external weblog that achieved much greater impact. Although the inability to discuss proprietary information is a restriction, some felt uneasy about such discussions in a forum visible to over 50,000 employees anyway.

From another side, blogging externally was explicitly recognised as valuable for connecting with customers and changing the somewhat controversial public image of the company. Publicity of external Microsoft weblogs, existence of external corporate servers and many other opportunities to start a weblog made it an attractive and easy option.

Blogging on *corporate external servers* gave bloggers more visibility as part of a larger Microsoft blogging community. However, even with disclaimers that content represents a blogger's personal opinion, the server ties the author to the company explicitly. For some this was positive, enhancing credibility or as a matter of pride (e.g. summer interns complained about not being allowed to blog on official servers); others saw it adversely affecting their image, causing them to be judged not by their expertise but as an employee of the company.

Blogging on corporate servers also clouds the issue of content ownership and future control. In addition, using company resources for blogging may constrain weblog content. Writing about personal topics was not officially improper, but some people found that they avoided it:

*Web quote 6-7*  
[Why am I moving my blog?](#) Alex Barnett,  
2 September 2006

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Well, there's something about knowing that your thoughts are hosted on your employer's infrastructure that I think has tended to constrain my writing somewhat – not much, but enough to be aware of it as I blog. And not because of company policy (i.e. 'blog smart').

While on MSDN, I always got a slight guilty feeling whenever I posted about purely personal or technical but non-Microsoft related stuff. I know there are bunch of posts I've written or wanted to write but didn't because I'm on 'official' territory.

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Also, since those servers were initiated as part of the initiatives in software development groups (this is reflected in the domain names and context of where weblogs appear), employees in non-technical positions were sometimes not sure if blogging in that space was appropriate for them.

The choice of *company-supported external servers* was usually motivated by a couple of reasons. First, starting a weblog there was a natural choice for the employees involved in the initiatives that those servers were part of, so they blogged in the same space (e.g. where external developers, the target audience for their effort, blogged as well). Employees, working on MSN

products were likely to start a weblog at MSN Spaces for similar reasons, and to be loyal to their own group product. This reason was also true for some other bloggers, not necessarily tied to the divisions supporting those servers: given that general functionalities of the platform fit their needs, they were likely to choose one of the company servers (e.g. MSN Spaces for purely personal weblog) to support their company's product instead of one by competitors. The issues of affiliation and content ownership are not very difficult in these cases – a weblog on those platforms will be treated in a similar way to a weblog by a member of the general public and it's easy not to give away one's real name and affiliation with Microsoft if necessary.

Many bloggers chose *other external servers*, not hosted by or affiliated with the company. Some cases were historical: weblogs created before corporate servers were available. However, this choice was usually motivated by the freedom it gave a blogger to choose topics to write about, to reveal or hide real name or affiliation, and to choose an appealing infrastructure.

A few bloggers explicitly noted that company-independent servers reduced ambiguity about content ownership, leaving them in control should they leave the company. This freedom comes at a price: bloggers must invest more in selecting or creating technology infrastructure and miss the benefits of being seen as part of the corporate weblog community.

The criteria that guide selection of a space to blog could be summarised as the following:

- *Envisioned use of a weblog* influences many other choices as well: whom the author is trying to reach, does she want to be visible or to hide, how important are certain platform functionalities or affiliation with the company;
- *Access and audience* – who can access weblog content, and how easily, (including the author himself);
- *Visibility, critical mass* – are there enough potential readers, can they find the weblog easily;
- *Affiliation, loyalty* – how far is explicit affiliation with the company or using company's product is important for a blogger;
- *Freedom and control over technology and content* – how much a blogger depends on others (own company or external providers) in configuring weblog platform features to fit own preferences or content ownership.

### 6.5.3 Content and style

Most weblogs we examined contain a disclaimer indicating that the content reflected the personal views of the author and should not be attributed to the company. But when an author openly associates with the company, the fine line between the personal and the corporate is blurred:

Web quote 6-8  
[Why am I moving  
my blog?](#) Alex Barnett,  
2 September 2006

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If there's one thing we're all learning as 'Microsoft bloggers' is that what you write is considered a view of a Microsoft employee and therefore is quoteable and abusable as evidence of Microsoft's position on a matter. It doesn't matter how much you point out disclaimers (ah, that reminds me! I should add one to my personal blog...) that "*your views are your own and not those of your employers*", that fact it is that it is the *perception* that counts. Even as I write this post and know that I'm publishing from my new blog on a non-Microsoft-owned site, I am aware of my contractual agreement with my employer, I am aware the information that I know of but can't share publicly and the conversations with colleagues that cannot be made public. [...] The fact that you *might* think that I'm writing 'on behalf of Microsoft' (which is not the case :-P) is a fact that any blogging employee of any company needs to be mindful of. [Blog smart](#) in other words.

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Many struggle to identify what parts of work can be blogged about, finding a grey area between the clearly confidential and the clearly publishable; however some believe that "you can say a lot without revealing trade-secrets". In one group, bloggers praised clear communication from their management that identified "three topics you are not supposed to blog about". This provided clear boundaries while not curtailing the freedom to blog.

For most it takes time, trial-and-error experimentation and reflection on internal and external feedback, to find what is comfortable for blogger, readers, and the company, trying to balance conflicting interests. One blogger said, "I fight with myself as a writer on behalf of Microsoft." Some respondents started conservatively and grew less so over time. Many described specific incidents that showed where to set boundaries. One mentioned intentionally writing a series of provocative posts to test the limits. Bloggers were challenged about posts by others, including people at higher levels. The relationship with the immediate manager was often identified as critical in getting a blessing to start a weblog, negotiating acceptable uses, or seeking support in cases of unexpected negative effects of a post.

Even weblogs primarily or exclusively focused on work are likely to have a personal touch, presenting information in an informal style and from an individual perspective. Many employees add personal comments to work-related notes or publish entries about hobbies, events in their private lives or opinions on non-work matters – suggesting that their readers "come to read the person, not the blog".

Attitudes differ toward the propriety or desirability of mixing personal and work content. Some bloggers have two weblogs, one for work and one for personal content. Others do not share any private information online, restricting blogging to work-related topics; "It hasn't came up... it doesn't seem appropriate because I'm afraid to lose my readership." Others see no problem with mixing work and private issues in a weblog that identifies their affiliation. Several mentioned the role of personal information in

providing context for work-related posts ("I have one reader who calls me 'black belt lady tester'.") They indicated that such posts resulted in strong, positive reader responses:

*One of the reasons for injecting personal stuff is that people enjoy reading that sort of thing... it's another angle to my persona... otherwise I'm a robot [...] those articles tend to get much more comments and hits.*

#### 6.5.4 Blogging as part of a job

Time demands and effects on work raised questions about the integration of blogging into "the day job" for which a person was responsible when blogging commenced. Several people reported that their job responsibilities evolved after they started blogging due to the exposure of their expertise. Those changes included taking on responsibility for customer communication activities, developing technologies that required understanding of blogging or the types of communications it entails, or blogging as part of the job; (in one case 15 hours per week formally devoted to blogging).

However, there are many cases of partial integration of blogging with direct work responsibilities as well. Some bloggers found ways to justify spending work hours reading or writing weblogs, usually by showing the impact of blogging on other job responsibilities ("blogging takes time – should be a good reason to do it.")

Others did not make blogging a formal objective, but raised it during annual performance appraisals as an extra work-related activity: "It's not explicitly part of my objectives, it's a mean to an end," said one. A few bloggers strive for a complete separation of job responsibilities and blogging, even for primarily work-related blogs, to maximise their flexibility and freedom in posting.

One of the questions that we eventually started to ask was, "What happens to your weblog if you change jobs inside the company, or leave it?" For many respondents it was difficult to answer, since the ownership of weblog content was not clear.

Despite disclaimers indicating that weblog content contains personal opinions that should not be attributed to the company, employees blogging about work, especially on official servers, would admit to the company's rights to own their weblog content: "When my blog goes public it goes on copyrighted by Microsoft." This is consistent with the contracts governing the company's intellectual property rights, usually interpreted as applying to hardware, software and branding. However, those contracts do not necessarily apply to any writing of an employee, so corporate ownership of personal stories in a work-related weblog was noted as paradoxical. The situation is thornier than our bloggers realised: in the United States,

organisational ownership of employee thought extends into hours and places outside the workplace, and some organisations enforce such claims (Baskerville & Dulipovici, 2006).

However, not everyone agreed that the content of their weblog is owned by the company. Personal investment and time spent blogging (especially when outside of work hours), personal stories and perspectives, as well as the fact that blogging is a result of personal initiative and not part of the work requirements, result in a variety of ways to look at weblog ownership. Some bloggers admitted the right and need of the company to have access to their weblog content, but wanted to ensure that their weblog wouldn't disappear and that they had rights of personal/public reuse if they left the company. Others took an extreme position, suggesting that they own their words entirely. These considerations led some to host their blogs externally, blog on their own time, or both.

### 6.5.5 Summary

This section discusses the practices of Microsoft employees in respect to dealing with tensions between personal and organisational perspectives around blogging, by describing the choices they have had to make in respect of starting a weblog, its location, content and style, and the degree of integration with work.

Weblogs are started for a variety of personal and work-related reasons. In most of the cases studied, work-related blogging was not mandated, but was a result of personal choice of a blogger, sometimes with some support or pressure from his work surroundings. Choosing a location for one's weblog requires juggling a number of concerns about its envisioned use and audience, as well as the degree of personal control over technology and content.

Although most of the weblogs included a disclaimer stating that they are personal endeavours, they were often attributed to, or associated with, the company. Bloggers were constantly experimenting and evaluating potential risks and benefits for themselves and Microsoft when writing their weblogs. The authors of work-related blogs were very different in their decisions on whether to include non-work related content. For some, their weblog was truly personal, containing details of their life and personal commentary, while others kept weblogs strictly on business issues and in the corporate style. In a similar way, bloggers differed with regard to their desire to integrate blogging with work. For some it went as far as becoming their job, while for most it required both work and personal time and effort. The issues of a weblog content ownership appear to be controversial.

The decisions made in each case are multidimensional and often influence each other. In the following section they are summarised through

a number of facets that allow me to address the mixed nature of work-related blogging.

## 6.6 Discussion

*Web quote 6-9*  
[Leaf Nodes](#),  
 Joshua Allen,  
 26 May 2003

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As long as your company views your blogging as "you chatting with your neighbors on your personal time", you pose little risk. But the more that co-workers, CEOs, and so on are on-record as being cool with blogs, the more that blogs take on the timbre of being "official". The more "official" that blogs are, the more perceived risk the company takes on by allowing you to blog. And neither you nor your CEO is really keen to make things more complicated than they need to be. And this is why, IMO, you see most companies and employees today still dancing around the issue of employee blogs and seemingly settling on a "don't ask, don't tell, and please for the love of God don't do anything stupid" policy.

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What Joshua Allen, the first Microsoft blogger (Scoble & Israel, 2006, p. 11), wrote in May 2003 pretty much defines what we found in our study two years later: a complex dance around the issues of employee weblogs. Employee blogging creates tensions by crossing boundaries between work that is paid for, regulated and controlled, and personal passions that enhance it, passions that could be recognised and appreciated at work, but couldn't be easily specified in a job description.

This section explores the findings on blogging practices of Microsoft employees. I first summarise and discuss the findings on personal blogging practices, using the knowledge work framework as a lens, and then discuss challenges that they cause in a corporate context, and examine the results on dealing with personal and organisational perspectives around blogging using twelve facets to position a weblog between the extremes.

### 6.6.1 Personal blogging practices in relation to work

The results of the study illustrate many ways in which blogging can support work. In a few extreme cases blogging becomes the work (when it is a part of a job description, has specially allocated time and is judged during performance appraisals) or appears as the content of work (when bloggers start working on Microsoft blogging products).

However, more commonly it is an instrument for working on specific tasks. Blogging could be chosen for it intentionally (e.g. to promote a product for product weblogs), used ad-hoc (a question related to the current task is asked in a weblog) or brought into play in retrospect (using previously documented ideas for a report or article).

In addition, there are less direct influences. Blogging changes the flow of information and knowledge in the company. Communication via weblogs, not blocked by hierarchical or geographical borders, could improve work on



specific tasks. Blogging can also help to kick-start or speed-up work on a specific project by bringing like-minded people together or by making visible positive feedback and expectations from customers. When being used as a personal knowledge base, it contributes to individual productivity. When used as an alternative to email it could save time and frustration in fighting email overload.

On the downside, blogging requires an investment of time and effort that could be a burden. Although potentially useful, work-related information in employee weblogs is highly fragmented and difficult to navigate. Although the visibility of bloggers, their work and expertise, can have many positive effects, it may also result in undesired communication overhead, time spent dealing with high reader expectations or with taking care of negative effects.

Most of the results of the study fit better on the "activation" side of the knowledge work framework, although many references to blog uses for conversations, relations and developing ideas appear in relation to specific tasks. Given the broad scope of the study, this is not surprising: articulating how weblogs contribute to awareness, often implicitly and invisibly, requires special focus and effort.

In respect to supporting *conversations* with others, weblogs provide an alternative communication channel that allows:

- reaching external audiences (e.g. customers) faster by bypassing official channels;
- reaching audiences interested in a topic, but not known in advance;
- sharing of information without fear of spamming others;
- providing information that is more likely to be found due to the way weblogs appear in search engines;
- providing a personal perspective on work-related matters.

In respect of *relations* with others, showing the human faces behind the company comes out as the most prominent target. Given Microsoft's controversial reputation as an "evil empire" it is not surprising that its employees want to show outsiders that this is not necessarily so. As corporate negative image becomes tied to how its employees are perceived by outsiders, it becomes even more important to correct the image by showing one's own passion for work and care about products and customers. However, the results also illustrate how weblogs contribute to maintaining one's own reputation, finding others though exposing own interests or developing trusted relations as a result of being open and passionate.

In respect of one's *ideas*, weblogs are used as a personal (or team) knowledge base, documenting ideas or work progress. Compared to other instruments, weblogs provide an easier way to find "old" ideas, and feedback of others is a possible extra benefit. Even weblogs not intentionally

used for documenting one's thinking path provide a view into it over time, potentially supporting reflection and allowing reuse of old ideas.

The study illustrates that in some cases uses of weblogs correspond to different parts of the framework at the same time. For example, when the primary purpose of a weblog is communicating with others, aggregated weblog posts are also used as a trail of one's ideas and result in developing trusted relations with others.

In a corporate context, weblogs provide an alternative way of working. However, existence of this emergent phenomenon in an organisational context presents not only benefits, but also challenges. Those that we observed in our study could be summarised as follows.

- *Lack of control of the company's message to the external world.* Each blogger turns into a "self-appointed spokesperson", communicating with the rest of the world based on his own interpretations of corporate policies, interests and risks. This could turn into accidental leaks of confidential information, disrupt "official" public relations or marketing campaigns, or create unexpected incidents when business-related information is misinterpreted or amplified by the media.
- *Dependence on personalities.* Many of the business benefits of blogging come from communicating about work from a personal perspective, and bringing personal passions into it. This is the source of challenges as well, since external visibility or success becomes dependent on personal traits and practices that can not be easily controlled as part of existing contracts and regulations around work. Company reputation or the fate of a product can become tied to a blogger's personal reputation; with product-related blogs, customer satisfaction with access to product information depends on a blogger's personal decisions as to what, when and how to write in the weblog.
- *Challenged hierarchies and communication flows.* Blogging provides visibility and power that many employees would not normally have; it also accelerates connections across hierarchical layers, departmental or geographical boundaries. As a result, information often flows in unexpected ways, challenging existing practices and power distributions in the company.

Since the study was finished more research on uses of weblogs in organisations appeared. Two studies of Microsoft weblogs correspond to the findings reported in this chapter: weblogs are used to "elicit passion for knowledge" (Kaiser et al., 2007) and change the image of the organisation in the eyes of outsiders (Kelleher & Miller, 2006). Another study suggested that product weblogs is a common phenomenon across a range of companies (Lockwood & Dennis, 2008). Studies of weblogs in IBM and Hewlett-Packard show their uses to share information internally and their social effects, such a visibility of experts and expertise, relation

building and emergent collaboration (Jackson, Jates & Orlikowski, 2007; Huh et al., 2007; Yardi, Golder & Brzozowski, 2008).

### 6.6.2 Multifaceted choices

Blogging by employees of a company, often started by personal initiative and supported by personal investment, can easily become beneficial to the company, raising both expectations of work-related value and concerns about risks. Those reasons are likely to warrant the company's engagement with blogging, either by providing support to maximise positive effects or setting boundaries to minimise risks. Still, for many employees writing their weblogs is an "extra" activity that should not necessarily fall under the corporate sphere of influence, even when clearly work-related. As a result blogging turns into an arena of negotiations and interplays between personal and corporate interests and concerns.

This section explores the study findings with respect to dealing with tensions between personal and organisational perspectives around blogging<sup>113</sup> by proposing a set of facets to position a weblog on a scale between a private affair (e.g. a diary published for family and friends) and a strictly work-related instrument (e.g. a weblog as a way to collect team progress reports). Although, most of the weblogs by our respondents fit somewhere between the two extremes, the facets allow us to address the multidimensional nature of the choices that shape blogging, as, for example, someone might heavily use a weblog for work-related purposes but not accept it as a legitimate part of her job description.

*Table 6-4* provides an overview of facets and corresponding examples from the weblogs in the study; those that were 'extrapolated' by me are included in the square brackets. Facets 1-4 represent factors that shape a weblog: its location, uses, content and style. Facets 5-7 refer to the authority making decisions regarding starting a weblog, specific blogging episodes and technology used for blogging. Facets 8-12 represent aspects concerning integration of blogging with work. There are relations between some of the facets (e.g. weblogs on a corporate server make affiliation with the company explicit, while for a self-hosted weblog all options are possible); however they are not reflected in the table.

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<sup>113</sup> Although the facets come from this study, their list and grouping was refined using an ad-hoc sample of a few readers of my weblog (for more details, see [Employee blogging: personal or work-related?](#), presentation at ECSCW'07 workshop "What is missing in Social Software? Current collaborative practices in social software").

Table 6-4 Facets

	Private affair		Work-related instrument
<b>Weblog shape</b>			
1. Location	Personal server Public hosting platforms	Company-affiliated servers (e.g. funded, but not a part of a corporate online presence)	Corporate servers (part of corporate official presence online).
2. Blog uses	Not related to work	Mix of personal and work-related uses	Only business-related (good for my company), or work-related (good for performing well at work).
3. Content focus	Primarily non-work matters	Mix of work and non-work content	Primarily work-related.
4. Content style	Personal, subjective, confessional	Some degree of filtering or editing to fit professional norms and business requirements	[Business, objective, defined by corporate communication policy.]
<b>Decision-making authority</b>			
5. Initiative	By the blogger	By the blogger, given positive signals (that blogging is allowed and encouraged) at work. By the blogger, consulting with others at work. Was convinced by others at work.	Was prescribed at work
6. Micro-level decision making: Who decides when and how to blog? What goes into a specific post?	By the blogger	By the blogger, influenced by others at work. By the blogger, who has to get permission from others at work. Has to be negotiated with others at work. Some moments are defined by work workflows (e.g. editorial processes of product weblogs).	Defined by work needs. Defined by others at work. [Defined by business logic and exiting workflows in the company.]
7. Technology control: Who controls blogging tools?	Controlled by the blogger Company doesn't influence it	Technology is provided by the company, but the blogger has control over some parts of it (e.g. template customisation, adding plug-ins, etc.).	[Fully controlled by the company.]

Table 6-4 Continued

	Private affair		Work-related instrument
<b>Integration with work</b>			
8. Affiliation with company	No Explicitly hiding	Implicit – not immediately visible, but not hidden. Disclaimer	Yes, explicit, visible.
9. Impact (attribution)	Impact the blogger, not the company	Impact the blogger as an employee (e.g. by helping to do work better). Impacts both blogger and the company (e.g. an incident gets into media).	Impact the company, not the blogger.
10. Part of job description	No	Blogging is one of the ways to get work done. Not explicitly, but as an "extra" during evaluation. Optional part of job responsibilities.	Yes, job responsibilities explicitly include blogging.
11. Time blogging	No, never	To a degree: not officially, as a way to do the job	Yes, only blogging in work time.
12. Content ownership	Copyrighted by the blogger	Both parties accept that the other party has some rights. Nobody knows for sure, since it is too complicated.	[Explicitly copyrighted by the company.]

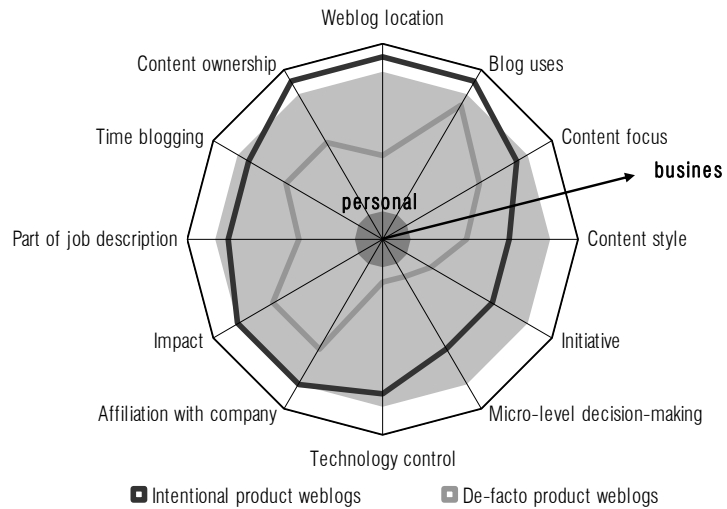
A weblog, scoring high on personal" end of all dimensions is not likely to be interesting for a company, since there are no corporate investments, benefits or risks in that case. In fact, there is a good chance that such blogging activity will be unknown in the company, since there are no legitimate reasons for an employee to discuss such a purely private affair at work; (this might explain the difference in the number of weblogs written by Microsoft employees provided by the key stakeholders we interviewed and estimated from the results of the survey, section 6.3.2). Weblogs on the purely business side are also unlikely to create many problems, since they are likely to be fully aligned with specific business goals and practices. However, a weblog "stripped of" every possible personal touch could have difficulty in being perceived as a weblog at all by its audience or author. It could have less potential business value, often attributed to "personal unedited voice" behind a weblog, and have difficulty being written at all since potential authors are not likely to have much personal stake in it.

The majority of weblogs we encountered<sup>114</sup> would be positioned somewhere in the middle (*Figure 6-2*) provides an example of facet-based

<sup>114</sup> Non-Microsoft examples could be found in my blogpost [Personal vs. business dimensions of employee blogging: other bloggers](#) (Mathemagenic, 20 November 2006).

profiles for intentional and de-facto product weblogs, described in the section 6.4.5). It's those weblogs, neither fully personal nor fully shaped by business needs and practices, that result in "a complex dance" of experimentation, reflection, explicit negotiations or implicit "don't ask, don't tell, and please for the love of God don't do anything stupid" decision-making around them.

Figure 6-2 Facets for two types of product weblogs



Employers and employees who take up blogging should anticipate a degree of ambiguity. Blogs have potential benefits and implications for one's job, so it's tempting to make them part of existing working practice. Yet, it is personal initiative, interests and time investments that make a blog interesting for readers and often yield unexpected positive effects. An attempt to squeeze those into job descriptions or formal rules could drain the vitality and utility from weblogs: if pushed to specify the limits, an organisation could be too restrictive and lose benefits. Rather, to successfully exploit weblogs, it must understand the personal interests and concerns of bloggers and create an appropriate environment. At the same time, it may be good for bloggers to constantly consider limits and consequences—personal judgment and responsibility are inescapable elements of employee blogging.

Where encouraged, employee weblogs will change the way that work is organised and authority is distributed, by fostering direct communication across organisational boundaries, from employee to customer, and across group boundaries within organisations. The policy of "be smart" is telling; it becomes more important to have employees who are broadly informed



# Integration

As blogging in knowledge-intensive environments, this dissertation is driven by passion. This chapter brings together the findings of the studies presented in the dissertation; however it is also informed by insights from non-academic fields I find interesting to explore, personal blogging experiences and conversations about blogging.

The first section integrates the findings across different studies presented in this dissertation and summarises the contribution of this work in relation to weblog research. I then use the results to propose "ingredients for a theory" and views that explain how blogging works in respect to crossing boundaries, and to discuss how the insights from this work could be used to facilitate productive uses of weblogs in knowledge-intensive environments. Finally I reflect on the main choices behind this dissertation and discuss "lessons learnt" and further questions with respect to knowledge work, integrating blogging and research, and boundary crossing.

## 7.1 Blogging practices of knowledge workers

The first section integrates the results across different studies to provide an understanding of blogging in knowledge-intensive environments, answering research questions about blogging practices of knowledge workers with respect to ideas, conversations, relations, tasks and context. I then outline the contribution of this work to the field of weblog research and discuss further research directions.



### 7.1.1 Ideas

This section summarises the results of the studies in respect to the first research question:

*What are the blogging practices of knowledge workers in respect to ideas?*

The study of my personal blogging practices provides an insight into using a weblog as a personal knowledge base that supports different activities around the weblog content: low-threshold creation of entries, a flexible and personally meaningful way to organise and maintain them, opportunities to retrieve, reuse and analyse blog content and to engage with others around it. Since blogging (both reading and writing) does not require much effort, it could often be fitted in while working on something else, providing a way to keep abreast of others' ideas, as well as capturing those and one's own emergent insights in a blogpost. The public nature of blogging provides an additional motivation to document emergent ideas, make an effort to clarify them for others and treat the weblog as a legitimate place to share thinking in progress. Over time ideas on a topic accumulate and connections between them become clearer. Browsing through the archives when writing a new post, seeing multiple ways to organise the posts, and receiving feedback from the readers turn blogging into a set of sense-making practices that I call "everyday grounded theory". Eventually an idea is "ripe" and ready to become part of a specific task, which is in my own case doing research or writing about it.

Studies of weblog conversations and networking between KM bloggers provide insights into the social nature of this process. Studies of weblog conversations illustrate how one's own thinking over time (conversation with self) is woven into collaborative thinking (conversations with others, those in comments to a blog post or distributed between multiple weblogs). They also show differences between bloggers with respect to using weblogs to support their thinking: patterns of connecting one's own posts with links differ between bloggers, probably as a result of personal choices regarding the purposes of using a weblog, its content and style. The distributed and open-ended nature of interacting via weblog conversations supports tangential conversations that explore fuzzy or unexpected ideas.

The study of networking between KM bloggers gives an insight into how "distributed sense-making networks" and "collective intelligence" work. Monitoring weblogs of people in their network, bloggers maintain an awareness of the ideas "flowing" through it and then join in conversations that interest them, to develop those ideas further. Being person-centred, weblogs allow "crossover" between topics when reading and writing in a way that is difficult with group-oriented tools. Some

bloggers appreciate and explicitly seek a variety of perspectives within weblogs they read and in a selection of those to follow.

In the Microsoft case, employee weblogs provided a way to stay aware of the ideas of customers and colleagues, creating an opportunity for unexpected developments. In some cases weblogs were used as personal or team knowledge bases, documenting ideas and experiences in a space where they were easy to retrieve and might benefit from the feedback of others. In addition, bloggers who did not intentionally use weblogs that way reported returning to old blogposts for reflection or reuse.

Drawing conclusions across those studies, blogging practices of knowledge workers with respect to ideas could be described as follows:

- Weblogs are used to *maintain awareness of the ideas "out there"* through reading in small bites, using others' weblogs as trusted sources and one's own network as a filter.
- Weblogs provide a space for *articulating and capturing ideas* that might be undocumented or hidden in private collections otherwise, parking them in a trusted external repository *shared with others*.
- Blogging is used for *sense-making* supported by writing, multiple ways to organise and assess one's own blog posts and conversations with other bloggers.
- When developing ideas, the person-centric and open-ended nature of blogging brings *unexpected insights that cross topical boundaries*.
- Over time ideas captured and organised in weblogs provide a fertile ground for *reflection and reuse*.

### 7.1.2 Conversations

This section summarises the results of the studies with respect to the second research question:

*What are the blogging practices of knowledge workers in respect to conversations?*

Two studies of weblog conversations reported in this dissertation show that weblog conversations include fragments (weblog posts and comments) distributed between multiple weblogs and connected by links. Those conversations are difficult to trace and visualise. Relatively high interactivity between KM bloggers, compared to the reports on weblog interactivity in the literature, suggests a relation between social context and the occurrence and character of weblog conversations.

The study of the Actionable Sense conversation shows that participation in weblog conversations involves choosing communication channels (weblog comments, links between weblogs or other media) and linking as a way to connect conversational fragments and to retain an overview. Resulting

conversational structures combine conversations with self and others, and could branch into multiple topics or languages.

The study of KM blogger conversations with self and others shows that weblog conversations do not happen all the time, but rather include bursts of interaction between bloggers. It shows that conversations with others are integrated into one's "conversations with self", personal narratives and thinking in the weblogs of the participants. Connections between different conversations made by a blogger in his own weblog through self-linking provide bridges between different conversations with others, and may result in a mega-conversation, a network of linked posts that connects multiple participants and topics.

The study of KM blogger networking indicates that weblog conversations (especially those between weblogs) are essential for developing ideas through collective intelligence and bonding between bloggers. It suggests that blogging provide opportunities for both the access and exchange information with others, without personal connection, and an interaction that is informed and embedded into a history of communication and relations between the participants. The study shows that weblog conversations might be accompanied by interaction via other communication channels, especially when there is a need for a direct interaction with a particular goal in mind or one that requires private, confidential or vulnerable writing.

According to the results of the Microsoft study, weblogs support conversations with others by providing an alternative communication channel that can reach external audiences (e.g. customers) faster by bypassing official channels, or reach audiences who the blogger is not aware might be interested in a topic. They provide a way to share a personal perspective on work-related matters and provide information without fear of spamming others. Compared to other media, information in weblogs is more visible and more likely to be found.

Drawing conclusions across those studies, blogging practices of knowledge workers in respect to conversations could be described as the following:

- Weblog conversations are informed by and embedded into *histories of writing in individual weblogs* as well as *history of interactions and relations between participating bloggers*. These contexts are not necessarily explicit and visible to everyone who participates.
- Since weblog conversations involve communicating via comments to a specific weblog and via linking across weblogs they are *fragmented and distributed* over multiple weblogs. In addition, those conversations may be supplemented by interacting via other media. The distributed and fragmented nature of weblog conversations results in exposure

- to different audiences, the crossing of multiple topics, and the *combination of individual input and the power of dialogue*.
- In comparison to other tools, participation in weblog conversations requires *extra effort* that includes manually connecting conversational fragments by linking, as well as creating and maintaining an overview of those fragments. This effort limits the scale or frequencies of such conversations and also makes them more likely to happen within densely knit networks of bloggers.
  - Weblogs provide the possibility of an *occasional interaction* rather than supporting constant conversations. They are not particularly suitable for goal-oriented conversations, but provide a fertile ground for exploring ideas, especially those that cross topical boundaries or where the interests of others are not known in advance.
  - Participation in weblog conversations contributes to developing ideas and relations that often *cross boundaries and exclude intermediaries*.

### 7.1.3 Relations

This section summarises the results of the studies in respect to the second research question:

*What are the blogging practices of knowledge workers in respect to relations with others?*

The results of the study of networking between KM bloggers show that blogging extends professional networks, connecting bloggers across topical, geographical, organisational and hierarchical boundaries with people with similar professional interests and shared values. In the process of discovering other interested parties, weblogs serve as attractors and filters: writing a weblog invites others who resonate with it to comment and link back, while weblogs one reads provide recommendations for others that are potentially interesting. Since weblogs are rather more person-centred than strictly focused on a predefined topic, a blogger often writes about a variety of personally relevant issues, exposing readers to potentially new and unexpected topical areas and other bloggers within those. A weblog serves as a "living portrait" of its author: by making visible the history of the author's thinking and interaction, personal details and cues about personality and passions, it allows others to get to know her/him from a distance and then decide whether or not to engage further. The connections between bloggers grow through interacting over time, starting from conversations in blog comments and between weblogs, and then "spilling over" to other channels and meeting in person. The knowledge of each other, trust and a history of interaction then enable bloggers to collaborate to get things done together; however, joint work is usually carried out via other channels. For established relationships,

blogging provides a way to stay in touch without necessarily interacting directly, often complemented by use of other tools.

KM bloggers report not only about establishing personal relationships with others as a result of blogging, but also non-personal ones, when another blogger is viewed as a trusted information source. Weblogs provide opportunities for both a way to access and exchange information with others without personal connection, and a space to engage with others personally, building relations through creating affinity, demonstrating commitment and negotiating attention of others.

The study of employee blogging at Microsoft illustrates how weblogs contribute to maintaining one's own reputation, finding others inside and outside of the organisation through exposing one's own interests, or developing trusted relations as a result of being open and passionate. It also shows how the company's public image is changed when bloggers personally engage with others outside organisational boundaries.

Drawing conclusions across these studies, blogging practices of knowledge workers in respect to relations could be described as follows:

- The personal nature of blogging plays an important role in establishing professional connections. Weblogs are often treated as *online representations of their authors*, living business cards.
- Weblogs are used for establishing and maintaining both *personal relations* with other bloggers and *informational relations* that involve treating other bloggers as trusted information source without engaging in person.
- In both cases it is "*connecting through content*", where the person-centric nature of blogging plays an important role in establishing trust (either in the blogger as a person or as an information source) and connecting across boundaries.
- Networking via weblogs is enabled by *publishing* and *interaction*. Publishing allows efficient broadcasting on a variety of topics to often unknown audiences and is essential for being present as a blogger, getting to know others and making informed choices about engaging with them, and as a low-key way to stay in touch. While bloggers do not actively interact all the time, it is the conversations between them over time that help to establish personal bonds that eventually enable getting things done together.
- While personal relations are often initially established via blogging, over time *multiple channels* come into play to monitor others and to interact with them.

#### 7.1.4 Tasks

This section summarises the results of the studies with respect to the second research question:

*What are the practices of knowledge workers in respect to using weblogs to support specific tasks?*

In my own case, using the weblog to work directly on the core tasks, doing research and reporting about it, is an exception rather than a rule; however blogging supports these tasks indirectly. In the case of research writing it not only creates the need to connect multiple fragments into a bigger whole, but also helps to do so, turning ideas into a product. It supports writing by providing inspiration, content to reuse, and opportunities to structure an argument and discuss it with an audience before it becomes part of a final product.

The study of networking between KM bloggers illustrates that blogging enables working together with other bloggers by creating opportunities for informed choices about with whom to collaborate, and by building shared understanding and trust. When it comes to doing the work itself, or reporting about it, a weblog is not necessarily the ideal tool, since such work requires a different mode of writing and interaction, and might not benefit from being visible in a weblog.

The results of the Microsoft study illustrate that, in some cases, blogging becomes part of work (when it is part of a job description, has specially allocated time and is judged during performance appraisals) or the focus of specific tasks (when bloggers start working on Microsoft blogging products). However, more commonly it serves as an optional instrument for working on tasks that involve documentation, communication or relationship building. Blogging could be chosen for the task intentionally (e.g. to promote a product in a product weblog), used ad-hoc (a question related to the current task is asked in a weblog) or brought into play in retrospect (using previously documented ideas for a report or article). In addition, blogging contributes to working on specific tasks indirectly, by changing the flow of information and knowledge both inside and outside the company: creating opportunities for unexpected connections across boundaries, allowing efficient direct communication and providing access to ideas.

Drawing conclusions across those studies, blogging practices of knowledge workers in respect of working on specific tasks could be described as follows:

- The open-ended and public nature of weblogs does not necessarily make them a good tool to work directly on tasks, so in most cases weblogs are used for *enabling work, rather than doing it*. Weblogs influence one's work

indirectly when they are used for developing ideas, engaging in conversations and establishing relations that might be needed in the future:

- documented ideas might be reused and reworked, accelerating working on tasks;
- relations with others make it possible to engage them when needed;
- conversations result in unexpected ideas and relations that can turn into new projects or contribute to the on-going ones.
- Blogging might become more closely integrated with one's work when it requires *working on tasks that match the medium*, for example, those that require documenting potentially useful ideas, relationship building or communicating to a broad audience.
- While in some cases blogging might become the required way to perform one's work or a focus of it, in most cases it is added to a pool of various tools one can use to work on a task. Knowledge workers *choose* to use blogging as an instrument *when it works for them* and do it intentionally, ad-hoc or in retrospect.

### 7.1.5 Context

This section summarises the results of the studies in respect of the last research question:

*What are the practices of knowledge workers in respect to dealing with issues that arise as a result of blogging in specific contexts?*

The study of blogging PhD ideas shows how the discovery that blogging added value resulted in making it part of the main body of work, through changing working practices to integrate blogging, blogging during working hours and bringing it into the performance appraisal. However, it also illustrates how one could be "locked" into a specific weblog technology because of integrating blogging and work, and how blogging confronts hierarchical relations and existing practices (such as blind peer review). Blogging also challenged my personal practices of dealing with information: in my case the network expansion and access to abundant, divergent and potentially useful information as a result of blogging resulted in information overload and withdrawal from blogging. The study also shows an interrelation between personal and social in blogging: I articulate the challenges of serving my own needs vs. those of others when blogging, and the difficulties that arise around ownership and attribution of ideas developed through collective intelligence.

Studies of KM bloggers give an insight into the effort that goes into choosing and managing tools to communicate with other bloggers, as well learning the limits and possibilities of weblog technologies and developing practices of dealing with those (e.g. creating summaries to deal with lack of

conversation tracking tools or trusting the network to bring important ideas back). Studies of blogging conversations illustrate the challenges of mapping connected fragments across weblogs: while we used tools developed especially for this research to make sense of what is going on, bloggers have to find a way to do so without having an access to these.

The study of networking between KM bloggers gives insight into their practices relevant to managing the specifics of weblog-mediated networking. As bloggers' networks expand and expose them to more people, they manage this exposure by limiting the number of new contacts or the degree of engagement with others, making choices not to engage personally with everyone and selectively read weblogs. Treating weblogs as their online representation, living and persistent at the same time, bloggers make choices about their own public images, resolving conflicts between different perspectives and the needs of different audiences.

The Microsoft case illustrates how blogging by employees of a company, often started by personal initiative and supported by personal investment, can easily become beneficial from a business perspective, raising expectations of work-related value or concerns about risks. For example, visibility of bloggers, their work and expertise, may result in undesired communication overhead, or time spent dealing with high reader expectations or taking care of negative effects inside and outside of the organisation. As a result, blogging turns into an arena of negotiations and interplays between personal and organisational interests and concerns. Based on the results of the study, I suggest a set of facets to position a weblog on a scale between a private affair (e.g. a diary published for family and friends) and a strictly work-related instrument (e.g. weblog as a way to collect team progress reports), referring to factors that shape a weblog (its location, uses, content and style), the authority making decisions (regarding starting a weblog, specific blogging episodes and technology used) and integration of blogging with work (affiliation with company, impact, including into job description, time used for blogging and content ownership).

Drawing conclusions across these studies, blogging practices of knowledge workers with respect to context could be described as follows:

- Blogging on professionally interesting topics often results in a degree of *integration with work*, even when started without this intention. In business settings, blogging is neither purely individual nor business-driven – the choices that shape a particular weblog are multifaceted and weblogs of individual knowledge workers are positioned on various places between the extremes.
- Bloggers have to *deal with the effects of visibility* that comes as a result of blogging. While visibility might be a driving force for blogging and



a reason for many positive effects it brings (e.g. ideas and people being found) it also comes with challenges of dealing with expansion of networks and information overload, changes in power distribution when crossing hierarchical or organisational boundaries, raised expectations and making mistakes in public.

- Given that blogging is shaped by, and useful in, different contexts that often result in incomparable requirements, bloggers have to *make choices and draw the boundaries*, deciding if they blog for themselves or others, for connecting with peers or a business gain, or how personal their work-related weblog should be.
- Blogging is creating microcontent, but the value of it is in the connections and patterns across those fragments over time. It is also efficient in exposing a blogger to a great number of ideas and people across various boundaries. So, learning to *deal with fragmentation and abundance* is part of blogging practices.
- *Choosing, managing and "working around" tools* is part of blogging. As well as making the initial choices about the technology set-up for their weblogs, bloggers constantly have to make choices about media to engage with others. Various tools used for that purpose require the effort of maintaining contacts across them and learning how to maximise their potential and account for limitations.

### 7.1.6 Contribution and further research

This dissertation focuses on describing blogging practices of bloggers who work in knowledge-intensive environments and on uses of weblogs in relation to knowledge work. Although some of the findings (e.g. those in relation to weblog-mediated networking) are likely to be relevant for other types of bloggers, more research is needed to identify how far, and under which conditions, the results are applicable in such cases. In addition, while the findings illustrate how weblogs might be useful in business environments, such uses are explored primarily from an individual perspective, answering the "what's in it for me?" question, rather than systematically describing the potential of blogging in organisational settings.

Bloggers, represented in this dissertation come primarily from developed countries and are English-speaking (even if they use another language to blog). Although weblogs help to connect across various boundaries, shared values and language are important in shaping them, so the findings may not hold for other cultures. Since the results of a blog networking study indicate that the language boundaries might be the most difficult to cross, it would be particularly interesting to carry out similar research in the non-English speaking networks of bloggers.

The research focuses on blogging practices of a few bloggers in specific settings, so the findings describe a variety of knowledge worker blogging practices and leave the study of frequencies and conditions for each of them to further work. The results provide in-depth views on specific practices, suggesting categories and questions for further exploration. For example, the dissertation documents uses of a weblog as a personal knowledge base and an instrument for growing ideas from the early stages to a final product, as well as different uses of weblogs in a process of establishing and maintaining relationships. In both cases, blogging seems to be especially useful early in the process, helping to deal with fuzzy ideas and would-be relationships. While I bring insights from personal information management and personal networking theories to discuss how blogging works that way, additional research is needed to study it in depth.

Although various conversational uses of weblogs are relatively well studied, this research adds insights on rich conversational practices that are not common in a random sample of weblogs (Herring et al., 2004). The results describe not only the effort that goes into constructing these conversations from fragments and keeping an overview of them, but also their importance for both growing ideas and developing interpersonal relations between bloggers, suggesting the need for further research to identify the conditions that support distributed weblog conversations.

This research also explores conversations with self and illustrates their impact on conversations with others. In particular, it indicates that studying self-linking is as important as studying links between weblogs, since these different types of links might create mega-conversations, not necessarily visible as a whole for people, but taken into account by search engines.

Recently, the research on corporate blogging has expanded (for an overview see Lockwood & Dennis, 2008), focusing on work-related uses of weblogs in a variety of settings. As well as contributing to this body of knowledge, the studies presented in this dissertation also provide a view on the issues that arise as a result of those uses, such as the need to deal with information fragmentation or with blurred ownership of weblog content. In addition, it documents various ways of integrating blogging with work, the tensions between personal and organisational perspectives around blogging and individual choices that bloggers make to address these challenges. Those insights might be useful for further research on the specifics of supporting blogging in organisations and on addressing blogging-related issues in managerial practices.

Finally, the findings suggest several characteristics of weblogs that contribute to a broader understanding of weblogs as a medium: their simultaneous uses for open-ended publishing, conversations with self and engaged interaction with specific others, switches between personal and social, as well as opportunities that weblogs provide in crossing various

boundaries. While more research is needed to integrate these into a coherent theoretical view on blogging, I contribute to this process by discussing several starting points for such integration in the following section.

## 7.2 Ingredients for a theory: accidental brokering, artefact-based connections and edge zones

While the main focus of this dissertation has been on *describing* blogging practices of knowledge workers, it is also tempting to use those descriptions for developing a *theoretical understanding* of blogging. Also, although the dissertation results illustrate the importance of social ecosystems in blogging, the focus of this work is primarily on blogging from the perspective of an individual knowledge worker. It leaves unanswered questions about the "ecosystem effects" of blogging, especially interesting when thinking about blogging in organisational contexts.

In this section I reflect on the dissertation findings to propose "ingredients for a theory" that address the connection between individual and social perspectives around blogging. In particular, the focus here is on *boundary crossing*, which is one of the most promising features of blogging from a knowledge management perspective. I first use the work on boundary crossing in the case of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) to discuss accidental brokering and artefact-based connections as two ways of connecting different perspectives via blogging.<sup>115</sup> Then I explore the boundary between personal and social, by drawing parallels with the research on emergent social activities in urban public places (Gehl, 2001): I suggest viewing weblogs as edge zones and discuss conditions that turn individual-centred online writing into a starting point for emergent social processes. At the end of this section I discuss the questions to be addressed in the further work.

### 7.2.1 Accidental brokering

While, to an extent, weblogs do represent the bloggers behind them and are often perceived as their online identities, studies presented in this dissertation also indicate that blogging involves many challenges of dealing with different audiences that a weblog serves. Blogging in a context of

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<sup>115</sup> Corresponding sections of this chapter are based on the presentation of early ideas to the members of CPsquare community and the discussion that followed, see [Blog networking and crossing boundaries for CPsquare research and dissertation fest](#) (Mathemagenic, 2 December 2008).

knowledge work requires balancing interests of self and others, peers and customers, close friends and occasional lurkers, or people coming from different disciplinary backgrounds. From this perspective I find the discussion of identity in relation to participation in different communities of practice by Etienne Wenger (1998) useful:

*Our various forms of participation delineate pieces of a puzzle we put together rather than sharp boundaries between disconnected parts of ourselves. An identity is thus more than just a single trajectory; instead, it should be viewed as a nexus of multimembership. As such a nexus, identity is not a unity but neither is it simply fragmented.*

- *On the one hand, we engage in different practices in each of the communities of practice to which we belong. We often behave rather differently in each of them, construct different aspects of ourselves, and gain different perspectives.*
- *On the other hand, considering a person as having multiple identities would miss all the subtle ways in which our various forms of participation, no matter how distinct, can interact, influence each other, and require coordination.*

*The notion of nexus adds multiplicity to the notion of trajectory. A nexus does not merge the specific trajectories we form in our various communities of practice into one; but neither does it decompose our identity into distinct trajectories in each community. In a nexus, multiple trajectories become part of each other, whether they clash or reinforce each other.*

*They are, at the same time, one and multiple (p.159).*

When one belongs to different social worlds, being one person requires what Wenger discusses as *reconciliation*, the process of constructing an identity that can integrate "different meanings and forms of participation into one nexus" (p.160). Although usually participation in different social worlds is somewhat separated in time and space (e.g. being a colleague at work and a parent at home, while still maintaining a single identity of a working parent), blogging brings it into a single space, and sometimes even into a single moment when a blogpost is written to capture one's experiences between those worlds. In this case different forms of participation collapse creating a living resolution of a boundary. In addition, the work of reconciliation, very personal and invisible according to Wenger, leaves publicly visible traces when bloggers use their weblogs in different contexts.

Wenger discusses participative connections<sup>116</sup> across community boundaries as brokering, which is defined as "use of multimembership to transfer some elements of one practice into another":

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<sup>116</sup> As well as the reification-based ones that I discuss as artefact-based connections in the following section.

*The job of brokering is complex. It involves processes of translation, coordination, and alignment between perspectives. It requires enough legitimacy to influence the development of a practice, mobilize attention, and address conflicting interests. It also requires the ability to link practices by facilitating transactions between them, and to cause learning by introducing into a practice elements of another. Toward this end brokering provides a participative connection – not because reification is not involved, but because what brokers press into service to connect practices is their experience of multimembership and the possibilities for negotiation inherent in practice (Wenger, 1998, p.109).*

While brokering is not necessarily an intentional activity of a blogger, the co-existence and reconciliation of different perspectives in a single weblog might result in an *accidental brokering*. In this case elements of practices are transferred across boundaries as bloggers address conflicting interests and translate between different perspectives through their writing – not because they planned to do so, but since this is what being able to write in a single weblog requires – providing their readers with an opportunity to "visit" practices different from their own.

In this case a weblog provides a *window onto practice*, supporting learning through legitimate peripheral participation, as it allows one "to look through it onto as much actual practice as it can reveal, to see to increasingly greater depths, and to collaborate in exploration" (Brown & Duguid, 1992). Access to practices of others in this way requires time and effort to pick up contextual cues "between the lines" and establish relations needed for joint exploration. However, weblogs also provide an alternative way to peek into other worlds, which does not necessarily require the effort of engaging in person, but rather allows connecting through artefacts.

### 7.2.2 Artefact-based connections

While blogging might provide a window onto the blogger's practices, on the surface a weblog is just an artefact: text, links and bits of other media. In this section I reflect on the ways blogging helps to cross boundaries through information exchange and non-personal connections, using the concept of the *boundary object* as a starting point. This concept was introduced by Susan Leigh Star (Star & Griesemer, 1989; Star, 1989), who used it to describe how practices from different "social worlds" are coordinated:

*Boundary objects are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. They are weakly structured in common use, and become strongly structured in individual-site use. They may be abstract or concrete. They have different meanings in different*

*social worlds but their structure is common enough to more than one world to make them recognizable means of translation. The creation and management of boundary objects is key in developing and maintaining coherence across intersecting social worlds (Star & Griesemer, 1989, p.393).*

My original interest in using the concept of boundary objects with regard to blogging<sup>117</sup> comes from the term itself (a weblog is an *object* that works across various *boundaries*), so my treatment of it deviates from the way it is usually used. I use it to refer to an object at a boundary of different perspectives that include those of an individual, rather than to an object at an intersection between social worlds (Star & Griesemer, 1989) or communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). In addition, boundary objects are defined through their use for coordinating different perspectives (for example, this point is emphasised by Wenger, 1998, pp.107-108), while in the case of blogging, coordination between perspectives is often an accidental side-effect, rather than a reason for creating and maintaining a weblog.

Those differences might warrant the need to introduce an alternative terminology, but I will leave that issue for further work and focus on parallels between boundary objects and weblogs: artefact-based connections between different perspectives that do not require personal engagement, and characteristics that enable those connections.

Contrasting the role of boundary objects in crossing boundaries between communities of practice with brokering, Wenger emphasises that artefact-based connections "can transcend the spatiotemporal limitations inherent in participation" (1998, p.110), since artefacts can travel more easily than people. However, he says, uprooted from specific practices, artefacts are also a source of ambiguity and misinterpretation. Studies presented in this dissertation show that weblogs have the potential to connect different perspectives without requiring personal engagement. For example, readers of my weblog pick up bits of the research relevant for them. KM bloggers use weblogs to establish information relationships, as well as those of a more personal nature. The Microsoft case provides a view on how far information can travel via weblogs, as well as examples of challenges that a misinterpretation of weblog content can bring.

Based on the different types of boundary objects described by Star (Star & Griesemer, 1989; Star, 1989), Wenger proposes a number of characteristics "enabling artefacts to act as boundary objects":

*1) Modularity: each perspective can attend to one specific portion of the boundary object (e.g., a newspaper is a heterogeneous collection of articles that has something for each reader).*

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<sup>117</sup> For example, as in [Blogging as boundary practice](#) (Mathemagenic, 4 July 2006).

2) *Abstraction*: all perspectives are served at once by deletion of features that are specific for each perspective (e.g., a map abstracts from the terrain only certain features, such as distance and elevation).

3) *Accommodation*: the boundary object lends itself to various activities (e.g., the office building can accommodate the various practices of its tenants, its caretakers, its owners, and so forth).

4) *Standardization*: the information contained in a boundary object is in a prespecified form so that each constituency knows how to deal with it locally (for example, a questionnaire that specified how to provide some information by answering certain questions) (Wenger, 1998, p.107).

Those characteristics are useful to view what enables weblogs to serve as connectors across various perspectives.

*Modularity and standardisation* are inherent to weblogs: blogging is about bits of microcontent (weblog posts), connected within and across weblogs by standardised structure and protocols. When finding a new weblog, those familiar with the medium, know how to deal with it (e.g. distinguish specific posts and their metadata, browse through the archives or subscribe to the updates). Specific weblog posts, accompanied by permalinks, can be accessed without the rest of the weblog. This allows information presented in a weblog to travel far outside of the original contexts where it was created.

The potential of a weblog to *accommodate* various activities is not immediately obvious: it is usually viewed as an instrument for low-threshold *publishing* that allows bloggers to reach broad audiences without pushing information to them. However, the results of the studies presented in this dissertation suggest that it may also support *conversations with self* and *interactions* with specific others.

A combination of these three modes supports accommodation for various practices of different constituencies. An individual blogger might use a weblog for a conversation with self – articulating thoughts and feelings, organising her own digital bits or retrospectively reflecting on the traces left over time. Publishing makes one's weblog traces exposed, so others can learn from them without necessarily engaging directly with the blogger. On the other hand, weblogs could be also used for interaction and in-depth engagement, allowing the building of relationships and trust, and the development of ideas in dialogue with one's contacts.

Finally, since multiple perspectives are served at once, weblogs also exhibit a degree of *abstraction*, for example, when specific details of one's work or personal situation are omitted to make it possible to share the essence of it in public, knowing that the author and those "in the know" can read between the lines to reconstruct missing details. Abstraction also makes information presented in a weblog accessible and relevant to broader and varied audiences, while also increasing the chances of misinterpretation.

In sum, while not necessarily fully fitting a definition of boundary objects, weblogs exhibit characteristics that make them effective in establishing artefact-based connections across boundaries of different social worlds. As I discuss in the following section, their ability to accommodate various activities also turns them into a space on the edge between the personal and the social.

### 7.2.3 The weblog as an edge zone

As the findings of this dissertation illustrate, blogging supports the creation of relationships with unknown and unexpected others, often across various boundaries. These start from the point of being present as a blogger, finding and observing others; then there is the possibility of engaging in an interaction that might grow into a relationship. In his study of social activities in urban places Jan Gehl (2001) describes relationships in a similar way, starting from "see and hear contacts" that might eventually grow into a closer relationship. In analysing the conditions for those contacts and for emergent interaction in public spaces in a city he stresses the importance of edge zones:

*At the edge of the forest or near the façade, one is less exposed than if one is out in the middle of a space. One is not in the way of anyone or anything. One can see, but not be seen too much, and the personal territory is reduced to a semicircle in front of the individual. When one's back is protected, others can approach only frontally, making it easy to keep watch and to react, for example, by means of a forbidding facial expression in the event of undesired invasion of personal territory. The edge zone offers a number of obvious practical and psychological advantages as a place to linger. Additionally, the area along the façade is the obvious outdoor staying area for the residents and functions of the surrounding buildings. It is relatively easy to move a function out of the house to the zone along the façade. The most natural place to linger is the doorstep, from which it is possible to go further out into the space or remain standing. Both physically and psychologically it is easier to remain standing than to move out into the space. One can always move farther later on, if desired (Gehl, 2001, pp. 151-152).*

Weblogs are similar to the edge zones in cities. As a personal space in public, a weblog provides a unique opportunity for combining the characteristics of both being in control and feeling protected in one's own space (Gumbrecht, 2004), and being exposed to others and open to communication.

Drawing parallels between blogging and social life in cities allows the identification of several conditions for emergent social activities in the case of weblogs. One, mentioned above, is *personal control and safety*,



providing an opportunity to "linger" comfortably in public. Other conditions include: a legitimate reason to be in public, an opportunity to see and be seen, and switching between inward- and outward-oriented activities.

Edge zones often provide one with a *legitimate reason to be in public* as long as one wants to without necessarily doing anything "social" – for example, having a coffee or reading a book in the front garden of one's house. In this context Gehl also talks about "excursions as excuses" (2001, pp.117-119), describing a number of observations indicating that some activity meaningful for a person appears to be a pretext or an occasion for social contact:

*Among the requirements that are satisfied, in part, in public spaces are the need for contact, the need for knowledge, and the need for stimulation. These belong to the group of psychological needs. Satisfying these is seldom as goal-oriented and deliberate as with the more basic physical needs, such as eating, drinking, sleeping and so on. For example, adults seldom go to town with the expressed intention of satisfying the need for stimulation or the need for contact. Regardless of what the true purpose may be, one goes out for a plausible, rational reason – to shop, to take a walk, to get some fresh air, to buy a paper, to wash the car, and so forth (Gehl, 2001, p.117).*

Blogging can support various personal activities that do not require interaction. One can always think of a weblog in terms of conversations with self or publishing: blogging as "writing for myself", "publishing to the world" or "learning from others" provides an excuse to linger in public.

Being in public in a city implies that one has an *opportunity to see* what's going on and to *be seen*, without the necessity to interact. In the case of weblogs "seeing" is reading, made more efficient by news aggregators and various notification services that allow bloggers to keep track of interesting things happening. Writing a weblog makes its author present in a blogosphere and visible to others. This visibility provides an opportunity for low-intensity contacts, exposure and lurking that do not require the commitment and effort of an interaction, but create starting points for more intensive engagement.

Finally, to be able to engage with others further one needs an *opportunity to switch easily between inward and outward oriented* activities, those personally meaningful and those engaging others, for example, by stopping to talk with a friend met on a street. With weblogs it is about switching modes: what started as publishing or conversation with self can turn into an interaction when others comment or link to a weblog post. As a conversation in the middle of a street, interacting via weblogs is not the most convenient

way to talk, however, it is spontaneous and easy to move into a more appropriate space if there is a need for it, or to stop if one is in a hurry.

As an edge zone, a weblog provides a personal space in public. Although there are the pressures of social norms and perceived expectations of one's audience, the personal nature of blogging means that there is still more freedom in what to write and how to do it than in many other online spaces, which are often guided by topical focus or reinforced group practices. Blogging can also be more open-ended and less focused on an interaction with specific others, for example, writing an email with "an interesting idea that you might be able to comment on" to all acquaintances would be rude, while a weblog provides a natural space for it. However, at the same time a weblog is a form of communication aimed at others – in the same way that being in public reveals one's personality through exposing appearance and actions, writing a weblog exposes the author's values and way of thinking through the style of writing and choices about content.

#### **7.2.4 Insights and questions to answer**

In the sections above I use existing theories to discuss the findings about the boundary-crossing potential of weblogs. The first two sections draw on the discussion of boundary crossing through brokering and boundary objects in the research of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), suggesting that weblogs connect different perspectives in two ways. The first one, accidental brokering, is a result of a reconciliation of different perspectives that writing a weblog requires from its author. When bloggers address conflicting interests and translate between different perspectives through their writing, they provide their readers with an opportunity to "visit" practices different from their own. While access to the practices of others in this way requires personal engagement, and the time and effort required for that, weblogs also provide an alternative way to cross boundaries. I discuss those as artefact-based connections and draw parallels between characteristics of weblogs and those of boundary objects. Allowing publication, conversations with self and interaction with others at the same time, weblogs have the potential to accommodate the various activities of different actors without the need to coordinate them. Modularity and standardisation of weblog content allows it to travel far outside of its original context, while a degree of abstraction, required when addressing multiple perspectives at the same time, makes information presented in a weblog more accessible to various audiences.

In addition I discuss emergent social activities in weblogs by using an edge zone concept from the research on social life in urban public places (Gehl, 2001). As the edge zone, a weblog provides its author with

an opportunity to linger in public without necessarily engaging in social activities all the time, which enables spontaneous low-threshold social encounters that then might grow into something bigger. I discuss the fact that to work this way, a weblog has to provide its author with personal control and safety, personally meaningful activities that do not depend on direct interaction with others, visibility, and opportunities to switch easily between personally meaningful activities and those engaging others.

Although the theoretical insights presented in this section still have to be integrated into a coherent whole, they highlight several issues that need to be addressed in further work.

The first is around the *flexibility of a weblog as a tool* that could accommodate various uses and be used in different contexts at the same time, but that also requires specific skills in order to be able to do this. In this respect I would draw a parallel between a weblog and a Sardinian *Pattada*, a knife that De Michelis (2003) discusses as an example of technology that allows seamless integration of multiple uses in a single blade tool (as contrasted with the Swiss Army Knife, which requires switching between multiple highly-specialised blades). While weblogs as a technology might change or even disappear in a near future, I believe that it is important to study their uses across various contexts in order to understand the essential ingredients of designing future tools that seamlessly integrate knowledge worker activities that are currently supported by many specialised tools.

The next issue is that, as the discussion above illustrates, the effects of blogging are often *accidental and emergent*, rather than intentional. Bloggers and their weblogs might connect different social worlds not because they intend to do so, but by writing about eclectic topics that interest them and by making what they write accessible to various audiences. Relations between bloggers and more complex community structures might emerge as a result of individuals serving their own interests in a publicly visible way. Capturing and understanding those effects requires theories that account for practices that might seem to have lack of purpose. In relation to knowledge work that would mean theories that look at knowledge worker activities that go beyond performing specific tasks, or at interactions that look aimless (e.g. as some of those discussed by Nardi, 2005). Using the terminology of Jan Gehl, "excursions" that might have nothing to do with knowledge work on a surface (like drinking coffee together) might be a pretext or an occasion for something that is essential to enable it.

Finally, the "ingredients for a theory" presented in this section have another theme in common: the *person-centric nature of blogging* seems to be essential for boundary crossing, since it serves as an excuse to write on topics not necessarily relevant for a particular audience or as a motivator to write at all, using "I'm writing for myself" as an excuse when it's not clear

if anyone is there to listen. However, most of the effects of blogging are inherently social and require a weblog to be looked at as part of an ecosystem. In my search for theories I found it difficult to find those that would provide conceptual lenses to look at practices of a *connected individual*, rather than those of a specific community. As the first two parts of this section illustrate, I appropriated conceptual categories from the research on communities of practice to fit my needs. In this case the essential insights to account for a unique contribution of an individual are there, but not fully fleshed out – similar to other practice theories, as I discovered later:

*There is a very precise place for the 'individual' – as distinguished from an agent – in practice theory (thought hitherto, **practice theorists have hardly treated this question**): As there are diverse social practices, and as every agent carries out a multitude of different social practices, the individual is the unique crossing point or practices, of bodily-mental routines (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 256, emphasis is mine).*

In respect to blogging, this calls for the theoretical work that provides opportunities to account for a unique constellation of practices that shape blogging practices of an individual blogger, those of different types of social worlds - groups, communities, networks, organisations.

### 7.3 Implications for practice

This research was motivated by my interest in translating the practices of early adopters of weblogs into something that those that come after them might use: an understanding of the relative advantage of blogging in knowledge-intensive environments and its compatibility with existing practices. The description of blogging practices of knowledge workers, presented in the beginning of this chapter, provides a starting point for this: answers to the research questions about blogging in respect to ideas, conversations, relations and tasks outline a variety of uses of weblogs in relation to work, while the remaining results outline changes that blogging can bring. The previous section provides several theory-inspired viewpoints that discuss the findings further. In this section I draw on those insights to discuss the implications of this research for practice from two perspectives. The first one is of an individual knowledge worker, a pragmatist, who wants to know what blogging might bring for him in order to decide if it is worth the effort. The second one is of a person who is facilitating blogging by others in organisational settings.

### 7.3.1 What pragmatists might want to know about blogging

Is blogging for me? Why? What do I need to know before trying it out? Although answers to these questions should be specific for each person considering blogging, this section might provide a starting point for formulating those answers. Here I outline the characteristics of weblogs that make them useful for one's work and the changes in working practices that blogging might require.

#### *Switching gears*

Flexibility is a fundamental characteristic of blogging tools: weblogs allow one to "switch gears" in that they can be used for communication on a variety of topics and in a number of ways.

In most cases, weblogs are used as personal tools. Unless intended to be used for a very specific purpose (e.g. to communicate to customers about a product) or within a very restricted environment (e.g. in prison) one can use a weblog to write on *personally interesting issues in a personally meaningful way*. However, since weblogs are public, it is useful to think about them as one's front garden: it's up to the owner to decide what should be in there, but general cultural norms do apply (e.g. cursing might prompt neighbours to take another street to walk).

As a tool, weblogs might also be used in different modes. *Publishing* to a broad and often unknown audience is what weblogs are primarily known for: one can use weblog tools to make a particular piece of information available to others without pushing it to them. In addition to that, weblogs could be used for conversations with self and interaction with specific others.

Uses of a weblog for *conversations with self* are up to an individual blogger: a weblog can serve as a tool to collect personally relevant notes and organise them in a variety of ways; this collection then provides an input for reflection and reuse.

On the other hand, weblogs could be also used for an in-depth *interaction* with others, allowing the building of relations and trust and the development of ideas in dialogue with one's contacts. Weblogs are not perfect as a conversational tool: there is no guarantee of a reply and once a conversation has started it might become fragmented between multiple weblogs. When the topics and people for a conversation are known, it is better to choose other tools; however, blogging works well as a conversation starter since others could select topics that interest them.

#### *Enabling work*

Blogging might fit one's work when some elements of it require publishing, conversations with self or unexpected interaction. For example, it might

replace email for sharing news with a team, be used for documenting one's work to reflect on it over time, or to find out who might be the person to discuss a problem with.

However, in many cases the open-ended and public nature of weblogs does not make them a good tool to do one's job directly; in those cases their strength is enabling work by developing ideas and relations that might be needed in the future. Weblogs are about microcontent: writing and reading in small bits does not require much effort, so blogging might fit in moments between other tasks. In addition, a weblog post does not have to communicate a specific idea to a specific audience, so a weblog might work well to collect notes that do not fit anywhere else. Over time, this collection of thoughts provides an overview of one's ideas and expertise, enabling unexpected connections across boundaries.

Weblogs are probably most useful in settings where one doesn't know what is waiting "down the road". Which of the current ideas might be needed for a future project? Who is the best person to ask for help? What jobs have I never thought about but would love to do? In those cases weblogs help to build a foundation: to collect ideas "just in case", to grow a professional network, to make one's expertise and passions visible.

### ***Emergent social***

While a weblog supports publishing and interaction, an audience for it does not come automatically; it emerges through discovery and interaction over time. In addition, while email in someone's mailbox calls for attention, reading a weblog is a choice. What does that mean in practice?

- Writing needs to be enticing; readers come when a weblog adds value for them. A good way to ensure this is to write on the issues one is knowledgeable and passionate about.
- Bloggers discover each other through comments and recommendations. Making the effort to find interesting bloggers and commenting on their work is a good way to be found. Engaging with people who comment on one's own weblog, tracking who is linking to it and following links from one's favourite weblogs are other ways to get into contact with bloggers.

It takes time and effort before one can enjoy the social effects of blogging. To sustain blogging before those effects appear, it is important to have a personally meaningful way to use a weblog. For example, while documenting ideas about work might result in finding like-minded people in the future, it is easier to carry on knowing that doing so is useful even if nobody appears to be interested (e.g. as a reminder of one's activities for a progress report).

### *A learning curve*

It is relatively easy to learn how to use blogging tools. However, productive uses of weblogs in relation to one's work require another type of learning: the personal nature of blogging, as well as the visibility and boundary crossing that it brings, might challenge existing working practices. Blogging is likely to bring cultural shifts that need to be addressed and lessons to be learnt:

- Personal passions have a legitimate place at work. Personal stories and voices turn into trusted relations. People are more likely to believe another human being than an organisation or a computer. Showing emotions, telling personal stories, being passionate in hierarchical environments could be a challenge, but it is becoming an essential part of work.
- Transparency is here to stay. Weblogs provide a visible, often public, trace of one's expertise, actions and mistakes: what is written may stay "out there" forever and be searched, aggregated, transformed and linked back to the author. When there is no way to escape one's past, it is essential to learn how to make mistakes in public and how to handle them gracefully.
- Visibility can turn into information overload. Being visible as a weblog author might extend one's reach, but may also bring an unexpected explosion in communication as a result. With its low threshold for online publishing, blogging brings into public spaces ideas and stories previously hidden in private collections. Blogging requires reconsidering one's routines of working with information in order to be able to deal with fragmentation and abundance.
- Everyday routines matter. Unless one has nothing else to do, blogging survives only if integrated into the everyday world. Starting a blog is easy, continuing requires more – embedding the activity into one's information routines, work processes and interpersonal practices.
- Authority becomes fluid. Formal hierarchies are still there, but blogging provides alternative routes. However, new blogging authorities are only as good as posts on their homepages, networks constantly evolve and the share of attention one gets is more and more mediated by search engines.
- Organisations might set the rules and create conditions, but in the end it's up to an individual. Making judgments, taking risks, taking responsibility. Crossing boundaries. Having fun.

From the reality of working in an "average" business environment the challenges that have to be addressed to make blogging work might look like too much trouble to deal with. However, it is important to take into account those challenges also reflect some of the broader shifts in

the nature of work, so embracing them as a result of blogging might help to prepare for those.

### 7.3.2 Facilitating adoption of weblogs in knowledge-intensive environments

From an organisational perspective, weblogs provide a people-driven way to share knowledge and to develop ideas. For example, weblogs are useful for:

- *Tapping into the undocumented.* Blogging provides a low-threshold opportunity to write down ideas not related to current deadlines, but important to prepare for the future. Bloggers might use their weblogs to document their experiences and lessons learnt – those that escape official reports, but are usually very useful for others to learn from.
- *Making expertise visible.* Weblogs provide traces of personal expertise and practices. Making it visible helps to get an idea of who knows what, which is a starting point for collaboration. Reading a weblog written by experts allows others to gain insight about their ways of thinking and working, and to learn from them.
- *Unexpected connections.* Weblogs support serendipity – finding ideas that fuel innovation and interesting people to talk to or to combine efforts for a shared goal.

What is essential for facilitating adoption of weblogs in knowledge-intensive environments? Based on the results of this research, I suggest four principles: putting individuals in control, supporting an ecosystem, lowering thresholds and making use of what is already there.

#### ***Putting an individual in control***

Blogging works best when it is driven by personal interests and passions. Start by helping potential bloggers to find uses of a weblog personally meaningful for them in the long term - these are essential to sustain blogging while social effects of it emerge. Impose as few rules as possible: freedom and a sense of personal ownership of a weblog are important to be able to find those personally meaningful uses. Personal investment in blogging might create tensions with organisational norms and practices; however, this is the price that must be paid: be prepared to relax rules and embrace ambiguity. Avoid the temptation to measure the business effects of blogging: most of the added value of it is in enabling work rather than doing it, which is difficult to measure explicitly.



### ***Supporting an ecosystem***

Blogging is about microcontent – publishing small pieces of thought and commentary, anchored with permalinks and carried away by feeds.

However, the real value is not at the post level – ecosystems between blog posts and connections between their authors are more interesting and more important. When thinking about introducing weblogs in particular settings, it is essential to create conditions for weblog ecosystems, rather than only supporting individual weblogs. The essential ingredients for this are:

- *Scale*. Facilitate the broadest possible reach. Communicate clearly that blogging is supported in your organisation. If there are things that should not be blogged in public, make those exceptions known.
- *Readership*. Introduce newsfeeds and newsreaders as part of the practices of working with information. Make sure that intranet weblogs are accessible via those.
- *Visibility*. The infrastructure that supports visibility of public weblogs (weblog indexes, aggregators, search engines) has to be recreated if weblogs are used within an organisation.
- *Feedback*. Bloggers need tools to monitor the interest and reactions of others to their writing, which are often missing when weblog infrastructure is provided by an organisation. Statistics about references and traffic should be made available to the weblog authors.

### ***Lowering thresholds***

Although blogging looks simple, in practice it requires navigating a number of challenges. To help potential bloggers with those it is necessary to address several points:

- Some uses of weblogs are not obvious. Make sure that unexpected practices of blogging that are useful in relation to work are shared between bloggers.
- Think of blogging as a new tool for old tasks. For example, why not start a weblog for trip reports that are currently lost in separate documents? Lab notebooks, course notes, progress reports, customer communication and many other activities could be shared more easily via weblogs.
- Learn about the risks and benefits of blogging. Discuss those with the people in your organisation and then trust them in knowing what not to talk about in public.
- Provide blogging tools if you can, give basic how-to training or, better, ask a few experienced bloggers to coach newcomers by giving them time and recognition.

- Make it part of "work as usual" – make sure that spending some time on blogging is perceived as normal, account for it in performance appraisals, integrate it with other technologies in your organisation.

### ***Making use of what is already there***

If people in your organisation are already blogging, is there still something to do? Definitely: help others to navigate the sea of blog entries, support cross-fertilisation, find ways to reuse quality entries and recognise good authors. This could include, for example, making sure that employee weblogs (and also external ones) are indexed by an intranet search engine or creating a "best of blogs" column in your monthly newsletter. Blogging is best driven by personal passions, but once there, weblogs need to be embedded into organisational practices to bring business value.

## **7.4 Looking back**

In this section I look back to reflect on the main choices behind this dissertation, to identify "lessons learnt" and further questions with respect to knowledge work, integrating blogging and research, and boundary crossing.

### **7.4.1 Rethinking knowledge work**

In addressing knowledge work in this research, I chose a multidisciplinary approach, selecting theories that helped to look at specific issues of it or were useful in explaining the findings. Surprisingly, while technology-driven approaches and views in knowledge management are going out of fashion, in my search for useful theories I picked up many studies coming from the domain of Human-Computer Interaction and related fields (e.g. Personal Information Management or Computer Supported Collaborative Work). However, reflecting on those choices in retrospect, they are not that surprising. In studies of computer-mediated practices there is a need to study a person, even in the case of collaborative practices, as tools that people use are "designed for a group, but experienced by an individual",<sup>118</sup> and fluid networking practices seem to replace stable group interactions (Nardi et al., 2002). In addition, these fields are already multidisciplinary, since researchers come from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, bringing with them a variety of conceptual categories and methods.

While a multidisciplinary view on knowledge work is definitely useful to capture the complexity of it and to explore how different knowledge

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<sup>118</sup> The discussion on this should be credited to Nancy White, see [Online communication tools: designed for a group, experienced by an individual](#) (Mathemagenic, 12 July 2004).

worker activities are interrelated, it also creates challenges in integrating various conceptual approaches in a coherent picture and making a meaningful contribution to each of the disciplines involved. In this work I took a pragmatic approach, taking different disciplinary perspectives for each of the studies, as well as introducing relevant literature and discussing the findings in respect to it within specific chapters. Although this approach somewhat simplified the work, it also left open the challenge of integrating the insights from theories that I used into the knowledge work framework.

The knowledge work framework used in this research combines two sides of knowledge work: doing (tasks) and enabling (personal KM). Research-wise, the framework has been useful as an instrument that provides a view on what knowledge work entails and allows the exploration of knowledge worker activities that are not necessarily related to specific current tasks, but might be useful in a future.

The findings of this dissertation in respect to the practices "around blogging" also indicate dimensions of knowledge work that are not captured by the framework, but might be relevant to include as part of it in future research. Those are related to the need for an individual knowledge worker to manage identity and membership across various contexts, artefacts and their ownership, tools and instruments, attention and time, boundaries, reflection and change.

Practice-wise, the framework brings to light knowledge worker activities (e.g. developing and maintaining a personal network) that are often invisible, not supported, and not accounted for, thus creating awareness that could be a starting point for changes necessary to improve knowledge worker productivity. It also indicates that knowledge work has components that are beyond organisational control, implying that responsibility for knowledge worker productivity is shared between the individuals and the organisation they work for. This is a challenge for both sides. Companies would have to recognise that their employees are not simply "human resources", but investors, and learn how make workplaces rewarding, so employees bring their expertise in and make good use of it. Knowledge workers in turn need to take responsibility for their own work and learning (which entails an attitude shift and a desire to take the initiative), as well as developing personal KM knowledge and skills.

#### **7.4.2 Bringing blogging into research**

This dissertation presents a somewhat extreme case of integration between blogging and research. As well as being the focus on this work, blogging became part of my research approach: it helped to build relations with the participants, learn about their practices through participant observation, analyse the data, document and discuss work in progress, share and defend

the results. Since, as a whole, this combination is not likely relevant for many other research projects, in this section I discuss specific experiences of bringing blogging into research that might be useful in other settings: using weblogs as a lens to study the practices of people who blog, engaging bloggers as co-researchers, using a blog as a sense-making tool and as an instrument to increase transparency and accountability.

The studies presented in this dissertation show that weblogs are not often used as a primary tool to do one's work; however they capture rich traces of their authors' practices, providing researchers with an opportunity to study them. While I would caution against using weblogs as the only data source, they provides multiple opportunities to use *weblogs as a lens* to study practices of people who blog:

- Although information, captured in a weblog, does not provide a systematic overview of the phenomenon studied in a way a researcher-initiated diary would, it does not require an additional effort from the participant, providing an opportunity for unobtrusive observation.
- Weblogs can be used as a screening instrument to select study participants and to provide information about their personal contexts to guide further exploration, for example, when preparing for an interview with a weblog author.
- Content of specific weblog posts, as well as patterns in weblog artefacts over time, provide a way to aid reconstruction of related events and reflection on one's practices.

In cases where a research issue aligns with the interests of bloggers, they could be involved in it as *co-researchers*. While the most common way to involve research participants into research is providing them with an opportunity to comment on draft research results, I found that engaging bloggers in research on their own terms, by blogging it, was more beneficial in terms of quantity, quality and reach.

Blogging research requires breaking it into small pieces and getting outside of academic writing conventions, making it accessible for non-researchers. As a result, the chances of obtaining feedback are higher. While protecting research participants through anonymity is difficult to avoid when doing research on sensitive issues, I found that using real names when possible adds value too. If one's name appears in a blogpost, it is not only easier to find (since bloggers monitor who blogs about them), it is also more motivating to read, to comment on and to use for personal needs. As a result, more attention goes into it, which might lead to clarifications and additional insights.

Involving people in research in traditional ways almost always means that they have to be asked directly, based on guessing who might be interested, and how much. Blogging research in progress allows those who participate in it to regulate the degree of their involvement themselves. It also opens up

the research, providing people who are not directly engaged with a way to contribute. For example, in the case of the blog networking study, comments from bloggers I did not interview provided additional data and parallel interpretations, as well as help with the analysis and explaining the results theory-wise.

The results of this research describe the using of weblogs as a *sense-making tool* that provides a way to deal with unexpected or complex ideas by supporting articulation and organising ideas at an individual level, combined with distributed collaborative thinking in "sense-making networks". While I anticipated that I would be exploring this theme as part of the content of my research, I did not realise how much using the weblog as a sense-making instrument would become part of my research practices.

Sense-making through blogging is a flexible, intuitive and messy process, where the involvement of others is unplanned, casual, and fragmented. While those characteristics might suit specific research problems and circumstances well, they are not easy to accommodate in a methodologically sound way, since many strategies for ensuring research quality call for systematic and explicit measures that do not fit well with this way of working. This work provides an example of addressing this problem: using a weblog to provide a publicly available trace of research choices and interactions helps to *increase transparency and accountability*.

### 7.4.3 Crossing boundaries

The findings presented in this dissertation show the potential of blogging to provide connections across boundaries: to share private ideas in public, to connect across different domains and to transcend organisational borders. In addition, the research itself has been about crossing boundaries: bringing insights from different disciplines in order to understand blogging, experimenting with various research methodologies and blending together practices of the academic world and the blogging world.

Blogging, especially for those who enjoy boundary crossing, might be a challenge: other perspectives are within easy reach and every day brings a new batch of interesting bits to think about. However, it is easy to get lost, not knowing what your own perspective is:

*Web quote 7-1*  
[Third culture kids and research kunstkamera](#),  
 Mathemagenic,  
 14 March 2006

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Some time back we played with an idea of [blogging as distributed apprenticeship](#), articulating own practices and learning from others often transcending time, distance and disciplinary boundaries. For me blogging has been exactly that – an opportunity to lurk and learn, going beyond expertise and practices available in my immediate surroundings.

Now it bites back. For me reading weblogs of researchers coming from contexts very different from my own brought a permanent exposure to "other" research cultures while I'm still trying to figure out what are the norms and practices of my own tribe (and what is my own tribe, by the way?). In this respect I feel like a kid who moves between different cultures while growing up. I know a lot about

differences, fascinating local examples, needs to adapt and to speak the right language, but I don't know where I belong and which values to stick to. I know that whatever research paradigm you are in the consistency is important, but sometimes I wonder if I can find it wondering in my own *kunstkamera* with bits and pieces of research from other worlds...

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Hopping between perspectives does not bring deep insights by itself. Divergence needs to be complemented by convergence, perspective taking by perspective making (Boland & Tenkasi, 1995). In my own case, I had to learn to disengage from blogging to be able to find my own perspective, to go in-depth, to do research, to develop insights worth sharing across boundaries. While this worked for me, bloggers I studied had a more sustainable solution – changing their own information routines in order not to be distracted all the time and to combine a helicopter view across boundaries with zooming into specific issues in relation to one's current "perspective making". While boundary crossing is important, it adds more value when one is deeply rooted in a particular practice, either outside of blogging or as part of a densely-knit weblog community.

In addition, crossing boundaries brings personal challenges. For example, in my own case, belonging to two different worlds by being an academic and a blogger came with the anxieties of not fitting in. While the fear of not living up to the standards might be easily considered one's personal business, for one on the brink of completing PhD research it is different: living up to the standards does matter in order to be formally accepted as an academic. This is similar in any organisational setting – while blogging in relation to work might come from personal passions, in the end the work is evaluated by existing standards, into which blogging does not necessarily fit. The same is true when bridging other boundaries, such as those of disciplines or national cultures:<sup>119</sup>

*Uprootedness is an occupational hazard of brokering. Because communities of practices focus on their own enterprise, boundaries can lack the kind of negotiated understanding found at the core of practices about what constitutes competence. That makes it difficult to recognize or access the value of brokering. As a consequence, brokers sometimes interpret the uprootedness associated with brokering in personal terms of individual adequacy. Reinterpreting their experience in terms of the occupational hazards of brokering is useful both for them and for the communities involved. It can also allow brokers to recognize one another, seek companionship, and perhaps develop shared practices around the enterprise of brokering (Wenger, 1998, p.100).*

I hope that this work contributes to developing shared practices around boundary crossing that involves blogging. Knowledge workers who blog, can

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<sup>119</sup> E.g. Pollock & van Reken (2001) on uprootedness of *third culture kids*.

use it to demonstrate the value of blogging at work and to learn from practices of others in a similar position. Researchers, who decide to add blogging into their own work can use it to learn about added value and challenges that it brings and to continue experimenting with developing standards of doing and documenting research that would satisfy both, academic world and blogging world.

The research, presented in this dissertation indicates that blogging blurs boundaries between various contexts, making boundary crossing easier, less intentional and more embedded into everyday practices. While it is uncertain how much this should be attributed to blogging as such, and how much to the broader influences of information technologies on our lives and work, it is clear that understanding what boundary crossing as everyday practice means, and how to deal with challenges that it brings, is becoming essential.

# Summary

Since their early days, weblogs have been envisioned as a prototype technology for enabling grass-roots knowledge management. However, while experiments with blogging are underway in many businesses, research that could inform them is limited. In this dissertation early adopters of weblogs are studied to develop an understanding of uses of weblogs in relation to work, and to provide insights relevant to introducing blogging in knowledge-intensive environments.

This research focuses on describing the blogging practices of knowledge workers. It is guided by a framework that provides a view of what knowledge work entails and includes tasks, the essence of one's work, and enabling personal knowledge management activities, such as developing one's knowledge and relationships over time.

The studies, included in this dissertation are complementary, rather than comparative. Each is focused on identifying practices of bloggers in relation to one or more parts of the knowledge work framework and combines an analysis of weblog artefacts (text, links, tags) with participant observation and interviews. My own blogging practices are part of the approach: I study them in one of the cases, use my weblog as a reflexive journal to document the research process and integrate excerpts from it in the dissertation text.

The dissertation documents uses of a weblog as a personal knowledge base and an instrument for growing ideas from the early stages to a final product, as well as different uses of weblogs in a process of establishing and maintaining relationships. In both cases, blogging seems to be especially useful early in the process, helping to deal with fuzzy ideas and would-be relationships.

Although various conversational uses of weblogs are relatively well studied, this research adds insights on practices of participating in complex conversations distributed across posts and comments of multiple weblogs. The results describe not only the effort that goes into constructing these



conversations from fragments and keeping an overview of them, but also their importance for both growing ideas and developing interpersonal relations between bloggers.

The findings suggest several characteristics of weblogs that contribute to a broader understanding of weblogs as a medium: their simultaneous uses for publishing, conversations with self and interaction with specific others, switches between personal and social, as well as opportunities that weblogs provide in crossing various boundaries. While weblogs are used to work on specific tasks that match with those characteristics, the open-ended and public nature of blogging makes it more valuable for enabling work indirectly through supporting sense-making conversations, developing ideas over time and being able to tap into one's network when needed.

As well as providing an overview of work-related uses of weblogs in a variety of settings, this research documents the issues that arise as a result of those uses and gives insights about the changing nature of work that becomes increasingly digital, nomadic and networked. It documents various ways of integrating blogging with work, the tensions between personal and organisational perspectives around blogging, and individual choices that bloggers make to address these challenges. It shows the power of individual knowledge workers, who bypass existing authorities and use their networks to stay informed and to get things done; the blurred boundaries between what is personal and what is professional; and the growing need to know how to deal with transparency and fragmentation of one's work.

# Samenvatting

Sinds de introductie van weblogs worden deze gezien als één van de technologieën die kennismanagement mogelijk kunnen maken vanuit de basis van de organisatie. Hoewel veel wordt geëxperimenteerd met bloggen in organisaties, is er weinig onderzoek beschikbaar om deze bedrijven te ondersteunen. In dit proefschrift zijn ‘early adopters’ van weblogs geanalyseerd om inzicht te krijgen in het gebruik van weblogs rond werk en om relevante inzichten op te doen voor het introduceren van bloggen in kennisintensieve omgevingen.

Het onderzoek in dit proefschrift richt zich op het beschrijven van hoe kenniswerkers bloggen. Dit wordt gedaan aan de hand van een raamwerk dat een overzicht biedt van wat kenniswerk inhoudt in termen van activiteiten, de essentie van werk, en randvoorwaardelijke persoonlijke kennismanagement activiteiten, zoals het ontwikkelen van persoonlijke relaties en kennis.

De studies beschreven in dit proefschrift vullen elkaar aan, in plaats van dat zij een vergelijkende rol spelen. Elke studie richt zich op het identificeren van hoe kenniswerkers bloggen in relatie tot één of meerdere onderdelen binnen het gestelde kenniswerk raamwerk. Binnen elke studie wordt een analyse van weblog artefacten (tekst, links, tags) gecombineerd met het observeren en interviewen van proefpersonen. Mijn eigen blog maakt deel uit van deze aanpak: Ik bestudeer mijn blog in een van de casussen en gebruik mijn blog als een logboek, waarop ik kan reflecteren, om het proces te documenteren en waarvan ik stukken kan integreren in de tekst van mijn proefschrift.

Het proefschrift beschrijft de mogelijkheden die een weblog biedt als persoonlijke kennisbank en de rol die een weblog kan spelen in laten groeien van ideeën van concept tot eindproduct. Ook worden verschillende manieren waarop weblogs gebruikt worden in het proces van het aangaan en onderhouden van relaties beschreven. In beide gevallen blijkt bloggen vooral

in het begin van het proces extra nuttig te zijn, zodat omgegaan kan worden met vage ideeën en mogelijke relaties.

Alhoewel verschillende manieren waarop weblogs gebruikt worden om te converseren uitgebreid zijn beschreven in de literatuur, voegt dit onderzoek inzichten toe op het gebied van gebruiken in het deelnemen aan complexe conversaties verdeeld over verschillende posts en commentaren op verschillende weblogs. De resultaten laten niet allen zien welke inspanning het kost om deze gefragmenteerde conversaties tot één geheel te smeden, maar benadrukken ook het belang van deze conversaties om ideeën en relaties tussen bloggers te ontwikkelen.

De resultaten duiden op verscheidene karakteristieken van weblogs die bijdragen aan een breder begrip van weblogs als een medium. Dit zijn onder andere het gelijktijdig gebruik van weblogs om informatie te publiceren, om op informatie te reflecteren en om te communiceren met een specifieke doelgroep. Ook het schakelen tussen privé en sociaal, net als de mogelijkheden die weblogs bieden om verschillende grenzen te overschrijden zijn belangrijke karakteristieken. Terwijl weblogs worden gebruikt om te werken aan specifieke taken die overeenkomen met deze karakteristieken zorgen de vrije vorm van publiceren en openheid van het medium indirect voor een meerwaarde. Weblogs ondersteunen namelijk gefundeerde conversaties, het ontwikkelen van ideeën en de mogelijkheid om een netwerk van personen te benaderen wanneer dat nodig is.

Naast het verschaffen van een overzicht over het gebruiken van weblogs voor werkgerelateerde activiteiten in verschillende omgevingen, beschrijft dit onderzoek ook problemen die voortkomen uit het gebruiken van weblogs. Verder biedt dit onderzoek inzicht in veranderingen die optreden in werk als gevolg van de toenemende digitalisering, betrokkenheid in netwerken en mobiliteit. Het beschrijft verschillende manieren om bloggen met werken te integreren, het spanningsveld van persoonlijke en organizationele perspectieven rond bloggen, en de persoonlijke keuzes die bloggers maken om deze uitdagingen het hoofd te bieden. Verder laat het de kracht van individuele kenniswerkers zien, die bestaande machtstructuren uitdagen,. Zij gebruiken hun netwerk om geïnformeerd te blijven en om dingen voor elkaar te krijgen. Tot slot beschrijft het onderzoek hoe de grenzen tussen wat persoonlijk is en wat professioneel is vervagen en dat de noodzaak groeit om om te kunnen gaan met transparantie en fragmentatie van werk.

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- Yanow, D. (2006). *Dear Reviewer, Dear Author: Looking for Reflexivity and Other Hallmarks of Interpretive Research*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Marriott, Loews Philadelphia, and the Pennsylvania Convention Center. Philadelphia, PA. Retrieved June 22, 2007 from [http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p152878\\_index.html](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p152878_index.html)
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# Curriculum Vitae

Lilia Efimova, born 7 October 1975 in Moscow, Russia

## ***Education***

2003 – 2009	PhD, IVLOS Institute of Education, Utrecht University.
1998 – 1999	Master of Science in Educational and Training Systems Design, University of Twente. Graduated Cum Laude.
1992 – 1997	Mathematical Methods and Operation Investigation in Economics, Moscow State University of Economics, Statistics and Informatics (MESI). Graduated with Honour.

## ***Work experience***

Aug 2001 – Present	Researcher at Novay (formerly known as Telematica Instituut), studying social media, changing workplace, knowledge and learning.
Jul 2005 – Sep 2005	Intern at Microsoft Research, Redmond, studying weblog adoption at Microsoft.
Aug 2000 – Dec 2001	Teacher/trainer at MESI. Design, development and facilitation of courses for the MSc program "Human Resources Development" and teacher training programs.
Aug 1999 – Mar 2001	Training&Development manager at MESI. Development and implementation of teacher professional development programs, training-related policy-making, internal consulting regarding ICT use for teaching.
Mar 1995 – Jul 1998	Project manager at NGO "Children's Order of Charity", managing leadership training program "School of humanity" for youth clubs across Russia working on social integration of young people with disabilities.
Apr 1993 – Jul 1998	Social work/teaching/policy development at School "Podderzka" for children with disabilities.



### ***Selected academic publications***

- Efimova, L. (2009). Weblog as a personal thinking space. Forthcoming in *Proceedings of Hypertext 2009*. New York, NY, USA: ACM.
- Efimova, L. (2008). *Blending blogging into an academic text*. Paper presented at the workshop "IN THE GAME: Ethnographic relationships, mediation and knowledge", Internet Research 9.0, Copenhagen, Denmark, 15-18 October 2008.
- Efimova, L. (2008). Review Article: Bloggers and 'producers': Henry Jenkins, Fans, Bloggers and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture. New York and London: New York University Press, 2006. v + 277 pp. ISBN 0--8147--4285--8, \$21.00 (pbk) Axel Bruns and Joanne Jacobs (eds), *Uses of Blogs*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2006. vii + 267 pp. ISBN 0--8204--8124--6, \$32.95 (pbk). *New Media and Society*, 10(3), 529-535. doi:10.1177/1461444808089418
- Efimova, L. & Ben Lassoued, A. (2008). Weblog-mediated relationship: a co-constructed narrative. In S.Holland (Ed.), *Remote relationships in a small world* (pp. 137-154). Peter Lang Publishing.
- Efimova, L. & Grudin, J. (2007). Crossing boundaries: A case study of employee blogging. In *Proceedings of the 40th Annual Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences* (p. 86). IEEE Computer Society. doi:10.1109/HICSS.2007.159
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in Russia, I studied economics and human resource development and worked designing, facilitating and managing learning programs in education and non-profit sectors. Now living in the Netherlands, I work as a researcher at Novay studying social media, changing workplace, knowledge and learning. In my work I bring together my experiences of facilitating learning and managing change, my interest in technology and my passion for understanding how people work.

Blogging is part of my work since 2002, as a research topic and as a personal practice. While studying uses of weblogs in relation to knowledge work, I also experiment with blogging as an instrument for doing and reporting research.

I'm online at [blog.mathemagenic.com](http://blog.mathemagenic.com) and open for a conversation.

*Lilia Efimova*



# PASSION AT WORK: BLOGGING PRACTICES OF KNOWLEDGE WORKERS

*Lilia Efimova*

As other social media weblogs hold the promise to change the way in which work is done. In this dissertation early adopters of weblogs are studied to provide insights relevant to introducing blogging in knowledge-intensive environments.

The research focuses on describing blogging practices of knowledge workers and challenges that arise when weblogs are used in relation to work. It includes studies that combine an analysis of weblog text and links with participant observation, interviews and blogging about work-in-progress.

The findings suggest that while in some cases weblogs are used to perform one's core tasks, the open-ended and public nature of blogging makes it more valuable for enabling work indirectly through supporting sense-making conversations, developing ideas over time and being able to tap into one's network when needed.

By describing the practices of knowledge workers who blog, this research provides a view into the changing nature of work that becomes increasingly digital, nomadic and networked. It shows the power of individual knowledge workers, who bypass existing authorities and use their networks to stay informed and to get things done. It documents the blurred boundaries between what is personal and what is professional, as well as the growing need to know how to deal with transparency and fragmentation of one's work.

