

# Post-Katrina Citizen Media: Speaking NOLA

Maria T. Brodine

---

Much of the existing literature about the practice of blogging, citizen media/journalism, and other online “counterpublics” assumes that the emergence of a globalized “digital culture” is inherently democratic due to the fact that any participant is allowed “to post and upload files, information, and news without a formal editorial moderation or filtering process.”<sup>1</sup> Recent ethnographic studies are beginning to explore the political and economic aspects of the World Wide Web—and its relationship with offline activities—in more depth, highlighting the complexities of digital culture.<sup>2</sup> This ethnographic case study of post-Katrina blogging in New Orleans seeks to further problematize the notion of independent media as inherently democratic or exclusively digital. I argue that by taking a material culture studies/actor network theory approach—which means, in part, acknowledging that no technologies are indifferent, and that all are political<sup>3</sup>—we can better understand how bloggers and blogs, through a kind of political economy generated by practices such as “linking,” form a social hierarchy, essentially instituting a “peer-review process” by which certain blogs or bloggers become more reputable than others. Secondly, I use ethnographic data to show how certain professionalization practices within an emergent “independent media” draw from other systems of evaluation common to the mainstream news media and the publishing industry, in part to advance citizen journalists’ success in challenging dominant news sources. Finally, I argue that if independent media are in truth linked “to [offline] trends and developments predating the World Wide Web,”<sup>4</sup> it is essential to understand how the issue of real-world access to computers, high-

---

<sup>1</sup> Mark Deuze, “Participation, Remediation, Bricolage: Considering Principal Components of a Digital Culture,” *The Information Society*, vol. 22 (2006), 63-75. Deuze is building on the scholarship of Bowman and Willis (2003) and (2005), Hyde (2002), Gillmor (2004).

<sup>2</sup> See Tyrone Adams and Stephen A. Smith, *Electronic Tribes: the Virtual Worlds of Geeks, Gamers, Shamans, and Scammers* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008); Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); and Celia Pearce and Artemesia, *Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Deuze, 65.

speed Internet, and other amenities results not in “widespread integration of ... [the] Internet in all aspects of everyday life”<sup>5</sup> but in the generation of a more complicated scenario, one in which the Internet democratizes information and knowledge production for some while producing certain exclusionary practices inherent in computer-mediated, network, and link-based activities. Such activities may render offline publics invisible and unaccounted for less in citizen media accounts themselves than in the academic and journalistic discourses engaging with those accounts, as the personal and local stories reported by citizen media enter into a political economy ranging beyond the local.

When Hurricane Katrina hit the New Orleans area on August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2005, CNN conjured visions of a contraflow interstate turned into a parking lot of cars, stories about snipers and “looting,” aerial photographs of people trapped on roofs, panoramas of foundations underwater and roofs in flames, and reports of botched rescue efforts. Eighty-five percent of the Greater New Orleans area was flooded, with water as deep as 25 feet in some areas. While the hurricane did not hit the city directly, the enormous storm surge resulted in over fifty levee breaches and instances of overtopping. Subsequent reports called Katrina “one of the nation’s worst disasters ever... [caused by] engineering and engineering-related policy failures.”<sup>6</sup> Casualties settled at the indeterminate number of 1,836 in Mississippi and Louisiana (not counting the missing). But what caused the flooding was not out yet in the news in late August and early September. Instead, as is often the case, the same images and terrible stories repeated over and over again, their content limited by

---

<sup>5</sup> Deuze, 66.

<sup>6</sup> This is based on a number of extensive engineering reports and independent peer reviews conducted concerning the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. These include Christine F. Andersen, Jurjen A. Battjes, David E. Daniel, Billy Edge, William Espey, Jr., Robert B. Gilbert, Thomas L. Jackson, David Kennedy, Dennis S. Mileti, James K. Mitchell, Peter Nicholson, Clifford A. Pugh, P.E., George Tamaro, Jr., and Robert Traver. “The New Orleans Hurricane Protection System: What Went Wrong and Why: A Report by the American Society of Civil Engineers.” *Hurricane Katrina External Review Panel*. (Reston: ASCE Publications, 2007). See also R.B. Seed, R. G. Bea, R. I. Abdelmalak, A. G. Athanasopoulos, G. P. Boutwell, J. D. Bray, J.-L. Briaud, C. Cheung, D. Cobos-Roa, J. Cohen-Waeber, B. D. Collins, L. Ehrensing, D. Farber, M. Hanemann, L. F. Harder, K. S. Inkabi, A. M. Kammerer, D. Karadeniz, R.E. Kayen, R. E. S. Moss, J. Nicks, S. Nimmala, J. M. Pestana, J. Porter, K. Rhee, M. F. Riemer, K. Roberts, J. D. Rogers, R. Storesund, A. V. Govindasamy, X. Vera-Grunauer, J. E. Wartman, C. M. Watkins, E. Wenk Jr., and S. C. Yim. “Investigation of the Performance of the New Orleans Flood Protection Systems in Hurricane Katrina on August 29, 2005: Final Report.” *Digital Commons* (Available at <http://works.bepress.com/rmoss/17/>, 31 July 2006) and Ivor van Heerden and Mike Bryan, *The Storm: What Went Wrong and Why During Hurricane Katrina—The Inside Story from One Louisiana Scientist* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006).

the inability of news anchors and their equipment to access locations and recover technical specifics.

Looking for more information, I found something called a “NOLA blog,” which led to the discovery of “the NOLA blogs,” most of which began during the immediate aftermath of Katrina. By 2006, they were booming. These residents of New Orleans called themselves “NOLA bloggers,” “netizens,” and “citizen media” or “citizen journalists.” Citizen journalists are defined by proponents as members of the public “playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information...to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires”<sup>7</sup>—that is, producers of citizen media. Thus defined, NOLA bloggers wrote about the process of evacuation (or escape) and return, the role of mainstream media, the ongoing devastation after the storm, the failure of the levees, local and national politics, and their individual and collective battles with insurance companies and with FEMA over the provision of temporary trailers and funds. Over time, while most mainstream news outlets still used the term “natural disaster,” many NOLA bloggers recast the disaster as a “federal flood” and “engineering disaster” rather than a natural one, stressing their views not only about the inadequacy of the rescue response but about the failure of the political process to forestall a preventable engineering disaster. Immediately evident in these responses was the degree to which the bloggers linked to one another online, not only in individual posts, but in long blogrolls—that is, lists of related blogs under headings such as “NOLA bloggers” or “citizen media.” By emerging as citizen media, the bloggers cast themselves as on-the-ground journalists that could provide a more authentic, locally-based kind of news that often challenged or added depth and personal experience to mainstream news reports. Their accuracy as citizen media seemed to depend not only on reporting about Katrina, the aftermath, and related issues, but also about daily life in New Orleans and why it was a city worth rebuilding. Their accuracy also depended on their valuation of one another, first through the normal online processes of searching and linking, and later through offline

---

<sup>7</sup> S. Bowman and C. Willis, “We Media: How Audiences are Shaping the Future of News and Information,” *The Media Center at the American Press Institute* (2003); and Jay Rosen, “The People Formerly Known as the Audience,” *PressThink* (27 June 2006), [http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2006/06/27/ppl\\_frmr.html#](http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2006/06/27/ppl_frmr.html#).

conferencing, oratory, awards, informal parties, and other professionalizing activities.

## **SPEAKING FOR NOLA: BLOGS, BLOGGERS, AND THE VOICELESS**

Which came first, the blog or the blogger? On May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2006, Dangerblond wrote<sup>8</sup>:

This weekend, I...met some of the New Orleans bloggers who have been nothing but words on a monitor to me until now... The mainstream media's coverage of the recent elections and the congressional panty-twist involving William Jefferson have left me more convinced than ever that if you want to know what is going on in New Orleans, one of America's greatest and most newsworthy cities, you need to read the blogs. People just don't get it unless they live here. This is a big American city. Everything that has happened here can also happen in your city. Everything that has happened here is important to you. In our fate, it is possible to see your future. If you want to know what the results of your compact with the American government will be, take a look at the loneliest, most anonymous and over-looked person in New Orleans.

A number of important points can be gleaned from this post. First, when Dangerblond refers to "the New Orleans bloggers" and "the blogs," she does not mean everyone who blogged about Katrina or about New Orleans, but about a specific group of residents that linked to one another and, by the date of this post, were beginning to meet and organize in person. By this point, Dangerblond herself was sharing mutual links with other members and receiving links from a great many others. The next important point is that most of these bloggers began blogging independently of one another, then met each other online through a process of searching, following existing links, and adding these links to their own blogs. Then, members of this group of bloggers met each other offline, organizing events

---

<sup>8</sup> Dangerblond (29 May 2006), <http://www.dangerblond.org>.

known as “geek dinners” and, later, a conference called “Rising Tide” that attracted prominent speakers like actor and comedian Harry Shearer.<sup>9</sup> Third, echoing other NOLA bloggers, Dangerblond wrote as if “the blogs” channel the voice of New Orleans. A similar sentiment was expressed by the author of the *Da Po’ Blog*, who had this to say on October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2005 at 8:59 AM, upon returning to New Orleans after evacuation<sup>10</sup>:

### **Speaking of New Orleans. . .**

I started this weblog four days before I packed my family in a car and ran from a storm called Katrina. I wanted to speak for my city, New Orleans. I wanted to promote what was going right in my city, shine a light on what was going wrong, and hold the powerful accountable for the plight of the powerless. While I believe these goals to be valiant before the storm, I see them as essential after Katrina. The problems of my city are now out in the open. The solutions are scattered somewhere in the debris that still lines our streets weeks after the hurricane made landfall. As New Orleanians return to their city, they are going to talk about what happened. And they are going to talk about it like only New Orleanians can. And they are going to find solutions like only New Orleanians can. Down here, we speak a different language. We speak New Orleans. On this blog, I’m going to speak New Orleans. Feel free to listen.

With an authenticity gained from lived experience, many NOLA bloggers contrasted their work with mainstream news outlets. They often wrote about topics that are more broadly about daily life in New Orleans. While Dangerblond wrote about evacuating as well as a host of other Katrina-related experiences, much of her blog—which dates back to February, 2006—is dedicated to describing her participation in preparing and designing for events and festivals such as Mardi Gras.

Margaret Saizan, a blogger who describes herself as a citizen journalist (but not quite a NOLA blogger, since she does not live in

---

<sup>9</sup> Harry Shearer, himself a blogger, is a popular celebrity in New Orleans. He recently directed a full-length Katrina-genre documentary, explaining why Katrina is an engineering disaster, entitled “The Big Uneasy.”

<sup>10</sup> da po’ blog, <http://dapoblog.blogspot.com/>.

New Orleans), lives in Baton Rouge. This fact enabled her to begin her “storm journal,” called *Beyond Katrina*, prior to the storm’s landing. Because she had a generator at her home she was able to post throughout the crisis, and during the night of the storm she stayed up all night posting updates about what the weather conditions were like and the kinds of things her neighborhood was experiencing. Later, as news reports began to come in, Saizan posted pictures and links to news sites, reports she had heard from other people, and reflections on her own jumbled emotions surrounding the catastrophe. People began to post comments on her blog asking for help, hoping that readers would help them find their loved ones. Saizan also posted emails that she received. This kind of activity was sustained throughout September, the busiest month for Katrina-related blogging.<sup>11</sup> Later she posted on a greater variety of issues, addressing the task of the rebuilding of New Orleans while sharing humorous captions and articles and featuring “guest authors.” *Beyond Katrina* won an award from the Society for New Communications Research in 2006. When asked about the success of her blog, Saizan responded<sup>12</sup>:

I’ve really been authentic as a writer and that piques people’s interest. That’s also what makes blogs different from other modes of media—the authenticity—their popularity in general is attributed to this... Best I can say is that I’ve approached my blog very professionally even with its humanitarian focus. But I also have a lot of training and experience in the areas that are important to success in publishing.

Some bloggers, like the author of *Da Po’ Blog*, saw their role as oppositional to traditional news outlets, while others saw theirs as supplemental. Saizan saw her work as supplementary to the mainstream press, filling a crucial niche coming out of the “heart of experience.” She also noted the importance of news outlets, however, saying that since bloggers depend on external news sources, linking to and centralizing information, blogs would not exist without traditional news outlets. In fact, she said during this interview that she expected the traffic on her blog to “taper off about the same time

---

<sup>11</sup> Technorati, “Web Statistics: September 2005,” <http://technorati.com/>.

<sup>12</sup> This information was gleaned in a 2006 interview with Margaret Saizan, as well as from her blog *Beyond Katrina: The Voice of Hurricane and Disaster Recovery*, <http://www.hurricane-katrina.org/>.

Katrina left the front pages of the big newspapers” but that people kept coming, so she kept offering content. In 2006, she said that it is important to continue providing coverage of Katrina because “we’ve got about a decade of recovery ahead of us.”

Saizan echoed several other prominent bloggers who alluded to blogging as a professional endeavor requiring specific skills, perhaps as a way to counter certain criticisms of citizen journalism as a de-professionalization of reporting.<sup>13</sup> In addition to publishing skills, design was crucial: she mentioned the overall format and appearance as important, as well as “framing Katrina in the context of a bigger picture” and offering a variety of types of entries. Other bloggers with an interest in the professionalization of citizen media include Loki of *Humid City*<sup>14</sup> and Alan Gutierrez of *Think NOLA*.<sup>15</sup> They have trained aspiring NOLA bloggers, sharing technical, design, and networking skills that would help bloggers to professionalize their content and appearance.

The subject of the mainstream news media came up in many other blogs. Jeffrey, who authors *Library Chronicles*, addressed the tardiness of corporate media in catching up with the level of devastation faced by New Orleans. In the following post he linked to a CNN article he considered inadequate as “the official version”<sup>16</sup>:

### **The big disconnect on New Orleans**

[link] The official version; then there’s the [link] in-the-trenches version

Interestingly, NOLA bloggers often link to outside sources such as CNN and then provide commentary on them. As Saizan pointed out, bloggers act as centralizers of information. However, another function of the citizen journalist is clearly to act as a media critic. Many provide an alternative to the “official version” of events by linking to independent news outlets and local organizations, demonstrating alliances with them. In some cases NOLA bloggers were able to cover stories that later filtered into mainstream media.

---

<sup>13</sup> T. Grubisch, “Grassroots Journalism: Actual Content vs. Shining Ideal,” *USC Annenberg, Online Journalism Review* (6 Oct. 2005) and “Potempkin Village Redux,” *USC Annenberg, Online Journalism Review* (19 Nov. 2006). See also V. Maher, “Citizen Journalism is Dead,” *New Media Lab, School of Journalism & Media Studies* (South Africa: Rhodes University, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> *Humid City: Handing New Orleans a Megaphone Since 2005*, <http://humidcity.com/>.

<sup>15</sup> Alan Gutierrez, *Think NOLA*, <http://thinknola.com/>.

<sup>16</sup> Jeffrey, “How to Help,” *Library Chronicles* (2 Sept. 2005), <http://librarychronicles.blogspot.com/>.

For example, NOLA blogger Michael Homan described the “camps” that he experienced firsthand while trying to leave the city in the post-Katrina chaos.<sup>17</sup> According to Homan, people who tried to evacuate on foot from New Orleans at this time were denied the right to pass parish lines by armed police officers, leaving them with no choice but to stay in “camps” near checkpoints that lacked shelter, food, and water. Referencing the same phenomenon, Jeffrey posted in *Library Chronicles*: “The piggishness and inhumanity on display here is unforgivable. First, the poorest and most helpless are left behind to die... then when they are reluctantly allowed to escape they are treated as a threat to ‘assets.’ Someone should have to answer for this. I doubt anyone will”.<sup>18</sup>

Ironically, many of those who suffered from the levee breaches and poor evacuation planning belong to the same demographics that are underrepresented in Internet use. Some NOLA bloggers have reflected on this irony, while still expressing the need to represent “the voiceless.” Many of them belong to a more privileged demographic: they are white, middle class, and identify somewhere left of center in American politics. Despite their claims to authenticity and the ability to “speak New Orleans,” their demographic reality reflects the statistics of Internet use, which privileges those who have the time and technology to blog.<sup>19</sup> In addition, their own linking patterns demonstrate a tendency to organize along ideological lines, in accordance with similarity of experiences and beliefs. This reality points to the definitional problems associated with categories such as producers, consumers, and “publics” or “citizens,” evoking the need to understand blogs not only in terms of their human “authors” and audiences, but also as forms of communication shaped by many actors, and composed of historically, socially, and technologically-situated materials, including but not limited to images, code, and computers.

## BLOGS AS VISUAL HIERARCHY; LINKS AS CURRENCY

---

<sup>17</sup> Michael Homan, “One of the Millions of Hurricane Katrina Stories,” *Michael Homan* (5 Sept. 2005), <http://michaelhoman.blogspot.com/search?q=camps>.

<sup>18</sup> Jeffrey, “How to Help” *Library Chronicles* (2 Sept. 2005), <http://librarychronicles.blogspot.com/>.

<sup>19</sup> Kenneth R. Wilson, Jennifer S. Walin, and Christa Reiser, “Social Stratification and the Digital Divide,” *Social Science Computer Review* (2003), 21-33.



It is easy, at first glance, to see blogs as text-based phenomena. However, the properties that make blogs distinct from other forms of media have to do with a particular form of visual arrangement. This form allows the presentation of an interface that mediates complex and dynamic interactions between the blogger, the blog (as a representation projected by the blogger in concert with a computer and HTML code), and an audience (whose members connect with one another through a sociotechnological network whose relative center is the blog in question). It should also be noted that in addition to texts, bloggers often post a range of embedded media including film clips, photographs, and audio tracks. Thus, it becomes clear that blogs are not only textual, but function as visual maps; they are hybrid forms dependent upon the use and arrangement of many bits of standard HTML code known as "links." Thus blogs can be understood as expressions of a database—a "structured collection of data"<sup>20</sup>—combining heterogenous elements linked to one another and to other sites in such a way as to facilitate the production of non-linear textual and visual narratives.

The entire Internet depends on the process of linking, but the blog arguably takes the most advantage of, or depends the most upon, the dynamic nature of links. On traditional web sites, links hold the structure of the site together, allowing visual and topical organization while still connecting separate pages together or allowing the viewer to skip from the top to the bottom of a page. However, these sites tend to be static, lacking conductivity for interaction. Blogs, in contrast, are adapted for constant change and interaction with other sites, blogs, and home computers through the process of in-text linking, maintaining blogrolls, and exchanging comments on individual posts. This structure allows a blogger to write new material easily and to engage in direct and indirect conversations with other bloggers and with her audience, thus producing both visual and textual narratives. According to Dave Winer<sup>21</sup>:

A weblog is a hierarchy of text, images, media objects and data, arranged chronologically, that can be viewed in an HTML browser...with a human guide who you get to know. There are many guides to choose from, each

---

<sup>20</sup> Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2001), 218-228.

<sup>21</sup> Dave Winer, "The History of Weblogs," *Weblogs.com News*, <http://oldweblogsocomblog.scripting.com/historyOfWeblogs>.

develops an audience, and there's also comradery and politics between the people who run weblogs, they point to each other, in all kinds of structures, graphs, loops, etc.

Other important hierarchies are evident in certain features and properties of the blog form. Blog posts are arranged chronologically, but with the most recent post on top, emphasizing the importance of the present moment and visually presenting the past as a causal progression (or regression) of events. A blog acquires status with age and with frequency of posts. Usually miniature calendars in the margin of the blog offer access to older posts while displaying the longevity of the blog. "Keyword" or "tag" clouds are another important feature of some blogs. These are visual representations of a simple quantitative measure, illustrating which tags are most popular by making words appear large or small relative to one another according to the frequency with which the blogger used them to label posts. Clicking on a single tag will generate a link to all of the posts that are labelled by that tag. Thus, tags help to shape the frequency and diction around certain topics and reveal inherent hierarchies, which shape alliances and readership.

The act of pointing and connecting, or linking, across blogs proves vital to NOLA bloggers, since this is how they generate popularity, demonstrate alliances, and create cross-narratives around keywords. When someone links to another web site, they send a portion of their own traffic there, contributing to the number of hits that site receives and increasing its rank in search engine results. In general, blogs are dependent on shared traffic: their visual formatting is optimized to encourage reciprocal promotion. Bloggers also link to one another's individual posts, thereby exchanging traffic. By way of example, Jeffrey of *Library Chronicles* often wrote posts including links to Oyster's blog *Your Right Hand Thief*. On September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2005, the following exchange occurred<sup>22</sup>:

**What you can do for me**

To all my friends out there wondering if they can do anything for Lovely, Pearlgirl, or Oyster: first, thank you for your kind offers. Second, I'll just say: please, give the maximum you can to the hurricane relief [link] charity of your choice. We're fine. We were able to evacuate, and

---

<sup>22</sup> Oyster, "What You Can Do for Me," *Your Right Hand Thief* (2 Sept. 2005), <http://righthandthief.blogspot.com/>.

move in with my folks in Florida... We probably lost everything in our house, but we are insured and will manage to rebuild and get on with our lives... In short, you can help us most by contributing to the organizations who are providing relief to New Orleans and the rest of the Gulf South. They are the ones who need money, and we dearly appreciate anything you can do to help out. (Oyster 12:19pm)

**[link to Oyster's 12:19pm post] How to help**

What Oyster said. I am lucky. He is lucky. We have families and support. Many many others do not. Oyster linked to billmon's list. Donate. Volunteer. NO needs you. (Jeffrey 1:04pm)

As I have mentioned, one of the main ways in which bloggers display alliances is through blogrolls. While several dozen NOLA bloggers link to one another consistently in a democratic and reciprocal fashion, there are a few blogs that retain very small blogrolls. In the blogosphere, not all links are created equal. A blog with a small blogroll may be high in status, a fact that may be reflected in the author's careful reservation of links. Often such a blog will receive a great deal of links from other blogs, but the relationship is not reciprocal.<sup>23</sup> For example, Karen Gadbois, a citizen journalist known for scaring local politicians into action, has a small blogroll on two of her sites (*Squandered Heritage* and *Northwest Carrollton*).<sup>24</sup> Receiving a link from Gadbois would be highly prized, but nearly all of the other NOLA bloggers link to at least one of her blogs and occasionally reference her work.

NOLA bloggers often post other links that interest them, presenting their associations with political networks and alliances beyond the topic at hand. For example, following links may lead to subjects such as holistic health, leftist politics, conservatism, or gun rights. Howie Luvzus, a NOLA blogger, links to such sites as *Jesus Politics* and *Militant Moderate Musings*.<sup>25</sup> His political inclinations contrast with those of many NOLA bloggers, most of whom link to

---

<sup>23</sup> Stephen Ornes, "Map: Welcome to the Blogosphere," *Technology/Computers, Discover Magazine* (20 Apr. 2007), <http://discovermagazine.com/2007/may/map-welcome-to-the-blogosphere>.

<sup>24</sup> Karen Gadbois, *Northwest Carrollton*, <http://northwestcarrollton.org/>, and *Squandered Heritage*, <http://www.squanderedheritage.com/>.

<sup>25</sup> Howie Luvzus, <http://howieluvzus.com/>.

leftist or liberal sites of various kinds (and who, importantly, sometimes do not link to Luvzus' blog or include it in their blogrolls). In this way bloggers use their front pages to connect their citizen media projects with other causes, to expand their network according to common interests and experiences, and to promote the "market value" of their own and other blogs.

In the case of the NOLA bloggers, Internet connectivity facilitated the formation of a citizen media enclave along decidedly political lines, simultaneously defining a frame for who and what could legitimately represent New Orleans and the post-Katrina experience there. As Couldry has pointed out, much existing media theory has the tendency to portray various kinds of media as if they "were the natural channels of social life and social engagement, rather than highly specific and institutionally focused means for representing social life and channeling social participation."<sup>26</sup> By engaging more critically with various types of media—including blogs—as hierarchical, historically-constructed forms that navigate highly politicized networks made up of asymmetrical links, it becomes possible to understand how they function in relation to other online, and offline, publics. Understanding them in this way also enables us to move beyond the blogs as mere expressions of a database. Following the blogs, we may go offline, returning to New Orleans.

## **GOING OFFLINE (BUT STILL BLOGGING): RISING TIDE, THE CONFERENCE**

NOLA bloggers in particular demonstrate the way in which an online network can function as a locally situated phenomenon, as well as a means of generating new associations within a particular geographic location—in this case, the city of New Orleans. Subsequent to establishing their own blogs and connecting with one another online, NOLA bloggers organized offline events, including the annual conference "Rising Tide." I met some of the NOLA bloggers in person on August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2009, a few days before the fourth anniversary of Katrina, at a mixer held the night before "Rising Tide IV: Sinking to New Heights."<sup>27</sup> While most people wrote their blog handles

---

<sup>26</sup> Nick Couldry, "Actor Network Theory and Media: Do They Connect and On What Terms?," in Hepp et. al, eds., *Cultures of Connectivity* (2004).

<sup>27</sup> *Rising Tide IV: Sinking to New Heights*.

under their formal names, I wrote “anthropologist” on my name tag and entered the mixer. Finding it difficult to read the name tags, I asked blogger Adrastos if he could point out some of the bloggers to me. Having read their blogs, I still couldn’t match a face with a name. “It’s best just to go up and introduce yourself to people,” he said, and described how the bloggers had met each other in the same manner. The emphasis on face-to-face interaction surprised me. Later, a blogger informed me that at previous mixers, participants didn’t mix real names with blogging identities on their name tags, in order to preserve anonymity for those who wanted it. “But we kind of gave up on that; it became irrelevant,” he said. A blogger by the name of Tim told me that face-to-face interaction was becoming more and more important among the bloggers. “Now, one of us will post something and then we’ll call each other up and talk about it. Before, all of that used to happen in the comments section.”<sup>28</sup>

At “Rising Tide IV” there were several breaks in between panels for the purpose of “mixing and mingling.” While computers were ubiquitously present throughout the audience and among the panelists—as various bloggers blogged in real time about the conference, reporting on the content of the panels—a significant portion of the conference took place in the lobby area, where people gathered in groups to talk. Panel topics included the preservation of New Orleans culture (including food and music), sports, and local politics, most specifically the upcoming mayoral race. Several bloggers expressed a desire to get more involved with other community organizations and projects whose missions center around post-Katrina recovery and the celebration of New Orleans culture.

What this development of local presence and engagement reveals is that the NOLA blogs, now an established enclave of independent media, are heavily imbricated with offline experiences and modes of cultural production. For an outsider such as myself, and for the NOLA bloggers and their audiences immediately after Katrina, the medium known as blogging afforded an opportunity to effectively shrink the distance between New Orleans and other publics, reshaping dialogue around the Katrina disaster by identifying local narratives as more “authentic” reporting than those considered mainstream. The material form of the blog and its home, the Internet, helped to shape the way in which these citizen journalists defined themselves and organized with one another. This reliance upon and interaction with the “real world”—as well as the

---

<sup>28</sup> Personal Communication.

hierarchical, link-based nature of blogs—effaces traditional notions of “virtuality,” a term that has been used to describe how new media “seemed able to constitute spaces or places apart from the rest of social life.”<sup>29</sup> In the midst of crisis, devastation, and a complete lack of journalistic infrastructure, NOLA bloggers were able to take advantage of lived experience and construct themselves as “obligatory passage points”<sup>30</sup> for those interested in the experiences of post-Katrina New Orleans. This means that while NOLA bloggers most likely did not displace CNN and other mainstream outlets as sources of news about New Orleans, they did provide an alternative as well as a source of criticism, and have helped to complicate the authenticity assumed by professionally-trained journalists, favoring those reporting from on-the-ground, everyday experience. Having done this, they have then redirected their newfound authority to advance and continue their reportage in the New Orleans post-Katrina landscape, thus shaping recovery efforts in important ways and successfully contributing to the definition of Katrina as an engineering, rather than a natural, disaster. As the author of *Cliff's Crib* said recently<sup>31</sup>:

For most of 2010 I was thinking about closing down The Crib. I was going to turn the lights off, put up some plywood and lock it up. I was just going to keep cutting the grass because you know New Orleans has a blight problem. It seems like every time I get to the point of deciding something happens. The first time I decided to do it the Saints made the Superbowl and I ended up on CNN. The next time I made up my mind I ended up in a book. Then I got an award. It fits my life pattern that the time I decide to stop I end up with more people following me... I never thought New Orleans would be the microcosm of America's issues. We always had the crime and poverty thing covered but after Katrina we have just about everything covered. We have crime, poverty,

---

<sup>29</sup> Daniel Miller and Don Slater. *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach* (New York: Berg, 2001).

<sup>30</sup> Michel Callon and Bruno Latour, “Unscrewing the Big Leviathan: How Actors Macro-Structure Reality and How Sociologists Help them Do So,” in Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel, eds., *Advances in Social Theory and Methodology* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 277-203. See also Michel Callon, “The Sociology of an Actor-Network: The Case of the Electric Vehicle,” in Callon, Law, and Macmillan, eds., *Mapping the Dynamics of Science and Technology* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986), 19-34.

<sup>31</sup> Clifton, “Going Through the Process Again,” *Cliff's Crib* (17 Nov. 2010), <http://cliffscrib.blogspot.com/>.

racism, class warfare, urban renewal, gentrification, taxes, budget issues, charter schools, school reform, the environment, and corruption... We have everything you need to keep a blog going for years to come.

While the blogs seem well established as a new “voice of New Orleans,” and thus able to speak about “a microcosm of America’s issues,” there is still a question about how that voice will continue to be shaped by the demographics of access not only in readership but in the ability to post. The development of various other new media and communication awards (including the Ashley Morris award at the annual Rising Tide conference), the business of professional web tools like WordPress, and the existence of professional bloggers and trainers indicate the burgeoning development of a political economy with a full spectrum of participants who must be “educated” in order to participate effectively.<sup>32</sup> Scholars should thus be careful to refute the notion that there is automatically a “decentralized, interactive, and plural Internet culture.”<sup>33</sup> The question must be asked and pursued: in the process of voicing, whose voice is excluded? More broadly, who, and what, is Internet or digital culture? A more critical question follows naturally: if access to the Internet enables wider participation in contemporary debates, or mobilizes action during crisis, how should the question of Internet access and training be addressed?

---

<sup>32</sup> Ashley Morris was a popular, outspoken local blogger who passed away in 2008. His blog is still available for public view at <http://ashleymorris.typepad.com/>. John Goodman's character in the HBO series *Treme* was loosely based on Morris' personality and life. More information can be found at 'Blogger Ashley Morris provides some of the words for John Goodman's HBO 'Treme' character' by Dave Walker, *Times-Picayune* (April 9, 2010). Online link to article, [http://www.nola.com/treme-hbo/index.ssf/2010/04/blogger\\_ashley\\_morris\\_provides.html](http://www.nola.com/treme-hbo/index.ssf/2010/04/blogger_ashley_morris_provides.html).

<sup>33</sup> Deuze, 65.