

# Online Journaling as a Federated Community of Practice

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## Introduction

The recent years have seen rapid increase in the role that technology plays in mediating social interactions. From newsgroups and email, to instant messaging, SMS and blogs, every year brings new forms of technology that offer us new ways to interact with each other. How do people make sense of those new tools and decide how to incorporate them into their lives?

This paper focuses on online journaling.<sup>1</sup> An online journal is similar to a paper diary in that it consists of dated “entries” that one can browse chronologically. However, while the authors can keep the content of their online journals private, as is typically done with paper diaries, online journaling also allow them to *share* their entries, either making them altogether “public” (visible to anyone who knows the URL of the journal) or just visible to specific users of the site. Visitors can then leave comments on the entries, providing a degree of interactivity. Journaling websites are increasingly popular among high

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1 Online journals are also occasionally referred to as “blogs.” However, some people prefer to draw a distinction between “journals” and “blogs,” reserving the term “blogging” for a related but arguably distinct practice. Popular “journaling” websites, such as Xanga (xanga.com) or LiveJournal (livejournal.com) typically integrate each user’s journal into a larger community site and stress “friends” links between journals. Xanga and LiveJournal appear to be widely used by high school and college students. “Blogging” tools, such as Blogger, WordPress, or MovableType, produce stand-alone websites, often more professional in their appearance and tend to be more popular among older and more serious users (including some 2004 presidential candidates). One can try to make generalizations comparing blogs and journals (e.g. “blogs” often seem more oriented towards the public, while “journals” are more often written for a small audience). However, there is hardly a sharp difference and practices of many individuals fall in between. For this project, I avoided relying on an a priori distinction between blogs and journals and asked my interviews to talk about their experiences with “blogs or journals,” letting them draw a distinction between the two if they wanted. None of my interviewees attempted to draw such a distinction, and most used the terms “blogs” and “journals” interchangeably, but showed a weak preference for the term “journal.” (Even more often, though, they just said “Xanga” or “LiveJournal,” e.g. “in my Xanga” or “in her LiveJournal”.) For this reason, I predominantly use the term “journal” in this paper.

school and college students, and this paper looks at their use among undergraduates at UC Berkeley - a large public university in California.

When looking at online journaling, it is hard not to ask why anyone would do this - after all, many journalers talk “publicly” about things that are usually kept private. This paper will hopefully help answer this question.<sup>2</sup> However, I want to go beyond it, in asking not as much *why* journalers do what they do, but *how* their use of journals develops and the role that the social context and technology play.

Additionally, instead of looking at motivation *per se*, I will discuss journalers’ understanding of their activity, making use of a theory proposed by Howard Becker in early 1950s.<sup>3</sup> Discussing users of marijuana,<sup>4</sup> Becker argued that “the motivation and the disposition to engage in the activity is built up in the course of learning to engage in it and does not antedate this learning process,” due to the fact that the novice needs to acquire “a conception of the meaning of the behavior, and perceptions and judgments of objects and situations, all of which make the activity possible and desirable” (Becker, 1953, p. 235). In other words, the issue of *motivation* cannot be separated from the issue of *learning the right interpretation* of the practice. This link between developing motivation and learning “perception and judgments” is useful, as it allows us to move from looking at just the evolution of motivation to changes in how the participants see the activity, which are easier to access in interviews. It will also allow us to

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2 Bonnie Nardi and her students (Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, 2004; Gumbrecht, 2004) ask the “why” question for bloggers and some of the motivations they discover are similar to what I found. They do not, however, address the question of how the motivations are developed or the issue of the multiplicity of the ways journalers think about their practice.

3 This paper takes Becker’s 1953 article on marijuana use as a point of departure as it provides a useful way of thinking about journaling. I do not make use of Becker’s later work. Thus, all references to Becker concern the 1953 article and do not imply any connection with his other theories.

4 In borrowing Becker’s framework I do not want to suggest that journaling is similar to marijuana use in any way other than the fact that both are social practices in which the participants must form an understanding of the activity in order to continue to engage in it.

connect our question to Bijker's theory of "interpretive flexibility" (Bijker, 1995) which is framed in terms of "interpretation" of technological artifacts rather than motivation.<sup>5</sup>

How are the needed "perceptions and judgments" acquired? Becker stresses that they are learned *socially* by engaging in the activity together with more experienced users and gradually learning from them. This view of learning is later more fully developed by Lave and Wenger (1991) in the "Communities of Practice" theory (CoP), which stresses that learning usually occurs in the context of a community of practitioners who jointly engage in a particular activity, and proposes a specific mechanism, termed "legitimate peripheral participation": the newcomer can become a member of the community by engaging in certain peripheral activities and use such participation to learn more about the practice, gradually moving towards more central participation. Peripheral participation is important, as it gives the novices a way of engaging in the community without the knowledge that is necessary for playing the central roles.<sup>6</sup>

While the CoP theory was originally applied to *work* in a narrow sense, it has since been used to understand a wider range of communal practices. Similarly, while original CoP focused on co-present communities, the theory has also been extended to online communities (see Johnson, 2001 for review). While some authors have been critical of the idea of *purely* online communities of practice (e.g., Brown and Duguid, 1996; Duguid, 2005), as we shall see, online journaling draws heavily on real-world social ties, which creates the kind of "scaffolding" (Johnson, 2001) that is often deemed necessary

We would thus expect CoP to account for learning in online journaling communities, and it does to a large extent. Online journaling has an obvious form of legitimate peripheral participation: reading.

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5 Though this study did not aim to test the validity of the link between motivation and understanding, my interviews did seem to support Becker's theory.

6 Like Becker, most CoP thinkers stress shared "understanding of what their practice is about" (Wenger, 1998) as a defining characteristic of communities of practice and, therefore, the importance of acquiring appropriate interpretation of the activity.

Reading online journals requires neither the writing skills nor the complex privacy-management skills that many journalers develop. It is largely risk-free, since it can be easily done anonymously, and implies no obligation. For that reason, reading does not require particularly high motivation, thus being open to individuals who have not yet learned the “perceptions and judgments” necessary for stronger commitment to the practice. Finally, reading journals provides early exposure to the community and its practices. At the same time, reading is a *legitimate* form of peripheral participation, since many journal authors want to be read and thus need readers.

Though one might expect online journaling to be disconnected from real-life ties, it actually appears to be closely tied to co-present communities, much like the more common examples of communities of practice. Similarly to what we found in our earlier study of blogging among graduate students (Takhteyev and Hall, 2005), pre-existing face-to-face ties provided important support for initial experimentation with journaling. All but one participant first discovered journaling through friends they knew on a face-to-face basis. All entered the practice by reading journals of their *friends*.

At the same time, certain observations about online journaling do not fit well into the CoP framework. In particular, online journaling takes many forms and it is impossible to find a single “central” form of participation. What is more significant, however, is the diversity of the understanding of the meaning of the activity. As we will see, some interviewees see it as a way of communicating with friends, others as a way of venting frustrations; yet others as a tool for keeping track of one’s activities. It becomes impossible to understand what is “the meaning of the behavior” (Becker, 1953) that one needs to acquire to become a journaler. Which form of journaling is truly central?

One might ask whether journaling in fact constitutes a single practice or whether it might be better understood as multiple communities of practice. I will argue against the latter view and show that each online journaling site forms a single community with multiple forms of “central” participation, and that

becoming an active journaler is as much about finding a role that fits one's preferences as it is about acquiring a new understanding. I will thus refer to it as "federated" community of practice.

Having identified examples of communities of practice with multiple forms of central participation, we can ask what is holding them together, keeping them from disintegrating into separate communities. In case of online journaling, such binding is provided by a shared artifact (the journaling website) and the pre-existing real-world ties. I will make use of Bijker's concept of "interpretive flexibility" (Bijker, 1995) to discuss the multiple interpretation of the artifact by different community members, extending it to explain our case.

## Data Collection

In order to understand how the undergraduate journalers form their understanding of the practice, I conducted interviews with eleven undergraduates with various levels of involvement in the practice. Recruiting subjects turned out to be quite difficult, due to their reluctance to refer their friends<sup>7</sup> and a low response rate among contacted people, when such referral was obtained. As a result, a number of different recruitment methods were used: Some subjects were found on the Internet and contacted by email or AOL Instant Messenger (AIM), others were recruited through friends, yet others responded to fliers posted around campus.

Ten participants were UC Berkeley undergraduates, one was taking a year off after high school and was planning on attending Berkeley next year. (This interviewee was recruited through her friend at Berkeley.) All participants graduated from high schools in California: five in Southern California, four in Bay Area or Sacramento, and two in the northern part of the state. The reflected the ethnic diversity of

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<sup>7</sup> I attribute this partly to the sensitive nature of the topic - the participants seemed somewhat reluctant to discuss their journals with their friends. Notice that in contrast with "blogging," journaling is often practiced in a more private and secretive manner. "Journalers" are thus harder to recruit than "bloggers."

UC Berkeley; however, since cultural background or discrimination did not come up in the interviews,<sup>8</sup> I use European pseudonyms for all of the subjects.<sup>9</sup> The interviewees were interested in a range of academic fields, including economics, biology, engineering and foreign languages. Except for one participant who studied engineering, academic major did not seem to play a role. Seven of the participants were women and four were men. I did not identify any effect of gender, but the chosen pseudonyms reflect the gender of the participants.

All participants were (or had been earlier) users of a journaling or blogging system, but varied in their level of engagement with journaling. Some were quite active, posting almost every day and spending substantial time every day reading journals. Others posted less frequently. One participant had given up journaling altogether, having arrived at the conclusion that it's "pretty dumb." The journals varied in visibility from fully private ones (visible only to the author) to one read by over a hundred people. Seven interviewees used Xanga, three used LiveJournal and one used WordPress.

The interviews lasted around one hour, and were recorded. No form of compensation was used other than a dessert or a drink that was offered to some of the interviewees. After explaining the project and inquiring about participant's background (year in school, major, where from), I asked them to tell me about their earliest experience with journals.<sup>10</sup> The conversation then proceeded roughly chronologically covering subjects' experiences to this day. Throughout each interview I inquired about participants' reactions to the events, and asked them how their practices compared to those of others or changed over time. Overall, I tried to understand how subjects *thought* about journaling and how their understanding

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8 One exception was a subject who stated that her parents would not be able to read her journal due to lack of English reading proficiency.

9 Some of the interviewees of non-European ancestry already had European names. Only two had distinctly South-East Asian names. It did not seem appropriate, however, to single those two out as "foreigners" nor to give non-European pseudonyms to interviewees who introduced themselves by European names.

10 In several cases I had to encourage the participants to think of earlier examples, asking if they knew about journals at even earlier points.

of it evolved over time. If the participants did not bring up privacy concerns on their own, I explicitly asked them if they had any.

In addition to the interviews, I looked at journals of those interviewees who provided me with a URL, which gave me a chance to see what they were actually posting and get a better idea what some of the interviewees meant by “personal.”<sup>11</sup> Given the highly personal focus of many journals, however, I did not *ask* interviewees for this information, and not all interviewees volunteered it.

## Learning through Peripheral Participation

All interviewees but one discovered journaling through real-life friends who started journaling before them, typically encountering a link in a friend’s AIM profile.<sup>12</sup> Most found the idea quite strange:

Amanda: I thought it was weird. I didn’t really get it. And I didn’t get the whole... I didn’t really get why it was called a blog or a LiveJournal. And I didn’t really get what she was doing. Because she would post random little tidbits about class and stuff. And I just didn’t really understand the concept.

It is perhaps not surprising that “Amanda” did not consider starting her own journal. She later gets a better understanding of journaling when she experiences it in a more personal context:

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11 Many interviewees said that they avoid “personal” content or post it for “friends only.” As I looked at their “public” entries, however, I found that their notion of “personal” was quite different from mine, as the public entries sometimes included discussions of authors’ sex life or drug use.

12 AIM is a popular real-time text chat tool used extensively by all interviewees and often described by the interviewees as the most important method for keeping in touch with friends (more important as either phone or email). AIM users can put short text in their “profile” which others can see whether or not the user is online. Checking if a friend has put anything interesting in their profile and discovering a URL of their journal was by far the most commonly reported way of discovering journals. Those who did not discover journals from friends profiles, typically report having a friend send them a URL – again by AIM. Scaffolding for online journaling thus includes not just prior face-to-face interactions but also the pre-existing patterns of computer-mediated communication between friends. When talking about advantages of journaling, many use AIM as the reference point, often implicitly:

Maria: I think I read journals more than I post. Now. Because I am so far away from home and I still want to know what’s going on in my friends’ lives. I am away so much. Not away away, but “away” on AIM. So someone would say ‘what’s up’ and I am not there. Or when I try to talk to them, they are not there.

Note that Maria starts by making an implicit comparison with AIM, which she then has to explain (“Not away away”) when she realizes (from the surprised expression on my face) that the word “away” doesn’t mean the same thing for me as it does for her. Note that her consequent “say” and “talk” similarly refer to attempted text chat over AIM.

Amanda: Well, what happened was, two of my friends who were dating for a long time broke up suddenly because of... the circumstances were a little bit shady and it was because of this other girl, we thought. So I started reading his LiveJournal to get an insight into his mind and what was going on and stuff. And kind of see a little behind the scene thing. Maybe he was posting more to his journal than what he was telling us. That kind of thing. And then I sort of got into the habit of reading these people's journals.

As this quote shows, Amanda has acquired a certain degree of understanding of journaling and has come to define it as useful, though at this point she seems to be aware only of its utility to the reader (getting insight into someone else's mind, frequently mentioned by others as well).

Amanda later starts commenting on friends' journals, and eventually decides to start her own, while having nothing else to do:

Yuri: Do you remember how you decided to start your own journal?

Amanda: Kind of. I was home sick one day, and I was bored and I thought, well, why not. There is nothing else to do. And I didn't really realize what I would do with it, I didn't know.

She starts with infrequent "random tidbits," gradually discovering in what ways journaling can be rewarding and posting more and more as a result:

Yuri: So, what *did* you do with it?

Amanda: At first I just posted random little tidbits of, you know, "Oh, I have a good boyfriend," or "This is a cute animal," or "Hi, Michael!" [...]

Yuri: How often did you post?

Amanda: At first really sporadically, like once a week maybe at most, and then more and more. It's kind of addictive. The way LiveJournal works, one of the things that's really great about it, is that you have this 'friends' list where you put... you add someone to your friends, and then you go to this one page and you can read all of your friends' entries. And that's really addictive. And there is also "friend-locking." You can "lock" a post and it's secret, so that's kind of exciting. [...] Also, you can have an option so that if someone comments on your post you get an email telling you "oh, somebody commented on your journal." And that's nice because you get attention, and you feel nice and vindicated. And everyone likes getting email. I think most of the good emails that I get now are someone commenting on my journal.



In addition to increasing frequency of posts, Amanda also makes her way from “random tidbits” to much more personal entries, including topics like love, sex, and health. Amanda starts journaling with little idea of why it would be worth doing, and hence limited motivation – it takes an unusually boring day. Over time, however, she discovers many ways to enjoy journaling.

It is important to note that Amanda learns the meaning of concepts by interacting with other people, but not necessarily *from* them. She does not simply borrow her understanding of journaling from other people; rather, it appears that she develops it largely through her own experience. This learning, however, is only made possible through her participation in the community: she would not come to see LiveJournal as “exciting” if she wasn’t getting comments from her friends.

A similar story can be told about most other interviewees. “Dan” first came across a friends’ journal in high school, but did not find it interesting. Only after coming to college and finding himself far away from his high school friends he started reading their journals and discovered that they helped him keep in touch. He eventually started his own journal on Xanga (where most of his friends had theirs) in order to post comments on his friends’ journals,<sup>13</sup> and eventually wanted “to reciprocate” by posting his own stories. At the moment of the interview, Dan read around 20-30 journals and thought that his journal was read by about the same number of people.

Even those who started a journal soon after discovering them talk about not knowing what it would be like and thus having limited motivation:

Sheila: I didn’t think I would actually keep it. I’ve never actually kept up writing in diaries before. But it became extremely addicting surprisingly. I guess I was surprised. But at first I thought it was cool but I didn’t think I would carry through with it and I thought it would fall away with time.

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13 At the time of the interviews, both Xanga and LiveJournal required visitors to have an account on the site to be able to post comments.

Instead, Sheila currently has over 150 subscribers and reads journals of 83 people herself, spending several hours a day reading and writing. “I spend ridiculous amount of time polishing my entries to get something people would want to read,” she says. The change in motivation occurs as Sheila changes her perception of what journaling is, realizing that quite unlike normal “diary,” LiveJournal is a way “to put my life on display” (something Sheila discovered she enjoys ), as well as a kind of popularity contest.

For most journalers, early learning came through the interaction with friends whom they know. Many, however, also refer to interactions with strangers online as sources of their understandings. Cynthia, for example, talks about discovering useful insights in journals of others and thus hoping that maybe others might learn something from her experiences. In other words, she sees her journal as potentially useful to strangers because of the value that she found in journals of people she does not know.

## **The Variance**

However, while the interviewees seem to develop their understanding of the practice through legitimate peripheral participation, the understandings they develop *are in fact rather different*. While we might talk about reading as a peripheral activity and maintaining a journal as central, maintaining a journal can take many forms and it seems impossible to identify any one of them as uniquely central.

Their understanding of journaling vary along two main dimensions: their perceptions of appropriate audience, and their perceptions of appropriate content. In what follows I will focus on the diversity of perceptions of audience, since considering this single dimension of variation would be sufficient to demonstrate the divergence. Showing that the participants have rather different views of who they write for and who is part of a legitimate audience should convince the reader that their overall “perceptions and judgments” of the practice are quite different. I consider below three potential audiences: the self,

friends, and strangers.<sup>14</sup> While those audiences are not mutually exclusive (one can write for all three), each one is embraced by at least some interviewees and rejected by others. Furthermore, even those who welcome the same kind of audience sometimes assign them different roles.

One could argue that perhaps some of those audiences correspond to more “central” forms of journaling than others, or that central journaling would involve recognition of *all three* audiences as legitimate. Despite having substantial experience with journals and mostly seeming reasonably settled in their practices, however, the interviewees showed little sign of conversion either in actual practices or in the opinions about what a proper practice would be. In addition to differing in their own practices, the interviewees often expressed strong opinions about those who do journaling differently. For example, talking about highly personal content of some of his friends’ journals Dan says emphatically: “I think this is something people should keep to themselves.”

## **Self**

Most of the participants say they write their journal “for themselves” at least to some extent and many stress this as the primary reason. “I just like to get my thoughts down on paper,” says Paul, “for my own purposes, because I like to go back and read my old entries,” as do other interviewees. Other participants talk more generally about wanting to go back and remember the past. “It’s nice to go back and read all of Xanga and be like ‘Wow, that’s what I did,’” says Maria. Another interviewee, Lisa, explains: “Xanga is mainly a journal, I keep track of what happened to me on this week or on this day or something.” She adds that occasionally she goes back to read her old entries, say when she wants to “remember on which day a particular event happened.” Paul adds another self-oriented reason: practicing writing and getting his thoughts clear. The same reason is mentioned by Sheila, who, despite

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<sup>14</sup> I group together under “self” writing for oneself and writing for nobody (e.g., “therapeutic” writing that is not intended to be read by anyone). I also omit the discussion of audiences that were either universally unwelcome (e.g., relatives) or never brought up unless I asked about them (e.g., university professors or the general public).

having much larger audience than other interviewees (over 150), also mentions that “to some extent” she posts for herself. This view of journaling was also adopted by all interviewees who kept fully private journals, e.g. Jane who used it “instead of a paper diary” and Damon who using it “as tool to vent,” first publicly then privately. Those who used journals “for their own purposes” compared them to paper diaries, typically noting several advantages: “typing is faster than writing” (Jane), it’s “really organized” saving the date and keeping entries chronologically (Lisa), can’t be left behind when you go on vacation (many participants).

This view is not universal, however. Several participants talk about their journals as solely ways of keeping in touch with other people. “It’s not like I need to get it out in the open to relieve stress,” says Dan, “I only do it to keep my friends informed and if they didn’t want to be informed, I wouldn’t waste my time with it.”

## **Friends**

Close friends are seen as legitimate audience my many journalers and some interviewees, like Dan, say communication with friends is “the whole point.” “It’s been really hard to keep in touch with people,” she says Jessica, “and this [Xanga] just turned out a good way of doing that.” She contrast Xanga with email, where personal messages from friends “get buried with all your other junky emails.” Many others stress that it is easier to post a story in a journal than re-tell it separately to every person, especially for remote friends:

Lisa: If this is like something really cool that I want to share with everyone, I can’t repeat the same story over and over again. If I repeat it, I would have to change it somehow and other people might get details of a part and other people would get different details. And sometimes... I forget the details myself and start making them up. And so keeping it in Xanga, i guess it’s a nice unbiased way to tell everybody. [...] I think it’s even more so [for friends from high school], because I can’t talk to a group of them at the same time, so that means I would have to call them individually or talk to them on AIM individually and it just gets very tiring to repeat the same story again and again.

Other interviewees, however, prefer to keep their journals away from their friend's eyes. Some prefer to keep them private altogether. Others, like Paul and Sheila, specifically want to keep them away from *friends*. While stressing that he "would be fine" with his friends reading his journal, Paul is nonetheless concerned that he would "subconsciously" start censoring himself. At the same time, he enjoys comments from people he met online. Sheila limits many of her more sensitive entries just to people she *does not* know. Unfortunately, this requires making those entries visible to a limited group of LiveJournal users who she knows to be strangers. Such precautions would be unnecessary if her friends didn't read the journal. "In an ideal world," she says, "where *strangers* only read my journal, everything would be public, no questions asked."

Those who see friends as a valid audience often draw a distinction between the friends "back home" and those at Berkeley. Maria expresses frustration at having her journal read by a friend at Berkeley: "I felt that people who were reading my Xanga were people from back home who wanted to know what was going on in my Berkeley life... but he was *from* Berkeley and if he was reading, he would know who I was referring to."

Those who welcomed friends as readers, often assigned them different role. For some, friends are an audience for whose sake the journal is written. For others, friends are there to support the author in what is overall their personal project.

## **Strangers**

The participants also approached strangers in a variety of ways. Sheila, welcomed the attention of strangers and in fact preferred it to the attention of friends:

Sheila: For a while I considered doing a lot of private entries on my main journal, but there is something much more fulfilling in writing in a public journal that no one finds, as opposed to evading your audiences eyes by making private entries. That makes no sense because obviously if you write something public in a secretive journal you risk someone finding it. And with private entries you don't. [...] I think I kind of want people to find it.

That's the reason I don't really make many private entries, because I am kind of an exhibitionist and I like to put my life on display. And if it wasn't for the fact that certain people read my journal, everything would be public. Because I don't care if strangers read this stuff. It's the people that I *know* who read this stuff that I have to filter.

Paul similarly enjoys comments from people he has only met online, though for somewhat more pragmatic reasons: "They help develop my thoughts on issues..." he says, "Like if I write on an issue and they comment on it, this usually starts a stream of comments or a conversation in AIM and this helps me refine my thoughts on this specific thing."

Cynthia and Lisa both see strangers as legitimate audience, but in more altruistic terms. Cynthia stresses that she has learned a lot from reading journals of strangers on the web and hopes that perhaps some of her reflections will similarly benefit someone. When asked why she puts her entries in public, Lisa says:

Lisa: I think it's just cool reading other people's Xangas when they have something interesting or exciting in their life right now, or just went on vacation to somewhere exotic, and it's really cool to hear about their experiences and stuff. And so I like sharing, what happened in my own personal life, what makes it unique, I guess.

When asked if she has in mind random visitors who stumble upon her journal, she says it's for those strangers as well as friends.

Amanda, on the other hand, sees exposure to strangers as sometimes undesirable:

Amanda: It's just a feeling sometimes. Sometimes I think: "If someone was just browsing journals and they stumbled on my journal, would I want that random person to be able to read this?" And a lot of the time I would think: "No, I really don't. This is something I just want my friends to see." And other times I would feel: "I don't care, the whole world can see this."

Amanda deals with this concern through "friends only" posts - the same feature that Sheila uses to *exclude* friends when exposing herself to strangers.

## A Single Practice

Perhaps we are really dealing with several distinct practices here? This answer is problematic given how intertwined those different forms of participation are. All interviewees discovered journaling in a form other than the one they eventually chose for themselves. Even as they settled into their own practice, however, they continued reading journals quite different from theirs. As a result, we do not see a community of people maintaining private journals, a community of people sharing their stories with friends and a community writing for strangers. All are in an important sense part of the same community.

Dan, who writes “to keep my friends informed” contrasts his practice to that of many of his friends, whose journals he reads:

Yuri: But do you think it’s the same thing for your friends?

Dan: No, I have a lot of friends who are using it almost therapeutically, I think, to get their problems into the open. Some of them love attention. They just like the idea of everyone being able to read their stuff.

He also finds that they have a different view of what constitutes appropriate content: “The majority of my friends keep pretty personal journals. I don’t, but most of my friends do.” He later expresses his frustration at such posts: “If they post something that is really emotional, like they are feeling depressed, often times I would skim it, but I don’t have particular interest in reading it. I think this is something people should keep to themselves.” Nonetheless, he mentions that for close friends, he is likely to read even the distastefully personal posts.

Sheila, who enjoys the attention of strangers expresses frustration at those of her LiveJournal friends whose journals are strictly friends-only (emphasis added):

Sheila: A lot of people have their journals for completely different reasons. Well, some people *on my friends list* have completely friends-only journal, which I would never ever

do. Because some things are just retarded to put as friends-only. Like “Today I went to the store” - as friends-only, by default. That’s ridiculous! It makes you look... Actually, if you have a completely friends-only journal, I think you are elitist. Not necessarily that you don’t want your journal to be read, but you think your journal is so interesting and so private that you have to make it hidden except for these people that you trust - which I feel is kind of pretentious.

We need to note that the journals Sheila is talking about are *among those she reads on a daily basis*. This also means that she has been added as a “friend” by the authors of those journals.

Amanda tells the flip-side of this story. A close friend of hers (whose journal she reads) posts “for an audience.” Amanda says (emphasis added):

Amanda: Because the way she posts a lot of the time, *she talks like if she was telling someone a story*. Like about her day. *I don’t really do that*. It’s more of an actual journal for her. And it seems to me that she is really addressing an audience. And it’s not specific people in general, it’s “the Audience.”

Amanda feels that her friend writes with intention to be read by strangers, just like Sheila. She contrasts it with her own practices: “And I just feel that I am just talking to my friends when I am posting... I feel that when I post a lot of the time I just assume that whoever is reading it knows who I am and knows about me.”

We thus see the close links spanning different forms of journaling, which suggests that it is better understood as a single community, although with multiple forms of participation.

## **“Federated” Communities of Practice**

We thus cannot fully understand journaling as a community of practice unless we relax our understanding of such communities to include the possibility of multiple forms of “central” participation. I would refer to such communities of practice as “federated.” A federated community of practice involves multiple activities practiced by the same larger community united by a shared forms of peripheral participation. In case of journaling, after completing an early stage of reading, the participants



can pick any of the many forms of participation or construct their own. Thanks to the common ground established by the shared peripheral participation, the members find it relatively easy to move between different forms, sometimes trying one, then another.

Looking back to standard CoP examples, we can see that perhaps some of them are also better described as federated. For instance, university research and teaching can also be understood as two forms of participation within a larger practice, where practitioners often combine researching and teaching or move between them. The two also share the peripheral forms of participation: novices enter the community of practice as graduate students, simultaneously engaging in peripheral forms of research and teaching regardless of which form of participation they would settle on eventually.

What holds such federated communities together, keeping them from disintegrating into separate communities of practice? If we compare the decentralization of journaling with the hybrid teaching-research practice from this perspective, we see an interesting difference: teaching and research are tied symbiotically as complements of each other and also institutionally. This does not appear to be the case for journaling. No form of journaling is a necessary complement to the others and neither is mandated by an institution. Instead, the different forms of journaling are primarily tied together by a shared artifact - the journaling web service – and pre-existing real-world ties.

Most of the interviewees reported currently using one of two popular journaling services: seven were using Xanga, three used LiveJournal.<sup>15</sup> Xanga and LiveJournal offer virtually identical experience but are at the same time distinct communities, and the only thing that is different about LiveJournal users is that their friends usually also use LiveJournal, while friends of Xanga users tend to also be on

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15 The eleventh interviewee (Damon) used WordPress - a software package that allows one to host a blog on their own website. Perhaps not surprisingly, Damon appeared most isolated in his journaling, making relatively few references to reading journals of other people or being read by others.

Xanga.<sup>16</sup> Given this isomorphism between the two sites, we can see Xanga and LiveJournal as two instances of the same artifact and I will thus use the term “Xanga” to refer to both.

Bijker (1995) introduces a concept of “interpretive flexibility” to express the notion that a single technological artifact can be seen by different people as fulfilling radically different purposes.<sup>17</sup> This diversity of interpretation, Bijker argues, leads to different views of whether the artifact is serving its purpose adequately and different preferences for its future evolution. Bijker illustrates this idea with a discussion of the evolution of the early penny-farthing bicycle. This early bicycle, common up to 1880s, lacked gears and relied on the large size of the front wheel for speed, which made riding extremely hazardous, as the riders were prone to flying over the handle bar. Lack of modern air tires also made the ride rather bumpy. Bijker stresses, however, that this machine was interpreted differently by different “social groups.” In particular, “young men of nerve and means” saw it as “the Macho Bicycle” - a machine that allowed them to show off their acrobatic skills and courage. Under this interpretation, the penny-farthing bicycle was serving its purpose quite well. Two other groups - “women and older men” - interpreted the machine as “the Unsafe Bicycle,” a machine that would be useful for pleasant rides, if only it wasn’t so dangerous and uncomfortable. Bijker points out that the later “speed bicycle” (with gears and air tires) succeeded largely because it was functional under *both* interpretation, and could be used for pleasant rides as well for showing off athletic skills thanks to the potential for increased speed.

We can see how Xanga similarly successfully supports several interpretations. Some come to see it as a good way of communicating with friends, others as a way of exposing their lives to strangers, yet

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16 Users repeatedly stress that it is much easier to keep track of journals on the same site. This creates a network effect that encourages each clique to pick one site or another.

17 The concept of a “boundary object” (Star and Griesemer, 1989) is another common way to describe objects that are shared by two or more communities, each assigning it different interpretation. I do not make use of this concept here due to the lack of a boundary between the people who hold different interpretations, starting instead with Bijker’s broader notion of “interpretive flexibility.”

others as a more organized way of maintaining a diary, sometimes with an extra benefit of getting friendly support.

Bijker sees alternative interpretations as held by distinct “social groups.” Furthermore, his association of “young men of nerve and means” with “the Macho Bicycle” and “women and older men” with “the Unsafe Bicycle” appears to take each individual’s adoption of the different interpretation as pre-determined by their gender and social class. Presumably, “young men of nerve and means” saw the penny-farthing as they did, simply because they were male, young and with time and money to spare. We saw, however, that in case of journaling, multiple perspectives coexist within what is essentially the same social group - the students were of the same age and there was no over-determining effect of gender,<sup>18</sup> ethnic background or class. Furthermore, the individuals arrived at their interpretations through a social learning process. Their adoption of such interpretations appeared contingent not only on prior preferences, but also on specific experiences while engaged in the practice.

Importantly, new users are not limited to learning the interpretations adopted by their immediate social circle. Regardless of how she arrives to the website,<sup>19</sup> the new user quickly becomes aware of the diversity of practices due to the inter-connected design of Xanga. “Friends” links between journals, “random” journals featured on the front page and the ability to search for people by interests all contribute to helping the new user go beyond the journaling practices of her friends. Thus, while real-life social ties provide the scaffolding that facilitates entry into the community, they do not limit user’s learning in the long term.

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18 Women appeared to be somewhat more likely to post personal content than men. However, there was substantial variation within each group. Thus, while it is possible that a larger sample would have revealed statistically significant effects of gender or other characteristics, those effects would not be nearly as straightforward as in Bijker’s account.

19 I.e., regardless of the practices of the real-life friends through whom she was exposed to the practice.

Those two types of interactions – with prior friends and with strangers or more distant friends<sup>20</sup> – may provide the key to understanding the federated nature of the community. The journals of strangers expose readers to new views of journaling, helping them find an interpretation that fits their preferences. The continuing links with prior friends, on the other hand, provide the lateral ties that keep the community from splintering into several separate ones, either by clustering around different sites (e.g. Xanga for communicators and LiveJournal for exhibitionists), or by grouping into disjointed communities within each site. Most interviewees have stronger commitment to journals of friends than of strangers, much like Dan who says he avoids posts that are “too personal” *except when written by close friends*. Real-world social ties thus keep them engaged as readers with forms of journaling that they might reject as writers.

## Conclusion

Continued use of online journals requires the users to develop understanding of why such an activity would be worthwhile. Such understanding is acquired in a process that is similar to learning in communities of practice. However, while traditional communities of practice are usually characterized by shared meanings, journalers end up adopting quite a variety of interpretations of what journaling is all about and thus form what I call “federated” communities of practice. In case of journaling, I claim, the co-existence of multiple interpretations within a single community results from confluence of three factors: high “interpretive flexibility” of the journaling system, which makes multiple uses and interpretations possible; the ease of observing the practices of strangers, which gives the users exposure to various interpretations present in the community; and the intertwining of online and face-to-face

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<sup>20</sup> Many interviewees mention reading journals of people they know in real-life but not very well, perhaps even people they have never talked to one-on-one. I group those people together with “strangers” here.

interactions that keeps users interested in reading the journals of their friends (even if they are quite different from theirs), and thus keeps the community from splintering.

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