

TEKKA

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BlogTalk: Let's Talk.

(with Oliver Wrede)

<http://www.tekka.net/03/?BlogTalk>

The German-speaking media are giving weblogs more attention lately, but weblogs might not be grateful. The print media, in particular, have often adopted a negative, almost contemptuous attitude. Blogs are perceived as personal and trivial. The notion of alternative journalism, which underpins so much weblog enthusiasm in the English-speaking world, is nearly absent here. Nonetheless, active German-speaking weblogs command the whole bandwidth of the medium, from diary to discussion board to personal publishing to marketing and public relations.

Universities, too, have discovered weblogs as cultural phenomena. [BlogTalk](#), organized by Thomas N. Burg from the Center for New Media at Danube University in Krems, Austria, was the first conference on weblogs in a German-speaking country. According to the conference website, "the mission of BlogTalk ... is to survey the status quo of Weblogs or blogs as tools for professional and private use." TEKKA editor Anja Rau regrets she couldn't make it to Vienna last May, but Oliver Wrede, who teaches weblogs as discursive tools at the Department of Design at FH Aachen, did attend as a panelist and was available for an email interview afterwards.

TEKKA How did you like BlogTalk?

WREDE One thing was obvious from the beginning: weblog authors are open-minded, curious and communicative. Some participants had been reading each other's weblogs regularly. One might say that old friends were meeting for the first time at BlogTalk! And yet it was quite easy to get to know new people. The talks had a common theme and the radically different backgrounds of the presenters were really exciting. This conference could have lasted twice as long without running out of steam. That's how conferences should be!

TEKKA The organizers seem to have emphasized private networking, not only as a topic but also as a mode of in-conference communication, with many coffee-breaks and room for informal communication.

WREDE Everybody knew a couple of others from the Internet, so it was easy to start talking -- even to people one hadn't met either on- or offline.

TEKKA The conference was targeted at a non-academic audience. Did that succeed?

WREDE Academic or non-academic was not really an issue during BlogTalk. There was something like a digital divide between those who had brought a laptop and were connected all the time, and those who took notes with a pen on paper. There were also a few who had little contact with weblogs.

I started my presentation with a quick poll:

1. "Are you running a personal weblog?" -- est. 60% Yes
2. "Are you participating in a group weblog?" -- est. 20% Yes
3. "Are you planning to start a weblog?" -- est. 15% Yes

So, 75% of the attendees were bloggers or soon-to-be bloggers. Unfortunately, this does not seem to be representative of a wider public.

TEKKA Weblogs are still not a household term in German...

WREDE BlogTalk was as international as any European conference, and included participants from the United States. And of course the conference language was English. There also seems to be a cultural predisposition at play when it comes to why someone would start a weblog. In Iran, for example, eight of the top ten weblogs have sexual content. In Poland, the Internet is a trendy medium used mainly by young people who use it to renew their image of themselves as producers of a modern society.

TEKKA In German-speaking countries, weblogs seem to be a pastime of *die Anglophilen*.

WREDE I have the impression that weblogs have a different meaning and position in the USA than in Germany. For one thing, Americans tend to be less skeptical about (and more accepting of) mediated realities. Then, quasi professional self-(re)presentation is an important aspect of the highly dynamic US job-market.

One should also consider that weblogs had their heyday in the time when the dotcom bubble burst. Many IT-specialists found themselves at home with their computers, an Internet connection, a knowledge of HTML, and time on their hands. Then came the news that someone had found a [new job with the help of his weblog](#). Seen from this angle, weblogs are a typically American

idea: everybody can make it big. But an ethnographer or anthropologist would be better equipped than I to approach this.

TEKKA Do you think a conference like BlogTalk can improve the acceptance of weblogs among non-English speakers?

WREDE The German press does cover weblogs, but too often in a superficial way and under the heading of online diaries. The analogy to diaries is plausible, but it creates the false impression that weblogs are only about the publication of the private. I think BlogTalk helped add some depth to this image. I also think that something that has been the focus of an international conference gets a different kind of publicity than an online diary.

TEKKA There was some live blogging during the conference, some of which was linked from [the conference website](#). Digital Arts and Culture 03 in Melbourne saw some live blogging as well. But that's not necessarily good: some say that "live bloggers are like tourists who take photos all the time and never see anything." How was live blogging regarded during the conference?

WREDE There was a discussion about whether the fact that ten or twenty people blogged during the presentations compromised the quality of the conference. Some presenters felt uncomfortable to see their talk published while they were speaking, but most didn't seem to care. People typing into their computers will soon be a common sight during conferences.

Still, I wonder whether a weblog is the best possible tool for note-taking. During the last panel I asked the panelists whether they'd read a forum written by the audience during their presentations. They all said yes, but they did not say whether they liked the idea or not. Only Dan Gillmor suggested that you'd need a thicker skin than normal, because criticism in the comments might be more direct and unfiltered than in face-to-face conversation.

TEKKA What are the lessons from BlogTalk?

WREDE Weblogs turn out to be more than hype: they're here to stay and they could turn the Internet into what it was always supposed to be: a social space, a hypertext, a mixture of communication and publishing, a knowledge archive made up from relations and always-new strategies.

One day we will all regard weblogs as a completely normal thing -- like e-mail and mobile phones today. But this raises some questions, too. Are weblogs a mainstream tool for communication? Is it necessary to differentiate private weblogs from business or research weblogs? Is there better information if thousands of amateur journalists state their personal views on the Iraq war or the latest OS update from Apple? Why is that happening at all? Why do weblogs polarize between those who can't stand *narrow-band exhibitionism* and those who regard weblogs as a way to get heard outside the established news media?

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