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Cory Doctorow, Rael Dornfest, J. Scott Johnson, Shelley Powers, Benjamin Trott and Mena G. Trott
Essential Blogging
O'Reilly & Associates, Inc., 2002
ISBN 0-596-00388-9 246 pp. $29.95

Paul Bausch, Matthew Haughey and Meg Hourihan
We Blog: Publishing Online with Weblogs
Wiley Publishing, Inc., 2002
ISBN 0-7645-4962-6 313 pp. $29.99

Biz Stone
Blogging: Genius Strategies for Instant Web Content
New Riders Publishing, 2002
ISBN 0-7357-1299-9 309 pp. $29.99

In a post from October 27 on the **misbehaving.net** weblog, Dorothea Salo made a point about accidental techies and gender which caused quite a bit of discussion in adjoining blog circles.

„I don't know, but I would lay pretty substantial odds that half or more of today's techie women got there the same way I did. No teenage hackfests, no college CS major, no certifications, no 80-hour coding death marches. Just something needing doing, and a woman willing to cuss the computer until she figures out how to make it do what she wants.

Some accidental techies are indeed male; I know one or two. I do wonder about the distribution, though. The accidental techies I know typically came from pink-collar occupations, and how many men does one find in those?

I wonder about some other things, too. Do accidental techies get paid what their jobs are worth? (I have no cause for complaint there, I am glad to say.) How many of them feel as much an impostor as I do? What do the intentional techies think of them? Do they ever learn all the in-jokes? Or the acronyms? Would they advise others to sneak in the back door the way they did? Is it even possible to plan to do that, or does it always "just happen?"

Do they ever get to say that it wasn't an accident?"

While Salo asks the right questions about gender, payment, acceptance and self-esteem, it seems to me that the term "accidental techie" is off the mark. Some people may detour on their way to a tech-related job, but they all have what it takes from the beginning. And what it takes is, simply, No Fear.

No Fear

As a child, were you secretly cheered when the alarm clock broke down because "broken" is just a synonym for "can be fixed"? Can you read knitting patterns? Can you design them? Can you cook by the book? And by ear? Then you have a fearless, get-a-grip, hands-on approach to technology.

Knowing at least three programming languages at a single-digit age is not a prerequisite to mastering the computer. The prerequisite is knowing that there is no mechanism to snarl up, no fender to dent. Befriending a computer starts with the confidence that, while one needs to remember to Save Often, one has to reach a certain level of skill before one can even seriously scramble anything that cannot be repaired through a clean reinstall. The broken alarm clock may be closer to the computer, but it's mostly only a matter of time until a person transfers their fearlessness from, say, knitting to coding. The surprise is not how many women are accidentally technical, but how many women aren't techies at all.

Here is where gender friction works its mischief: girls still tend not to get as much encouragement as boys when it comes to learning about and using technology.

But then I also personally know critics who would like require an undergraduate degree in literature and two current programming languages before anyone is allowed to talk about digital literature. This is obviously not the attitude with which Paul Baush, Meg Hourihan and Evan Williams launched Blogger in the summer of 1999.

Everybody Can Blog

While not the first weblog building tool, Blogger was the first to make online publishing as easy as email. In a recent interview with c|net, **Evan Williams** sums it all up: "... a democratic approach to how information should be distributed and available.... We're all about giving anyone a voice...." He's aware, though, that, from the technology point of view, Blogger — probably the easiest of the popular blog tools — is not quite perfect. "Still," he says, "it doesn't pass the 'mother' test. One of our big focuses is to make it easier and easier; more so than the mainstream user base needs. With the entry of AOL and probably other big portals, it will become more straightforward and easier. It relates to the trends going on; it's just going to be more prevalent."

From the beginning, the Web was about giving people the opportunity to publish and share information. The profession of Interface Design was invented for the express purpose of making Web reading as easy and comfortable as possible, through careful, systematic, and professional preparation. But there will always be those who have good reasons to want to publish online, and who have no time or money for prolonged study and professional assistants.

So, faced with the task of teaching a bunch of people with complex needs and minimal Web skills how to blog, I was happy to dive into a bundle of recent titles. I hoped to find the answers to my questions:

- What is a weblog? How can I explain this to someone who has never seen a blog, let alone a content management system before?
- What is the easiest way to set up a blog? How do you break the news gently that the nice thing about standards is that there are so many of them to choose from?
- How far can you go with the simplest tools?
- How much further can you go, if you are willing to use more sophisticated software?

Essential is Relative

Essential Blogging (Doctorow, Dornfest, Johnson, Powers, Trott & Trott) is by no means Basic Blogging. It's not a book that teaches rank beginners to craft a customized blog-based web presence with comments, categories, search engine and statistics. But then, *Essential Blogging* has not been published by *Markt und Technik*, or *Everything for Dummies*. The claim on the back-cover, "anyone can run a blog", may well attract the wrong audience; this is a hands-on, detailed, nuts-and-bolts treatment.

The first chapter starts gently enough, with a definition of the term "blog" and gentle hints as to what to blog about in the first place. Then, Doctorow dives deeper into the structural elements of blogs. There's no apparent order to this discussion:

- Title
- Subtitle
- Suggest Link
- Mailing List
- Counters
- Post

This list is sorted neither by importance nor by the order of appearance. Some basic blogging tools don't even offer post titles; mailing-lists require some technical sophistication; public counters are add-ons. For the beginner, this surfeit of information may turn out to be confusing and eventually restraining, rather than liberating.

In an attempt at didactic user-centeredness, the authors chose a two-tier structure. After the introduction and a confusingly-premature excursion into desktop clients, we find chapters on the basics of Blogger, Radio Userland and Movable Type. These are followed by three chapters on the advanced uses of each of these applications. Then we have a chapter on another application, Blosxom, and a collection of "Blogging Voices". This isn't a sensible organization for a guide to your first blog, but as a reference to assist advanced bloggers to select and master the most appropriate tools it makes some sense. *Essential Blogging* is three manuals rolled into one cover.

This said, *Essential Blogging* is an essential reference to three currently popular blogging tools. The blogosphere is evolving rapidly, of course, and software is constantly being improved. Some of the screenshots are already obsolete, and some of the hottest weblog technologies and services — Feedster, Trackback, Technorati — evolved after this still-fresh book was published. Crucially, many sections of *Essential Blogging* were written by the people who created the software. You won't get a closer look at what Blogger, Radio and Movable Type are about.

But, because the book's sections are composed by the creators of distinct systems and competing corporations, there's a lot of stylistic variation and a great deal of repetition. All three products rely on templates for user customization, but each chapter discusses templates afresh. Some information, like the benefits and drawbacks of WYSIWYG editing, might usefully have been collected in a general section at the beginning of the book, not hidden in several asides.

Essential Blogging is for self-made bloggers who have a patchwork knowledge of the tools they use and, especially, of those tools they don't use yet. It's not very basic, but it's rather essential.

We Blog

Essential Blogging focuses on technology; *We Blog*, the authors of which include two programmers from the original Blogger.com team, focuses on the history of blogging. The message here is the development of weblogs from essentially personal note taking to alternative journalism

to corporate communication. The authors weave the whys and hows of blogging, the workings of the internet from domain names to FTP and the basics of good online writing, into a comprehensive introduction to online publishing with personal content management systems. Bausch and company are ready to embrace commercial usages of blogging, and while they do not find best practices (yet), they give valuable tips for establishing blogs in large institutions. The authors make a case for addictive sites, i.e. sites the users return to again and again, over sticky sites that try to prevent the visitor from leaving their ambit. They slip this piece of advertising heresy to the reader wrapped in text that flows along very readably and without the teamwork problems that sometimes make *Essential Blogging* blotchy.

"From the personal to the professional" seems to be the guiding structure of *We Blog*. Every chapter ends with an exercise, from setting up a very basic Blogger/Blog*Spot blog, to creating an RSS feed, to programming your very own weblog content management system. When Bausch et al. talk about relational databases and ASP programming, they're not quite on a beginner's level anymore. But they stick to their generally unthreatening language and have made the smart move to place the chapter "Understanding Blog Technology" somewhere in the middle of their book. The chapter that follows is less technical, talking about communication and communities. This way, the non-technical reader can pull through the technical minutia onto more comfortable terrain.

The technical chapter, then, is probably too elementary to be useful to programmers and too challenging to be interesting to writers. Still, it explains the underlying principles well, so that the reader gets a solid idea of how weblog systems work. The authors of *We Blog* do a fine job of moderating complexity without losing coherence.

It's a pity, though, that the step-by-step screenshot-supported sections appear to have been a rather unloved chore for the team. The screenshots sit forlornly on their respective pages, at times not even aligned with their captions. At times, it remains unclear why a specific screen has been chosen, like figs. 1-9 through 1-11, which hardly differ. Perhaps the authors had already realized the futility of screenshots from products that are still "actively under development" (p. 111).

Strategic Blogging

On first sight, Biz Stone's *Blogging* looks a lot like *We Blog*. Stone, too, fuses the history and theory of blogging with how-to sections, starting with a basic Blog*Spot blog and stepping the reader all the way to syndication and beyond. But Stone adopts a far more detailed, take-you-by-the-hand approach to the hands-on section that makes up the largest part of the book.

Stone is convinced that blogging is good for you, and he is determined to take you there. And he just loves blogging. *We Blog* makes me think, "This is a cool place. It'd like to go there but I'm not quite sure I'm up to it." When I read *Blogging*, it's a case of, "I can't wait to get there — everyone's waiting for me!"

The most notable aspect about *Genius Strategies*, however, may be Stone's interest in cash. You won't find a sentence like "Blogs are written by people, not PR departments or staff writers" (*Essential Blogging*, p. 16) in this book. Even PR departments are staffed by people, and Stone is talking to professionals who have things to say and a living to make. Behind the hip tone are determination and a goal. This is not only about migrating from tool to tool; the tools and features that Stone introduces are all directed at getting people to read what you write. It is this combination that propels the reader through a book that is entertaining bedside reading as much as a practical guide to being an online professional.

If I had to recommend only one title to the beginner, it would probably be the *Genius Strategies* — if only because Stone manages to maintain his exuberant enthusiasm to the last page. But for teachers, and for those who are looking for a comprehensive introduction to the world of blogging, *Essential Blogging*, *We Blog* and *Genius Strategies for Instant Web Content* team up very well. Fearless fiddling will provide a sufficiently detailed conceptual grid in time, but every now and again it doesn't hurt to grab a manual.

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