

## **Piret Viires**

Tallinn University, Estonia/  
Estonian Literary Museum  
E-mail: [viires@eki.ee](mailto:viires@eki.ee)

### **Narratives across Media: from Blogs to Paper<sup>1</sup>**

The narrative structure of a blog is different from the way narratives are organised in mainstream movies or novels. It can be described as *fragmentary, episodic, continuous and open-ended*.

The most obvious difference between a narrative in a blog and in a novel is that the stories in blogs are told in brief episodes. Each post in a blog has a beginning and an end, and can in principle be read on its own. Read together they may, or may not, create a larger story. (Rettberg 2008: 111.)

Jill Walker Rettberg has argued that the antecedents of such kind of narrative structure are both diaries and earlier hypertext fiction. Most blogging is to some extent self-representational, and such a form of life-writing or autobiography. Aimeé Morrison has written that the community of literary studies has begun to examine the links between diary-style blogging and other forms of life-writing, and links between blogs and prior internet forms are seen too (such as “online diaries” in simple html that began appearing around 1995) as well as print antecedents (paper journals, diaries and scrapbooks) (Morrison 2008).

Besides the autobiographical aspect of blogs and the form of life-writing, Jill Walker Rettberg has noted the fictional essence of some blogs. She points out the intentional fictionality of some blogs, and how they play on the borders of reality and fiction (e.g. Kaycee Nicole, lonelygirl15) (Rettberg 2008: 121-126).

The other antecedent of blogs is earlier hypertext fiction, which just like blogs, consists of many small pieces of narrative. The hypertext fiction is characterized by linked text fragments, open endings, and the possibility of disrupting the narrative. There exist also blogs,

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which are consciously written as fictional narratives, thus most resembling the online hypernovels. (Rettberg 121-126) The interaction between authors and readers in the blogosphere is already familiar from the earlier hypertext literature. Espen Aarseth, for instance, has explained the changed roles of authors and readers, saying that while generally a reader's role is limited to interpretation, in terms of hypertext literature a reader or a user serves four functions. A reader has an active role – in addition to interpretation he navigates, configures and writes (Aarseth 1997: 64). The blog reader communicates with the author in the same way, writing comments to which the author reacts.

However, the aim of the present paper is to examine those cases in which blogs leave their Internet environment and are published as printed books. In such cases, we can argue that the fragmentary and episodic narrative structure of a blog is transformed into mainstream literature and becomes part of it. In the following I will primarily rely on the experience and examples in Estonian literature, although I hope that this also enables to model other more general and universal tendencies.

During the last decade, numerous books have thus appeared in Estonian literature that started life as blogs. They fluctuate on the borders between fiction and factual literature (there are many travelogues, initially written as blogs, also diary-like descriptions of everyday life etc.). However, they are quite similar – their narrative is fragmentary as in blogs. As Jill Walker Rettberg noted while characterising blogs: “Each post in a blog has a beginning and an end, and can in principle be read on its own. Read together they may, or may not, create a larger story.” The general typical feature of such books thus is that individual postings are printed on paper, which in a book mostly form a larger story, although not always. However, the narrative in such larger stories is not linear, there is no clear cause-and-effect connection, or distinct temporal sequence of events, the ending occasionally remains open and the book seems unfinished. Such powerful intrusion of blogosphere into mainstream literature is understandable from the point of view of both authors and publishers. For the author, a blog could be defined as a draft,

which will develop into a book. Having read the blogs, the publisher on the other hand knows what to expect of the manuscript of the book and can make suitable economic calculations.

What has still not been thoroughly discussed, is whether this fragmentary narrative structure has also influenced so-called mainstream literature, in cases when we are not dealing with published blogs but independently written books. And the other question - does the narrative structure of blogs influence authors who do not write blogs themselves?

Finding examples in Estonian literature, it is evident that Estonian writers have been rather active bloggers. Quite a few have used their blog as a draft, and have later published a book on the basis of these blogs. At the same time the percentage of blogging writers is quite small.

Despite that, we can claim that blogging writers have on the whole followed the fragmentary narrative structure of blogs also in their other literary work. A good example here is the Estonian writer Tõnu Õnnepalu, who has written a blog, published novels, and also deeply personal autobiographical diary-type writings (e.g. Õnnepalu 2007; Õnnepalu 2009). His novels have a clear narrative and ending, whereas his diary-type writings that were not initially blogs, structurally resemble blog entries. It can be thus assumed that blog-writing and blog-type narrative provided this particular writer with a key to structure his other work as well.

This conclusion might not be surprising with an author who has some experience in writing blogs. At the same time it is evident that during the last decade, the number of autobiographical, personal and diary-type literature has considerably increased in Estonia. There have been complaints in literary criticism that “big novels” have disappeared, and literature is dominated by stories balancing on the borders of the factual and fictional. The structure of the latter largely resembles that of blogs – fragments and episodes, presentation of personal experience. Characterisation, dialogue, story lines are all in the background. In addition to that, publishing “everyman’s literature” has explosively increased. Just like everybody can write blogs on the Internet, the writer’s modernist, heroic and elitist position in mainstream literature has disappeared as well.

I would thus like to claim that the impact of blogosphere on mainstream literature is bigger than previously assumed. This is evident on the level of narrative and on the level of author's position. The impact of blogosphere in the first case is the following: what was earlier considered typical of experimental literature, for example of modernist or postmodernist novel – fragmentary and episodic nature, open endings – have now penetrated into mainstream literature, and have not remained within the narrow realm of experimental literature. On the level of author's position, literature is subjected to a personal aspect, descriptions of the author's own experiences and opinions, whereas characters as the means of conveying the author's ideas have been abandoned.

At the same time it is interesting to note that although the narrative structures of blogs and hypertext fiction are similar, we did not see such influence on print media during the heyday of hypertext fiction in the 1990s at such extent. At least in Estonia, no books appeared in the 1990s, which were inspired by hypertext literature, despite the general fascination with technology in Estonian society. Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that we can consider hypertext fiction to be an avant-garde phenomenon whose influence remains limited. Blogging, on the contrary, is a wide-spread mass cultural phenomenon and therefore its impact on mainstream culture has been more significant.

It is being said that the heyday of blogging is about to end, blogs are being written and new ones will appear, but most are not finished and are simply sitting around in the vast expanse of the Internet. When you wonder where the bloggers have gone, the answer is – to Facebook.

The text strategies used in Facebook are even more fragmentary than in blogs. Blogs presume some sort of coherence and continuity at least within one posting, whereas Facebook consists of short text fragments, and they really function only in the polyphony of texts and in simultaneous cooperation of different agents.

Presenting examples of Estonian literature and Estonian writers in Facebook, it is immediately obvious that many more authors have joined Facebook than those preferring blogging. Analysing their contributions, we see that the authors of shorter forms, i.e. poets and humorists, seem to feel most at ease in Facebook. Twitter expects similar skills of short forms. This has, for example, inspired the Estonian writer Rein Raud to produce 140-character “twitterature”, modelled after Japanese cell phone novels and SMS-poetry.

How collective creation emerges in Facebook, can be illustrated with the case of Estonian humorist and TV-star Mart Juur. He uses Facebook actively, posting brief witty word games or fragments of sentences on the walls of his 1300 friends every day. As his friends include many other writers and poets, these word games are developed further and a kind of poetry or word competition emerges – who is the wittiest. With the help of all participants the initial phrase develops into something totally new and unexpected. However, the whole fireworks of such text-creation are only evident if we follow the entire correspondence from Mart Juur’s initial witty and inspiring start.

Whether and to what extent can we assume that Facebook and Twitter influence mainstream literature as well? Poets can publish their poems, previously appearing in Facebook, in book form, so for them Facebook could have the role of a draft version. Twitterature, too, can be read on paper, it is not limited with technological platforms.

What would not be conveyed in a printed book is the continuous active dialogue between different participants in Facebook, mixing various forms of media, unexpected additions by agents, collective creation and the textual and narrative dynamics of Facebook.

We can therefore conclude that the impact of blogosphere on mainstream literature is expressed in more fragmentary narratives and more personal texts. As for Facebook, the poems presented there could well be published in printed media.

On the other hand, if we try to transfer the lively buzzing Facebook life, polyphony of texts, the simultaneous participation of different agents and dynamics to printed media, it

becomes obvious that it is impossible. We can therefore claim that the impossibility of this transformation proves also how limited is the printed book and how limitless is cyberspace.

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