

## **The Traveller as Author: Examining Self-Presentation and Discourse in the (Self)**

### **Published Travel Blog**

Erving Goffman's (1969) conceptualization of social interaction as a stage performance underpins a number of studies that examine how individuals position themselves on platforms such as blogs and social networking sites (see Baumer et al., 2011; Papacharissi, 2009; Reed, 2005). Within this context, blogging is 'a performative act' (Baumer et. al, 2011: 4) and blogs themselves are modes of 'self-presentation that [have] to meet certain expectations about personal authenticity' (Schmidt, 2007: 1413) and 'straightforward indexes of [the] self' (Reed, 2005: 227). As such, they are narratives that enable individuals to indicate the different roles occupied by their online selves (Hevern, 2004; McNeill, 2003). This paper extends this view to travel blogs and explores how they negotiate the discursive tensions produced when presenting different aspects of an online self, particularly the self as a published author and as a traveller as opposed to a tourist.

Travel blogs evolve from diary-writing traditions that are self-presentational (Sorapure, 2003). Interestingly, the word 'blog' comes from the nautical 'log' that records a journey (Rettberg, 30). Travel literature has long engaged with positioning the self (Blanton, 2002). A constant switching of narrative positions, or a 'presentation of multiple personas,' as Holland and Huggan (1998:16) term it is as characteristic of travel narratives as it is of blogs (Hermans, 2004; Hevern, 2004). A travel blogger may describe the self as a traveller, but not a tourist, thus articulating a dichotomy that has long engaged critical debate in tourism studies as noted by Franklin and Crang (2001: 8). As McCabe (2005: 97) observes, travel, and by extension the figure of the traveller, is generally associated with authenticity and adventure whereas tourism suggests a superficial, commercialized, and regulated experience. There is sufficient evidence that these distinctions are expressed in accounts of experiences that are described as travel and not tourism (see Elsrud, 2001; McCabe, 2005; O'Reilly, 2005). In blogs that similarly construct

'travel' experiences, but nevertheless contain some elements of touristic discourse, this can create tensions.

Such discursive tensions are amplified when blogs that are positioned as accounts of travel rather than tourism are published as blog-based books, or 'blooks' to quote Jeff Jervis (Pedersen, 2009: 96). In some cases, this publication is the outcome of a successful book deal with a recognized publisher, while in others the book is produced via an independent press or self-publishing service. Regardless of the route taken, the authors of such books present themselves both as travellers and as published authors within their travel blogs. It can be argued that 'booking a blog' as one blogger (Friedlander, 2011) describes it, introduces an element of touristic discourse in them, especially when the resulting publication is a guidebook that promotes a certain mode of travel or a particular destination, although the original travel blog may decry touristic experiences. Moreover, the choice of route can have implications for how a travel blogger is presented and perceived as a published author. Against this background, this paper examines the implications of each choice of 'blook' publishing method for a travel blogger's self-presentation as a traveller and as a published author. Taking a case-study approach, it outlines some of the complexities of publishing a travel blog as a book and considers how these contribute to the tensions between discourses of travel and tourism in these narratives.

### **The Blogger as Book Author**

Blogs that enjoy a wide readership have proved a fresh source of content and talent for publishers (Nelson, 2006: 9-10; Williams, 2010). This 'blook' phenomenon is perhaps best exemplified by Brooke Magnanti's *The Intimate Adventures of a London Call Girl* (2005), written under the pseudonym Belle de Jour, and Julie Powell's *Julie and Julia: 365 Days, 524*

Recipes, 1 Tiny Apartment Kitchen (2005). Both blog-based books drew considerable media attention and brought fame and recognition for their authors (Gallagher, 2009; Pedersen, 2009: 96; Pickard, 2009). Interestingly, the former has since been televised and the latter cinematized. Lofgren (2013) notes a similar evolution of food blogs into books and other media and food bloggers into celebrities.

It is therefore hardly surprising that Pedersen finds that at least some individuals view blogging as a means of becoming a published author (2009: 95). This also holds true for a number of travel bloggers who have expressed an intention to publish a book based on their blogs, either by signing a contract with a known publisher or by self-publishing the blog as either a print or e-book. For example, Traveling Savage blogger Keith Savage writes of ‘elevat[ing] his blog into a business,’ as blogging about his travels has inspired a novel that could perhaps launch his career as a professional writer (Savage, 2010; 2013). At the time of writing, this plan had yet to be realized, and Savage referred to the proposed book as a work in progress (2014). This supports Pedersen’s conclusion that while the prospect of being published motivates blogging, the likelihood of this occurring ‘may be overly optimistic’ (2009: 100). Nevertheless, various other travel blogs have become ‘blooks’ that enjoy varying degrees of success.

There are a number of excellent studies of ‘blooks’ on the publication of a blog as a print book under the auspices of a recognized publishing house, which is the more traditional route to publishing (see Martin and Tian, 2012: 87-88; Nelson, 2006; Pedersen, 2009; Williams, 2010). However, travel bloggers may alternatively publish with an independent press, with a print-on-demand (POD) publishing platform such as Blurb, or a self-publishing service such as Lulu and other platforms such as Amazon’s CreateSpace and Kindle Direct Publishing. These routes allow potential authors to bypass literary agents and acquisition editors and expedite the process of seeing one’s name in print. As with several travel blogs

examined here, the final publication can be either a print book or an e-book or even both. This last is an attractive option, as an e-book may be easily distributed via Amazon.com and other online retailers as for readers using the Kindle or the Kobo.

Travel blogger Matt Kepnes has taken the traditional route to publication by signing a publishing contract with Perigee Trade, an imprint of Penguin Random House, one of the world's largest publishing groups. His book, How to Travel the World on 50 Dollars a Day: Travel Cheaper, Longer, Smarter (Nomadic Matt, 2010), is a guide to cheap travel available in both print and digital formats. It is distributed via Amazon and ranked second, at the time of writing, in the website's budget travel guide category (the first being Lonely Planet's South-East Asia on a Shoestring) and 8,522 overall (Amazon, 2014a). Kepnes's blog Nomadic Matt's Travel Site, written under the pseudonym Nomadic Matt, is a source of content for both this book and his series of online travel guidebooks, titled Country Destination Guides, sold via the blog. Kepnes also promotes his publications and enables readers to buy his books on Amazon.com via the blog. The Amazon ranking suggests that his book enjoys a degree of recognition comparable to that of a guide from a reputed travel publisher such as Lonely Planet, and that it is possible for a travel blogger to be discovered by a renowned publisher and to enjoy subsequent commercial success as a travel writer. For Kepnes, who has created several other similar e-books that he promotes and distributes through his blog, such recognition could potentially lead to sales of his other self-publications.

Some of the difficulties of finding a publisher for a blog-based book have been resolved by the proliferation of digital self-publishing services and platforms that facilitate a swift and wide distribution of a narrative at a low cost. These encompass a variety of non-traditional publishing models, including publishing with an independent press, a self-publishing service, or a print-on-demand publisher (see Bradley et al., 2011). Self-publishing may be a more desirable option for authors who are not discovered by a reputed publisher. An author who

self-publishes with Amazon, for instance, can utilize platforms such as CreateSpace or Kindle Direct Publishing (Amazon, 2014b, 2014d), which facilitate easy distribution of the book in both print and digital formats via the website and the Kindle e-reader.

Laquintano (2013) points out that self-publishing may be stigmatized due to its association with vanity publishing. Such ventures often found it challenging to distribute copies in a highly competitive and controlled commercial market (Bradley et al., 2012: 108). Furthermore, the self-published work was generally viewed as being of poor quality and the fraudulent practices associated with some publishers affected the reputation of both the author and the publisher (Laquintano, 2013). Although new models of self-publishing may differ from earlier forms of vanity publishing, Laquintano (2013) notes that some stigma persists and that a contemporary self-published author may still be viewed skeptically. In the context of travel blogs it can be argued that presenting the self as a self-published author, instead of merely a published author, has implications for the credibility of the narrative and the reputation of its creator.

Despite any perceived lack of authenticity, self-publishing has prospered in recent years, to the extent that Beat Barblan, Director of Identifier Services for Bowker believes 'This is no longer just vanity presses at work - self-publishing is out of the dark corners and making its way into the mainstream' (PR Newswire Association, 2012). Anil Polat, who writes Foxnomad, has chosen the self-publishing route with The Ultimate Tech Guide for Travelers: Version 2.0 (2012) and Overcoming the 7 Major Obstacles to Traveling the World (2010). Both are e-books distributed via the Amazon website as Kindle editions and via Barnes and Noble's website for the Nook e-reader. They were ranked respectively at 729,899 and 1,590,294 overall on Amazon at the time of writing, implying that Polat's offerings are not as popular as Nomadic Matt's. The Ultimate Tech Guide for Travelers: Version 2.0 (2012) has received several favourable customer reviews. Yet, Amazon's customer review guidelines state

that a buyer of any Amazon product, and not necessarily this book, may write a review (Amazon, 2014c). Therefore, while these reviews indicate some interest in promoting Polat's books, it is not clear whether this denotes a sale.

Those who have not attracted the attention of a big name publisher, but would still prefer to release a book under a publisher's imprint, may opt for a contract with an independent press and distribute the book via Amazon in both print and digital formats. A case in point is Jodi Ettenberg, whose The Food Traveler's Handbook (2012) is published by Full Flight Press, an editorial team of freelancers dedicated to publishing the blog-based The Traveler's Handbooks series. Ettenberg's book is also distributed in print and digital formats through Amazon but was ranked 407, 901 overall at the time of writing, suggesting that it enjoys a lesser degree of success than Kepnes's publication. The figures displayed in these rankings indicate the sheer volume of publications available on this website alone and the stiff competition faced by these authors. While there is clearly a market for blog-based travel books, it may prove challenging for these bloggers to gain the degree of fame and recognition enjoyed by Magnanti and Powell.

In the light of Laquintano's observations, it would appear that self-published books such as those written by Ettenberg and Polat compare less favourably with books from legacy publishers and authors like Kepnes. Nevertheless, Polat's decision to self-publish in a digital format for distributing his books is perhaps appropriate, given this travel blog's focus on digital technologies, a theme reinforced by the title Foxnomad, which is an allusion to the Internet browser Firefox. The fact that he has successfully published similarly themed e-books supports his self-presentation as a 'digital nomad' and an expert in digital technologies.

While Amazon is a popular choice, it is not the only company offering self-publishing services. Eva Rees's Forks and Jets: The Final Edition (2011) inspired by her now inactive travel blog by the same name, is available as a print-on-demand (POD) copy from self-

publishing service, Blurb (Rees and Rees, 2008). Unlike the Amazon online catalogue, the product description on Blurb offers no ranking for this book and, at the time of writing, there were still no customer reviews. Choosing Blurb presents some challenges to Rees's positioning of herself as a successful author, as this has limited the audience for her self-presentation. The book is not sold via major retailers such as Amazon or Barnes and Noble, and can only be located by means of a Google search using the title as a search term. Therefore, only individuals familiar with the original blog are likely to locate the book. For a potential buyer, the absence of a ranking or a review for this product makes it difficult to evaluate Rees's reputation as an author and the authenticity of the publication. Thus, while a travel blogger may still become a published author by utilising a less known service such as Blurb, he or she may not necessarily enjoy the same visibility as someone like Nomadic Matt who has the commercial backing of a global publisher like Perigee and a well-established online retailer such as Amazon.

One strategy for improving visibility and potentially generate more sales is to distribute the self-published book across various platforms. Derek Earl Baron, the author of How to Live a Life of Travel, Get Paid to Travel: Work on a Cruise Ship and of the travel blog Wandering Earl, achieves this by selling his e-books both via Amazon.com and his blog, which links to the website of online retailer E-Junkie. At the time of writing, the book ranked 192,512 overall on Amazon, outstripping both Ettenberg's and Polat's publications. Admittedly, this may owe something to the blog being listed among the top twenty-five blogs for 2012 in Time (McCracken, 2012). This endorsement by a world-renowned magazine publisher appears to have contributed to his success as a writer of travel-related books and his self-presentation as a published author.

A traditional publisher invests considerable capital in the promotion and distribution of the publication thus gaining wider visibility and recognition for the text and its author than is possible for those who publish independently (Laquintano, 2010: 484). This has some bearing

on the comparative commercial success of Nomadic Matt's book. The absence of this financial and promotional support poses a significant challenge for self-published authors seeking to acquire an audience or expand their readership and could explain why Polat and Ettenberg's books are ranked lower on Amazon. Another challenge is that a book released under the banners of a recognized publisher may appear more authoritative than one that is self-published or released by an independent press. Laquintano observes that the absence of the quality control that is generally associated with the conventional editing and publishing processes creates a 'credibility void' (2010: 484). Consequently, a reader of a self-published work may be less convinced as to the quality of its writing. Perhaps cognizant of this, the Full Flight Press website assures potential customers that their editorial services filter the best posts of each travel blog to produce books that 'mine the information you really need' (The Travelers' Handbooks, 2014). Such recommendations may confer a credibility that has implications for the perceived authenticity of bloggers' self-presentation as published authors.

### **Presenting the published author**

In the face of stiff competition and the pitfalls of self-publishing, the 'blook' creators discussed here utilize various affordances of their blogs to reinforce their self-presentation and reputation as published authors. The networked nature of blogs is integral to these self-presentational strategies. The travel bloggers discussed here use various social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, to promote themselves. This online self is also 'networked' in the sense that bloggers may position the narrative and the self within a network of links or connections to other persons or organizations online in a 'public display of connections' (Donath and boyd, 2004: 72). This strategy can confer a sense of reliability and trustworthiness based on the company they keep (Utz, 2010). It involves an implicit

presentation of the self that Zizi Papacharissi describes as resulting from ‘individuals us[ing] the tools at hand to present themselves in “show not tell” mode by pointing and connection to individuals, groups, or points of reference’ (2009: 141). Blog features such as hyperlinks to websites and other similar blogs facilitate a ‘pointing and connection’ that supports the presentation of the self as a published author, thus enhancing the reputation of the blogger as travel writer.

Such a show of connections is the central feature of the home page of Nomadic Matt’s Travel Site. Emblazoned across the centre of the home page, directly below the title banner, are logos for Time, CNN, BBC, The Wall Street Journal, The Guardian, Sydney Morning Herald, The New York Times, The Huffington Post, and National Geographic. Matt Kepnes’s profile page reiterates and builds on this display, including logos for organizations whose publications, he says, have ‘featured his advice’ (Nomadic Matt, 2010). The network displayed here supports Kepnes’s claim to being an expert on travel and creates an association with professional travel writing and news media that could enhance the perceived reliability of both his books and his blog. This positioning of the self as a recognized writer and reputable blogger is further reinforced by the blog’s web pages on ‘Travel Guides’ and ‘Books,’ which promote Kepnes’s publications and so establish the self as published author (Nomadic Matt, 2014a; 2014b). Yet, there is a certain tension between the implied idea of the self as a travel writer, who could be viewed as being more erudite and sophisticated, and the self as (a more commercial) guidebook writer.

Derek Baron’s display of connections on Wandering Earl is not quite as prominent, simply indicating that he has been featured in The New York Times, BBC, CNN, National Geographic Traveller, and The Huffington Post, among others. This strategy allows Baron to cement his position as an author, however implicit this may be. It also adds authority to his

position as a travel expert and tour guide, two other positions that he occupies in the blog, and heightens the inherent tensions between travel and tourism.

Jodi Ettenberg likewise positions herself as a reputed writer and published author through the 'Press and Public Relations' page of Legal Nomads that lists links to articles on her blogging and her subsequent publication of The Food Traveler's Handbook (Ettenberg, 2014). The networks of connections displayed in these blogs establish their creators' reputation as published authors and may be perceived as an endorsement of their books. Following from Laquintano (2010: 484), it can be argued that recommendations from recognized publishers and publications strengthen the authors' perceived credibility with potential readers.

Although Anil Polat comparatively lacks media recognition, a separate web page on Foxnomad lists his e-books, thus positioning him as a published author (Polat, 2014). In addition to this, he reviews books by successful blogger-turned authors such as Matt Kepnes and Derek Baron, a strategy that enables him to imply that he is in the same league as these other bloggers. For some readers, this may validate his own position as a published author and heighten his perceived credibility.

None of the abovementioned authors distinguish between self-publishing and conventional publishing models. Given Laquintano's finding that self-publishing may still attract some scorn, it is reasonable to assume this could be a factor in these bloggers' emphasis on being published rather than self-published. Although Kepnes makes no secret of the fact that his other e-books are self-published, he is keen to establish his status as a published author of some repute through a connection with recognized publishers. Baron, Ettenberg, and Polat adopt a similar show-not-tell strategy in their blogs. There is an underlying suggestion that the endorsement of a recognized publisher, or in the case of Polat a recognized book author, is necessary to validate their self-presentation as such.

## Negotiating travel and tourism

Although by promoting their books through their blogs, these travel bloggers suggest that they wish to be seen mainly as published authors, they frequently also describe themselves as travellers as opposed to tourists. Often, a number of other narrative personas are also presented via these travel blogs. Nomadic Matt is also a teacher, Baron acts as a travel guide offering off-the-beaten path tours, Polat styles himself as a technology expert, and Ettenberg and Rees are connoisseurs of different cuisines. Positioning the self as traveller, however, has several implications for their self-presentation as published authors.

The significance of the traveller figure is better understood in the context of theories that describe the practice of tourism as a search for authenticity, as conceptualized by Dean MacCannell (1976), Erik Cohen (1979), and John Urry and Jonas Larsen (2011) among others. Urry and Larsen (2001) in particular discuss the performative nature of commercial tourist photography that tends to stage places and performance of the tourist experience (Urry and Larsen, 2011). This attributes an illusory quality to tourist experience that suggests it is defined against something more genuine and that some opposition still exists between travel and tourism.

Graham Dann's work on the sociolinguistics of tourism proposes that such distinctions are discursive and demonstrates how different narrative techniques are used to construct an experience as travel or as tourism (1996, 1999). Backpacker narratives analysed by O'Reilly (2006) for example, construct travel as a spontaneous and unplanned experience. Other studies indicate that individuals use specific words and phrases to style themselves as travellers and frame their experiences as travel (Elsrud, 2001; McCabe, 2005; O'Reilly, 2005). Travel, unlike tourism, takes the individual off the beaten path, and the journey itself is a 'process of exploration' (Week, 2012: 189) that is fraught with adventure and hardship. Language is

therefore integral to the presentation and positioning of an experience as travel and the individual as a traveller and not a tourist.

A similar narrative style is manifest in blog titles such as Nomadic Matt's Travel Site, Wandering Earl, Legal Nomads and Foxnomad, which emphasize an apparently unplanned and rootless existence, associating these texts with spontaneous experiences that take 'nomadic' individuals off the beaten path. Likewise, Traveling Savage, a deliberate play on the author's legal name, reinforces Keith Savage's presentation of himself as an individual who has forsaken civilization to become 'A hunter, oft-stubbed and bleary-eyed, driven by an insatiable hunger for exploration and experience' (Savage, 2011). The themes of danger and hardship are perhaps best expressed in a post on Legal Nomads categorized 'Adventures in Transportation.' The journey is not easy – Jodi Ettenberg endures 'irate chickens' and 'dirt-covered' children while she is 'careening,' 'catapulted,' and 'trundled' across rural Laos in a form of local transport called a 'songthaew,' implicitly presenting the experience as off-track, spontaneous, and real travel (Ettenberg, 2011). Such descriptions authenticate her position as a nomadic traveller and could enhance her perceived credibility as an author of a travel book. Yet, the blog's display of connections to notable tourism publishers such as Lonely Planet both validates her position as a travel expert and commercializes the blog through its association with tourism.

Yet, while travel is constantly defined against tourism as being more adventurous, and therefore real, it is important to acknowledge that these discourses are nevertheless constantly collapsing into each other. Kepnes is particularly critical of Lonely Planet and its founder Tony Wheeler who, he writes, 'pretty much commercialized backpacking,' thus turning travel destinations into tourist hotspots (Nomadic Matt, 2013). Indeed, tourism promoters frequently draw on discourses of travel, placing advertisements in travel blogs and relying on these narratives of travel to endorse the touristic holiday experiences they sell. Nomadic Matt

collapses into touristic discourse with its promotion of his Country Destination Guides. These recommend sights and activities which Kepnes presents as off-the-beaten path experiences that most tourists are unaware of. Yet, the same texts could potentially lead to those travel experiences becoming touristic ones. Similarly, the subsequent publication of his book could potentially contribute to a touristic commercialization of cheap travel.

The same could be said of Derek Baron's blog and books. Wandering Earl strengthens Baron's position as a traveller, potentially enhancing his reputation as an author of a travel book. Yet, the blog also promotes Baron's guided tours to various destinations. These are described as being unique for taking small groups of people to places off the beaten path, thus introducing potential customers to real travel. There is a consequent tension between the self as a tour guide and the 'wandering' traveller who seeks unplanned, spontaneous experiences. Moreover, his blog-based book could be said to commercialize cheap and off-the-beaten-path travel in the same way that the books published by Kepnes promote budget travel or those by Ettenberg and Rees promote culinary tourism.

If these blogs work as narratives of travel, as opposed to tourism, this owes something to the authors' self-presentation as individuals who dissociate themselves from the tourist industry through narrative techniques that characterize their experiences as travel and position them as travellers. Publishing the blog as a book, particularly with a recognized publishing house, validates the original narrative and lends credibility to the blogger. However, this commercializes the texts and so creates an association with tourism, particularly when the resulting book is presented as a something of a guidebook or attracts tourists to an off-the-beaten path destination. Likewise, through the act of publishing a book and so potentially encouraging a certain destination or mode of travel, an author's position as a traveller dissociated from commercial tourism collapses into that of a promoter of the very industry he or she deprecates. This reinforces the discursive tensions between travel and tourism.

## Conclusions

The different routes to publishing the blog reveal the significance of the support of a well-known publisher and the challenges of self-publishing. Firstly, at least some bloggers recognize that reputation is crucial for success, and that recognized publishers can confer credibility. A display of connections to well-known publishers or published bloggers consequently becomes a significant element in presentation of self as an online author. Secondly, the rankings on Amazon indicate the vast number of publications available. Self-publishing has only put more books on the market, making it increasingly difficult for authors to get their books noticed by potential buyers. This indicates that the support of a renowned publisher is still necessary for visibility.

Self-publishing does have its advantages. The recognition of a traditional publisher is no longer necessary to publish a book. Yet, commercialising a blog through self-publishing and so cashing in on the blog to book phenomenon may not result in the utopian success story portrayed in the media. Neither does publishing with a recognized imprint necessarily result in instant fame and recognition for all such authors. If Matt Kepnes enjoys a reasonable degree of success as a book author, this perhaps owes something to his own self-presentation in his blog as a writer recognized by several leading publications and his being published by Penguin. Studies of the blog-to-book phenomenon that have thus far focused mainly on print books from recognized publishers could benefit from widening their purview to include narratives that are self-published and subsequently released by other less well-known entities. As several bloggers have chosen to self-publish in digital formats, this may indicate an emerging blog-to-e-book publishing trend that requires further investigation.

Publishing a blog as a book realizes these bloggers' aspiration to be viewed as professional writers and travel experts. The blogs become records of how the books evolved

and the bloggers' goals were achieved. Publishing the book is a promotional strategy that has significance for the overall presentation of the individual's online self. It bestows some credibility on the accounts of travel blogger who could be perceived as a reliable source of information and expertise as the traveller-author. Yet, consequently a travel blogger turns tourism-promoter-publisher. If the authenticity of the blog as a travel narrative rests on the presentation of the self as traveller, then in the very moment of publication, the blogger's claim to authorship and the blog's claim to authenticity are at once both validated and destabilized. This only complicates the existing tensions in these narratives, and as a result these blogs are constantly negotiating between discourses of both travel and tourism.

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