The use of LiveJournal to create personal journal–style weblogs exposes issues concerning identity management and audience control. Tensions exist between (1) notions of diaries as personal and private vs. the recognition of online journals as public and performative; (2) the efficiency of blending one’s social contacts into one audience vs. the ability to provide different self–presentations to different groups; (3) the desire for personal control of discourse vs. the desire for connection to others; and (4) values of individualism and autonomy vs. the desire for feedback and attention.

Abstract
The use of LiveJournal to create personal journal–style weblogs exposes issues concerning identity management and audience control. Tensions exist between (1) notions of diaries as personal and private vs. the recognition of online journals as public and performative; (2) the efficiency of blending one’s social contacts into one audience vs. the ability to provide different self–presentations to different groups; (3) the desire for personal control of discourse vs. the desire for connection to others; and (4) values of individualism and autonomy vs. the desire for feedback and attention.

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Introduction
In this article, I explore identity and information management strategies of individuals on LiveJournal. Several tensions inherent in LiveJournal participation remain unresolved, pointing to some significant contradictions in people’s understandings of identity and relationships. The model of a private diary conflicts with the reality of public performance. The convenience of the blended audience on LiveJournal, often consisting of friends, family, and coworkers, conflicts with desires to manage and partition that audience. The desire for control of discourse, interaction, and relationships conflicts with the desire for increased connection and closeness. The desire for autonomy and the belief in discrete, individual selves conflicts with the desire for feedback and approval from others. These tensions exist in social interactions more generally, but are particularly highlighted and even exacerbated by
the particular technological and social features of LiveJournal.

LiveJournal provides a user–friendly weblogging system enhanced by a variety of social networking features. LiveJournal participants create lists of “friends.” The “friends list” gives participants an easy way to group and display other journals they read frequently. It also gives people on their friends list greater access to their own journal. The display of the friends list on each user profile page facilitates the growth of participants’ social networks. Participants can also display their “interests” and search for and link to others with the same interests.

Previous research on blogs has considered how to characterize them (boyd, 2006; Herring, et al., 2004), what kinds of communication they contain (Herring and Paolillo, 2006; Herring, et al., 2006), what motivates people to contribute to them (Nardi, et al., 2004b; Nardi, et al., 2004a), and actions performed through blogs, such as gift exchange (Pearson, 2007) and information management (Raynes–Goldie, 2004).

While political blogging has received the most attention in both the popular and academic press, Herring, et al., (2004) point out that filter blogs, of which political blogs are an example, constitute a relatively small portion of blogs. Most blogs are instead more personal “journal”—style blogs. All of the LiveJournal accounts in my sample fit this diary–like format, although a few participants occasionally include filter–type posts.

Methodology

I conducted two years of participant observation research on LiveJournal. Like most LiveJournal users — especially those who started their journals during the period when accounts could only be obtained through receipt of a “code” from a current user — I started my own LiveJournal after several friends became participants. I participated much as others do, posting to my own journal, reading the journals of people on my friends list, commenting in others’ journals, and growing my network of contacts by adding people I encountered in the comments of my friends’ journals, or through reading the friends pages of others in my network. In 2003, I conducted face–to–face interviews with a theoretical sample of 26 LiveJournal users in several different U.S. cities. My interviewees included six couples. Given the networked pool from which I selected my interviewees, most were friends with other people I interviewed, and several kept in touch with others face–to–face and through other media besides LiveJournal.

Five interviewees were extremely infrequent users with spouses or close friends who were more frequent users [1]. I included these to investigate reasons for not using LiveJournal, even when many of their friends and family were using it.

My interviewees, and the wider group whose journals I studied, do not represent typical LiveJournal users. My network of journals grew organically through friends of
friends and thus comprises a snowball sample, with the resulting clusters of similar demographics and interests which that sampling method often produces. Statistically, LiveJournal is dominated by teenagers but most of my 26 interviewees are in their late 20s to late 30s. Most have at least a bachelor’s degree. Four are writers or graphic artists, and most of the rest work in the information technology industry, as either technical support (six) or programmers (seven) [2]. Most have been participating on various Internet forums for many years and are savvy computer users. Probably again as a result of the snowball sampling, a high proportion (twelve) are either gay or bisexual, and/or define themselves as polyamorous (in romantic relationships with more than one person at once).

The examples I provide in this article are primarily quotes from my interviews. However, my analysis of the interviews has been shaped by my experience reading the journals of my interviewees, and by my two years of participant–observation. In the following interview quotes, I’ve used ellipses to indicate that I’ve left out some of what the interviewee said. I’ve used a slash when an interviewee interrupted themself or restarted a sentence. Paraphrases or my insertions for clarity are in brackets, as are indications of actions such as laughter. I have changed all of the names of my interviewees and of the people they mention.

Private journal vs. public performance

Many of my interviewees distinguish between blogs and LiveJournal. Their definition of a blog focuses on the technological difference, with the expectation that blogging requires more skill with html and is housed on a personally controlled Web site. They also subscribed to the popular media model of blogs as essays or political commentary. Herring, et al. (2004) term this type of blog a filter blog. In their definition, the author of a filter blog finds online content, and then provides links to, and commentary on, that content. While some LiveJournals fit the definition of a filter blog (or more commonly, a blend of filter and journal–type blog), LiveJournal participants primarily characterize LiveJournal as a site hosting online diaries. Many were additionally drawn to LiveJournal for the social networking aspects of the site, with the hope that they would receive greater feedback and dialogue than is generally true on blogs [3].

However, LiveJournal participants also recognize that what they do on LiveJournal doesn’t quite fit their own model of a diary. Many of my interviewees hold two diametrically opposed models of what they are doing on LiveJournal. On the one hand, based on the model of a private diary, their LiveJournals are their own private space in which to record thoughts, opinions, feelings, and events from their lives. On the other hand, these journals constitute a form of performance, complete with an expectation that a performance must give attention to audience desires. In return, the audience can be expected to respond.

Tessa, a writer and editor in her 30s discusses her relationship to her audience on LiveJournal:
Lori: How would you compare [LiveJournal] to [your] paper diary?

Tessa: There’s much more of an entertainment focus in my LiveJournal because I’m aware of an audience. Fairly recently, a friend of mine on LiveJournal posted excerpts of her diary from when she was a teenager, and I thought what a neat idea for a post and I dug up one of my journals from when I was fifteen years old and I read it and it’s catastrophically boring. It’s the diary of a fifteen–year–old. It’s whiny. It’s self–absorbed. It’s repetitive. It’s boring. ... This may sound a little arrogant, but to some degree [I have a] reputation to maintain as someone who’s at least mildly entertaining.

Peter, a graphic artist in his 30s, points out that the existence of an audience also affects the style and content of the writing.

Peter: There’s definitely a level of self–censorship in terms of whether /If it were just a paper thing then you could put it in the sock drawer. There’s a lot more emotional honesty. I have seen some – in some journals – what I would consider to be an almost startling amount of honesty, but mine /I don’t know that I can be quite that open, even in a private [post], amongst friends.

While thus recognizing the public nature of their posts, LiveJournal participants nevertheless cling to the idea that what they’re writing is an expression of the self, for the self. This was often expressed, both in journals and during my interviews, with the phrase “it’s your (or my) journal” so “write what you want.” Yet, even in comments to that effect, there’s also a recognition that this might not be completely possible.

Amy: I consider it my diary and I do write things in there that I would write in my diary. ... I try to leave out personally identifying information that could be used against me somehow. I’m a little paranoid like that.

Even though trying to use her LiveJournal as a diary, Amy, a customer support worker in her early 20s, recognizes that this might expose her in disadvantageous ways.

James, a computer programmer in his late 30s, provides a negative evaluation of people who try to employ a private diary format in their LiveJournals:

James: There are a lot of people whose posts to LiveJournal are not just things they are trying to share with other people, but use it as sort of a, hey, this is a diary and I don’t care if other people read it. ... I’ve certainly seen
some people whose posting habits often include a phrase along the lines of, “I’m going to write this anyway because I want to say this even though it’s of no interest to anyone but me.” Sometimes they’re nice and they put it behind a little cut tag in case no one wants to read it, but sometimes they don’t.

LiveJournal “cut tags” allow users to create a link to parts of their post. The portion hidden behind the cut tag will not appear until the link is clicked. LiveJournal participants often use this feature when they post large graphics, long excerpts from outside sources, or detailed information that might be considered “too much information.” James distinguishes diarists who post things of interest only to them from his own practices, and even suggests that use of LiveJournal as a private diary could be considered rude unless managed with cut tags.

Other participants focus more on the public performance aspect of LiveJournal. George, an attorney in his late 30s, is one of the interviewees I term “resisters.” Despite having several friends on LiveJournal, he never posts and rarely comments in others’ journals. His wife posts frequently in both her own and other journals, but George uses his LiveJournal account primarily to read his friends’ journals. Although he enjoys this activity, he expressed mystification at the willingness of others to expose themselves online through LiveJournal.

George: When you’re doing it there’s an assumed audience. ... I guess [I would like to know] why are they doing it because that is a total mystery to me. I simply cannot understand, because it’s not logical. If you’re presenting to an audience you want to achieve something with them. You either want to entertain them or create a change in their behavior.

George recognizes the tension between private journal and public performance, and finds the two irreconcilable.

His wife, Alison, a graphic artist in her early 30s, and a much more active participant, has posted about very personal matters about her day-to-day life. Yet her description of her LiveJournal also leans more towards the performance model.

Alison: I think of it more as like a performance art kind of thing. I don’t think of it as my own personal private journal since I don’t want the entire world reading my personal private journal.

During my research period, Alison’s journal included commentary about work events, requests for assistance with a job search, complaints about relationships, general information about her day-to-day life, poetry challenges, links to amusing things found online, quizzes posed to her readers, and online quiz results. While all of these can be considered performance in some sense, many of them differ little from the content of LiveJournals considered by their users to be personal diaries. Thus Alison’s
characterization of her journal as “performance art” serves more to distance her from her own emotional use of the Journal than to accurately describe her use patterns.

The understanding of LiveJournal as “public” or “private” does not derive solely from participants’ experience with LiveJournal itself. All of my interviewees have experience in other types of online forums. As such, they view their LiveJournal participation within the context of their online lives, both past and present. Robert, an investment broker in his early 40s, made several statements during his interview about the public nature of the Internet:

Robert: I have been around on the net for long enough that I don’t consider anything I put on the net to be private. Even if it’s marked private. It’s on somebody else’s server and if the government wanted to subpoena all of the records concerning me they could. If I have things that are actually private they are not up on the Internet.

Robert rarely posts anything about his personal life on LiveJournal. Instead, his journal is primarily written from the point of view of a fictional character from a game system he and his wife produce.

Privacy concerns thus govern some of how LiveJournal participants use their journals. However there are also pleasures to be found in the public performance aspects of blogging. Robert’s wife, Vivian, is a food science technician in her mid–30s. She currently stays home full–time to care for their young son. She keeps a diary–type LiveJournal, with entries about day–to–day occurrences and relationships.

Vivian: [LiveJournal] really is this huge project in self–expression on the part of people who would not normally get to talk to a sort of wide semi–anonymous public. I think that /I get the feeling that a lot of the people who are talking in it, especially people who do most of their posts public, really feel like they’re talking to the whole universe in a way. Sometimes I feel that way actually. And so it’s a /I remember one of my highly emotional posts recently that I actually said the amazing thing about LiveJournal is you can shout into the wind and it shouts back. [laughs]

Vivian distances herself somewhat from the advantages of public posts, describing LiveJournal as good for “people who would not normally get to talk to a ... wide semi–anonymous public.” She acknowledges that she also feels like she’s “talking to the whole universe,” but only sometimes. This equivocal depiction of the pleasures of public posting suggests a slightly illicit quality to the desire for an audience.

Participants express tensions between several models of participation on LiveJournal. As a diary, LiveJournal provides a place for them to record daily events and reflections. As a communication tool, it provides a forum for connection with others and public expression. As a performance venue, it provides a stage for
self-presentation and artistic production.

These different aspects of LiveJournal use sometimes come into conflict. Private expressions risk exposure to the public world of the Internet. Attention to audience desires can make self-expression feel less genuine. Maintaining control over one’s own diary can interfere with the desire to connect with others. LiveJournal users employ a variety of social and technological techniques to attempt to manage these tensions.

Efficiency vs. audience management

In their use of LiveJournal as a communication tool, many interviewees identified communication efficiency as a key advantage to LiveJournal. LiveJournal provides a forum in which to post everything from information about day-to-day lives to announcements of important events. Dylan, a white male programmer in his late 20s, frequently posts to his LiveJournal, using it to record “day to day goings on, thoughts about current situations, links or other things that I want to show other people. LiveJournal provides a very convenient way to provide that sort of thing to a large audience.”

Mark, another Pacific Northwest programmer in his late 30s, rarely posts to his LiveJournal. However, he found it useful when his son was born:

Mark: When William was born, that’s the first place I went to do a post there because I knew that a bunch of [friends from an online group] read it and a bunch of [friends from a previous job] read it and some of [my wife’s] family read it. And it’s like here’s one easy place I can go. I can put up a picture and everyone will see it and so that’s the first place I went.

Several interviewees preferred LiveJournal as a method for updating large numbers of people to other media such as e-mail. Jill, a Web designer in her late 30s, says that “it’s so much easier sometimes to write a LiveJournal entry if you know that most of your friends will read it, than send a really big e-mail.” Cathy, in her early 30s, currently unemployed and previously employed in technical support, prefers LiveJournal to the telephone. “I’m not going to call you up and tell everyone individually twenty times.”

As many of these statements indicate, for LiveJournal to work this way for people, significant numbers of their contacts need to also participate on LiveJournal. Peter says, “a lot of people I know are already on LiveJournal” so “instead of sending one e-mail to a bunch of people” he can send them to read his LiveJournal. Several participants prefer using LiveJournal for news delivery over e-mail, and expressed their preference as a matter of convenience and efficiency.
Bloggers interviewed by Nardi, et al. (2004b) similarly preferred blogs to e–mail. However, there is little objective difference in effort between the two as ways to broadcast messages to a large group of people. To do so via e–mail, one might have to type in multiple e–mail addresses for each message, but most e–mail clients allow the user to set up lists, eliminating this step. Thus the claim of efficiency may stand in for a more emotional advantage. Posting to LiveJournal allows others to choose to come read the post, while e–mail “pushes” the message out to people who may or may not be receptive to it. Anyone who has received one too many unwelcome broadcast e–mail messages from distant relatives or friends may worry that their message imposes upon their friends.

Praising LiveJournal for its efficiency additionally positions LiveJournal users as effective, successful adults, utilizing new tools to communicate with others. This utilitarian stance deflects attention from the more emotional side of LiveJournal participation. It decreases the emphasis on LiveJournal as a diary site. By thus depicting their participation as businesslike rather than expressive, these LiveJournal users tap into cultural norms valuing information exchange over emotional expression and instrumental over creative uses of technology.

The efficiency involved in having contacts from different areas of their lives combined into one large audience can create tension, however. As more and more of their contacts join LiveJournal, often at their own encouragement, some LiveJournal participants experience discomfort related to this “audience blending.” Dylan described his reaction when a group of friends from another online forum began showing up on LiveJournal.

_Dylan_: I actually had a bit of a shock at the [chat group] migration onto LiveJournal. I looked about halfway through it and saw like Jim and Alison and a couple of other people. And it was a shock because I think Jim had found my sister and her LiveJournal and so that started going on and it was like the sound of two ships crashing in my mind. These two completely separate areas of my life suddenly collided.

_Lori_: When you say like ships colliding it sounds a little bit disastrous. Does it feel kind of disastrous?

_Dylan_: It’s been overall good, but it’s been/I don’t know if the right word is a paradigm shift, but until LiveJournal, I’d had separate areas of my life. People I knew from work, my real life social group, my mush group, my social group from another area of the country where I lived; and over time they’ve all blended. Either there were already connections there that I didn’t know about that LiveJournal revealed or just separate pockets of these groups have connected and the groups have sort of glommed onto each other and now at this point there really isn’t a clear separation between any of them and that’s taken some
getting used to. ... It’s getting to the point where everyone I know knows everyone else I know. ...

Electra: But you say that takes some getting used to. Why is that? Why is it a little uncomfortable at first?

Dylan: It’s kind of comfortable having these different social groups to be in where you can be a different person around them. You can be interested in different things because you’re with this different group of people.

We are accustomed to behaving differently with different groups of people, and providing different performances of self in different situations. The rules for behavior are different under different circumstances, and we may feel we can relax or “be ourselves” more with a particular person or group of people. Goffman (1959) analyzes these aspects of the presentation of self as pertaining to different “regions” of interaction, and particularly identifies the existence of “backstage” regions within which people may break “out of character” from the performance they have been accomplishing in a nearby region. In face-to-face situations, divisions between regions are often quite clear. For instance, rooms in houses are often divided between rooms for entertaining and more private rooms into which casual guests are usually not invited. LiveJournal provides a virtual region complete with the potential to create backstage areas. However, when people find different audiences blending all in one region, greater conscious attention is required to issues of impression management and to careful division of LiveJournal into new regions.

LiveJournal participants use both technological and social tools for audience management. LiveJournal allows users four levels of privacy. At the least private level, individual entries default to “public,” meaning that they are readable even by people who do not have LiveJournal accounts. Entries can also be “friends–locked,” which restricts viewing to the list of people with LiveJournal accounts designated as “friends” by the user. In addition, users can set up a series of filters. Filters designate a specific list of people from the user’s friends list, enabling people to tailor entries to specific groups of friends. Finally, entries can be locked “private,” enabling only the journal author to read the entry. Most of my interviewees said they used this final feature only rarely, and many not at all.

For most of my LiveJournal contacts, use of filters increased over time. In part this results from increasing sophistication in the use of LiveJournal tools. In part it stems from increasing numbers of people from different areas of their lives joining LiveJournal. Some also increased their use of filters based on reactions they received to particular posts. For instance, some people create different filters for particular interest groups, with the understanding that not everything they post about will be interesting to all of their contacts. Keith, a programmer in his 30s, uses several different filters based on topic:

Keith: I’ve also got [a filter] for geeks ... there’s one for Occults, one for Otherkin, one for Otherkin friendly. So the
Occult is if I want to post about such and so Pagan ritual thing that I did the other night or just musing on the relation between such and so goddess and such and so tarot card. No need to bother the geeks with it because half of them are raging materialists who will be like “why are you wasting my time with this, you superstitious weirdo?”

With this type of usage, the journaler can control who sees which aspect of their lives, and also share information only with people who share that particular interest. Keith particularly recognizes that not only will the “geeks” not be interested pagan posts, but they may view him negatively, as a “superstitious weirdo,” upon reading such posts. His use of filters functions not just to provide information to people specifically interested in a particular topic. It also controls other people’s view of his identity.

Many of LiveJournal participants I interviewed were conscious of their use of the filtering feature of LiveJournal to manage their appearance to different elements of their blended audiences. For instance, many were careful to keep their personal and work lives separate.

*Peter:* If I’m going off about my manager or my employer, that’s always going in private.

*James:* The only times I’ve even considered making something friends only is if I want to gripe about something very specific at work where I would prefer that there’s no chance that someone at work could accidentally /None of the people connected with me at work use LiveJournal as far as I know.

*Amy:* I have one specific filter where I filter out the people that I work with because I also have coworkers who know who I am. And I, because of the chain of command, I have information about goings on in the department that a lot of them don’t have information to. I don’t want them to find out about stuff going on at work through my LiveJournal so I filter them out of those kinds of posts.

Others recognized that the way they present themselves to friends might not be comfortable for family members. Mary, a stay–at–home mom in her early 30s, is glad that most of her family does not participate on LiveJournal:

*Mary:* Quite frankly, I don’t want my family reading my journal. I know that they don’t have this picture in their head of this sweetness and light woman because they know what kind of a person I am. But I don’t want them to really see how sarcastic and bitter I can be sometimes.

Amy, on the other hand, has several family members with LiveJournal accounts,
including her father and sister. She employs filters to control their access to her journal:

*Lori:* So does your family still keep track of you [through LiveJournal]?  

*Amy:* Yeah. Although they are heavily filtered and they don’t get to read everything I write. [laughs]

Individuals also create filters for varying levels of closeness with people on their friends’ lists:

*Keith:* I’ve also got one friends group titled “I’m Insecure.” That’s for the times when I’m just feeling really insecure and want to post my insecurity and only display it to the people I’m okay with reading that.

LiveJournal filters constitute a set of tools with which to create different interactional regions, and allow people to resubdivide their newly blended audience. This allows LiveJournal participants to resume the normal condition of providing different self–presentations to different groups. Filters thus provide a technological method for audience management. However, as in other social situations, an audience can be managed, but not controlled. Several interviewees recognized that while they might lock entries to specific groups, they needed the cooperation of the people within those groups to contain the information to just that specific audience.

Peter addresses this issue through self-censorship of his journal posts:

*Peter:* With the community and the friends I have, everybody is so tight that I don’t know that I would want to say things that only some people could see because it’s not just LiveJournal where we’re knowing people from.

*Lori:* It would get around in some other way.

*Peter:* Yeah. I would rather be the source of the information than have stuff get around.

Thomas, a technical support person in his late 30s, sometimes posts complaints about other members of a large group of friends who all participate on LiveJournal. He attempts to control dissemination of such posts through filters and through explicit statements within the post. He says that “Oftentimes on my friends list I have a LiveJournal cut with ‘this is a friends listed post. Please don’t talk about it.’” However, this technique has not been very successful for Thomas. He says that, “At this point I’ve had seven different posts referred to in other people’s journals in public entries.”
The audience blending that occurs on LiveJournal results in LiveJournal participants having to more consciously manage different audience segments. LiveJournal participants also understand that their audience members now also have a greater ability to compare notes and check differing performances against each other. They are faced with the choice of, like Thomas, asking different audience segments to collude with them in keeping information within a select group, or like Peter, omitting information they would otherwise provide. In face–to–face situations, it is easier to signal the impartation of “secret” information, and often easier to be sure of one’s audience membership for such information. LiveJournal’s more broadcast–like forum makes participants uneasy about their ability to accomplish information management amongst different groups.

Aside from interrelationships defeating the purpose of filters, LiveJournal participants also recognize that the technology itself, or their use of it, can fail:

Amy: One day I misfiltered something and somebody else read something that they really shouldn’t have and it was completely my mistake and it was Dylan’s other girlfriend and she broke up with him because of it.

Mark: I don’t use friends lock because I don’t trust it and I feel like if I have something to say that I don’t want someone to see then I’m better off not posting it at all rather than post it and oops, I messed up and locked it the wrong way or who knows, or like if they make a server change and something screws up.

Fiona: So I tried to set a filter of just a few people who had told me, if you need to vent about this, we’re willing to listen. I tried to do that and the filter didn’t work.

Charles: I tend to do this with everything that I post. I just ask myself for a second, if for some reason filters were to fail and my entire journal was to become public, what would be the repercussions of people reading this.

All tools may fail, and all computer users have some experience of tool failure. Most of my interviewees have significant online experience and understand the potential exposure inherent in the failure of online security measures. They also understand that while they may exert some control over their particular LiveJournal account, they do not fully control the forum as a whole. They thus perceive disclosure as riskier on LiveJournal than in other types of social situations.

LiveJournal participants appreciate the efficiency involved in having all of their social contacts connected to one forum. However, this advantage is in tension with their desire to manage different areas of their lives and to control their presentation of self among different groups of people. While LiveJournal provides specific tools that facilitate audience and self–presentation management, this tension is difficult to
completely resolve.

Control vs. connection

Most of my interviewees have significant experience with other types of online forums, including muds, chat spaces, e–mail listservs, etc. Several belonged previously to listservs from which most participants migrated to LiveJournal. Charles, a programmer in his 30s, discussed the advantage of LiveJournal for interaction with people who previously participated on a listserv.

Lori: Does it feel different as a group than it did when it was a mailing list?

Charles: Yeah. You don’t have to tolerate the idiots. If you don’t want to read something you don’t have to.

While it is possible to avoid reading some posts to a listserv, it can be more difficult to follow the ongoing interaction if you selectively filter out certain people. When the same people all have their own LiveJournal accounts, it can be easier to pick and choose contacts amongst the group.

Similarly, participants expressed appreciation for the degree of control they have over their LiveJournal. Unlike other kinds of online forums, they can control such factors as topic, access, and rules of interaction. Fiona, a veterinary assistant in her late 30s, and Tammy, a technical support manager in her mid–30s, are both part of a close–knit group of friends who all participate on LiveJournal. Despite heavy LiveJournal use within this group to keep connected with others and even to coordinate group activities, they both describe LiveJournal in individualistic terms.

Fiona: With LiveJournal, because it’s your journal, you choose the topic, so you have that autonomy.

Tammy: To me, it’s my journal. I can do what I want and I feel that everyone has that exact same right. This is your journal. You write in it what you want. I have no place to tell you what to put in your journal or what not to.

Participants value their level of control on LiveJournal. But they additionally seek connection with others. LiveJournal allows for a greater degree of dialogue than many other blogging programs. On LiveJournal, people can comment on specific entries, and can also comment on other comments in clearly threaded sequences. LiveJournal preference settings allow for e–mail notification whenever someone has responded to either a post or comment. In theory, this makes LiveJournal more conducive to
dialogue than many other blogging forums. However, many participants complain that LiveJournal does not have enough dialogue:

*George:* LiveJournal is not very dialectical. There’s not a lot of dialogue. ... I do read the comments and often I can see it happen, but it’s like super slow mo. It’s not an actual conversation.

*Mark:* ... it’s not really a two–way exchange typically. So, it’s hard to get in an argument with someone on LiveJournal I think.

*Robert:* It wasn’t designed as a mechanism for holding big conversations, really.

None of these three participants use LiveJournal to keep diary–type journals. Their primary interest in LiveJournal is to connect to or communicate with friends and family. But for that purpose, they find LiveJournal lacking.

Even more active participants tend not to expect dialogue despite desiring such interaction. When conversations do emerge, many participants seem to find this abnormal or uncomfortable within the LiveJournal format. For instance, Jennifer, an office worker in her early 30s, says “It felt really weird to me to comment back in my own journal.” This describes an essentially two–step process, rather than an ongoing dialogue between the poster and the commenters.

Conversations do sometimes emerge within the comments sections of people’s journals. But when they veer off–topic, as conversations amongst friends often do, they no longer appear to fit within the post–response format of LiveJournal. Mary discusses conversations she often has with Dylan, in their and others’ journals:

*Mary:* He and I usually start these /I guess the only way to describe it is we just make smart–ass comments either to each other’s posts or when one of us comments in somebody else’s journal.

*Lori:* It goes back and forth.

*Mary:* Yeah. We did that to Peter’s journal a couple of times. One of us made a comment and the other one commented and it just went on and on and on. And Peter was just, “get out of my journal” [laughs].

*Lori:* Yeah? Some people reacted that way to it?

*Mary:* Yeah. Sometimes. Usually, they’d just go “oh no, it’s them again.”
Mary and Dylan are very unusual in my sample in the degree to which they engage in multiple-turn conversations in comments. As Mary indicates, these discussions are often sarcastic and off-topic. As such, they constitute a connection between Mary and Dylan, but appear out of place when they occur in others’ journals. The blog model, in which the particular journal is “owned” by one person, does not easily lend itself to expectations of free-ranging conversation amongst posters and commenters.

LiveJournal posts are essentially broadcasts. The audience might react, but is not expected to participate, *per se*. Even when a post is targeted to a limited group, it doesn’t start as something that feels like a one-to-one or small-group conversation.

Vivian: I think [LiveJournal is] really much more voyeuristic than relationship-oriented. I think there are people who I know a lot of facts about. They might be emotional facts, even, but who I don’t have a very personal sense of, because they never — they’re not really talking to me. They’re talking to ten people or fifty people or one hundred people. So, from their point of view it’s not a relationship with me.

LiveJournal focuses attention on the individual, rather than the audience or group interaction. Posts are more declamation than conversation. While this does not lend itself well to close personal connections, it does provide some benefits to the audience, as George points out:

George: David’s journal I read because I’m interested in his life and frankly sometimes he does talk about things in his journal that I don’t think he would talk to me about face-to-face. Maybe he gets some distance through the keyboard. ... You do this for anyone, at least in part, you edit for what you think that person is interested in. And, maybe you’re wrong. Maybe they’re interested in other things that you don’t talk about. And so when you’re reading somebody’s LiveJournal, it’s what they are interested in about themselves. And so I find that interesting and his journal is a good example of that. ... That’s part of why I like LiveJournal. I do like it because I am not a specific audience, right. I like that it’s not customized for me.

LiveJournal participants enjoy the glimpses they get into other lives. As George notes, sometimes the broadcast model itself provides for greater insight into those lives. However, this functions more as entertainment than as interpersonal connection. It does not easily allow for the kinds of contact that strengthen relationships.

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**Autonomy vs. the desire for comments**
Participants recognize that their comments constitute a form of performance in front of an audience of uncertain composition that they cannot completely control. This evokes several fears. One fear regards the loss of control of one’s own words. When you post a comment in someone else’s journal, your comment can be deleted by the journal’s owner. In addition, you have no control over the audience. Beyond seeing that a post is friends–locked, you can’t tell if it is filtered to a specific group of the journal owner’s friends. And if the post is filtered, you have no way of determining who is on the filter. You also can’t control future changes in that filter, or in the level of privacy accorded the post.

Several participants spoke of the effect this had on their decisions to comment:

James: There have been times when I’ve wanted to make a comment to someone and realized that while they would probably want to hear that response, everyone else who is reading it shouldn’t hear it.

Robert: [I deleted a comment because] I was saying something a bit personal about a mutual friend and I wasn’t sure that that mutual friend was public with it. I knew that the person whose journal I was commenting into knew it. I don’t know who else is reading it and it’s bad manners to reveal.

Vivian: I find it really frustrating when looking at a locked post to not be able to know who else can read it. Especially since Robert’s journal has a lot of the same friends. Sometimes there will be something that’s coming up with somebody, which I’d like to discuss with him and I don’t know if he knows about it or not because there isn’t a feature to say who else is reading this.

Amy: I refrain from comments when it’s a privacy issue and I’m not sure who else is going to see it. When you’re in somebody else’s journal you don’t know who they are ever going to give access to their journal. So unless it’s in my own journal where I can control who gets to read what, I’m careful about commenting.

Jonathan: [I wouldn’t leave a comment that’s] something personal to me or something where it may reveal something about that person that they don’t want other people to hear.

Even in face–to–face or in other mediated forums, people can never be certain who might repeat a comment. But in face–to–face meetings, and in some other online venues such as chat rooms, utterances are by default more ephemeral. Archived forums such as listservs and online bulletin boards tend to be more public from the
Most communication in such situations is to the entire group, without the filtering capabilities that cause confusion on LiveJournal. People on LiveJournal face increased uncertainties about audience, information, and propriety of particular comments.

A second fear relating to commenting in journals concerns identity management. Just as participants understand their own journals to be a performance, they know that when they post comments in another participants’ journal, they are also performing, and in a forum in which they have less knowledge and control of the audience. This leads to some hesitancy to comment, an awareness of how comments present the self, and a tendency to comment only on trivial matters. For some, this means avoiding what they call “me too” comments.

George: I will try really hard not to comment unless I think I’m saying something that is novel, that nobody else has said, that actually has some value to it, or is funny. That’s essential.

Peter: I don’t make as many [comments] as I probably should. ... There’s also a level of not really knowing what to say in that situation and so, as much as I would want to be constructive, I don’t know how constructive I can be with a “me too” kind of, “I’m sorry.” ... I agonize enough as it is over proper spelling and grammar and stuff in posts, but when it comes to comments I’m even worse because I want to make sure the comment is relevant and that I’m not sounding like an idiot.

In other online forums, posts that merely agree with a previous post or repeat other comments are often perceived as a waste of bandwidth. In addition, these “me too” posts contain little information, and function in a more emotional way. Here again, LiveJournal participants lean towards instrumental communication and distance themselves from LiveJournal’s more emotional aspects.

Several factors thus influence people’s choice on whether and how to comment in other people’s journals. They recognize their lack of ability to control the audience for their comments. They also express concern about exposing information about others to that audience. Participants also want to appear intelligent and creative, which sometimes mitigates against supportive but repetitive “me too” posts.

In addition to comments they write, participants also have fears regarding comments they read. One such fear is that, as performers, participants are not being completely genuine.

Cathy: You shouldn’t fool yourself into thinking you’re getting no editing.
Tammy: Most people will stop and go back and read and will rework a little bit. There’s two sides to that coin too. Some people will say that’s fake because they went back and edited their thoughts and not all this stuff from the heart. But, you can still be honest without being blunt.

The diary format evokes an expectation of spontaneity and genuineness. This is in tension with pressures to write well and provide an entertaining performance. The control people have over their self-presentation in this text-based, asynchronous medium means that all information is what Goffman terms “given” rather than “given off.” [5] We are used to relying, in face-to-face situations on “given off” information — information that is less controllable by social actors — to provide clues to sincerity or its lack. All LiveJournal performances thus carry a slight cloud of suspicion as to their honest depiction of the self.

The desire for comments in one’s own journal also creates tension for participants. Cathy notes that the desire for comments is logical, in that it proves that one does in fact have an audience: “I think everyone wishes they got more because it means people are reading.”

Some participants fight against this expectation that the amount of audience feedback connotes worth or status. Jeremy, a programmer in his mid-30s, notes that more comments provide more “entertainment,” but de-emphasizes the existence of comments as proof of audience.

Jeremy: I think there’s sort of a tit for tat that goes on. If you comment in someone’s journal they’re more apt to comment in yours. ... Insofar as it provides more entertainment I would prefer if people commented more, but to me it’s not a popularity contest. How many you get doesn’t indicate what people think.

Stating that comments do not constitute a “popularity contest,” allows Jeremy to protect his ego from the fact that he does not get as many comments as he would like.

Participants worry that their desire for comments denotes a lack of autonomy or a shameful desire for attention. They express their desire for comments in even more negative terms:

Charles: I would be lying if I didn’t say that part of me, the attention whore, would love to get more comments. But I know that the comments that I get are genuine.

Keith: I’d like to get a few more comments in my journal. It would just make me feel like (a) more people were reading, and (b) more people care. It’s the standard narcissism thing that I think everybody has at least a little.
of. ... I try to adopt the stance that really I should be writing my journal for me and not to get more comments.

Charles and Keith label the aspect of themselves that desires comments as an “attention whore” or “narcissistic,” demonstrating a belief that they shouldn’t want comments as much as they do.

Amy projects the desire for more comments onto others. She identifies other people’s desire for comments in negative terms, suggesting that such people are “high maintenance” or “really insecure.”

Amy: But then there are a few people that are just really high maintenance and if you don’t give them comments they think you’re not reading them or that you’re ignoring them. So some people I comment even if there isn’t really anything worthy of saying. I’ll just say “oh yeah I agree,” because they need to see your name and know that you’re reading them because some people are really insecure. [laughs] ... I don’t live or die by what happens on the Internet and there are some people who really do — that’s their whole life. And so when they get comments ... I think it boosts their feelings a little bit.

There are several results of all these fears and tensions regarding comments. First, almost no one gets as many comments as they would like [6]. Second, participants also feel they should contribute more comments than they do, but are reluctant to do so. They express concern about both quality and control of their comments. Third, with comments so fraught with issues regarding identity and relationships, participants are much more likely to comment on trivial matters than important ones.

When discussing comments left by others in their own journals, over half of my interviewees told me a nearly identical story about the kinds of posts that receive comments as opposed to posts that don’t. They described posting about a serious or very personal issue, or even specifically asking for advice, but receiving few or no comments. Then, a short time later, they posted something amusing or trivial, and received numerous comments.

Fiona: Some things that I’ll post that I totally expect would stir up commentary — nothing. ... Sometimes I’ll post things that I think seem to be inconsequential and I’ll get a flood of posts about it from people that I wouldn’t have expected to comment on it and it will totally take me by surprise.

Amy: I posted something that I thought was very thought-provoking. I don’t remember what it was, but I got one or two comments on it and then I posted one line that was
something like “why are yogurt cups narrow at the top and wider at the bottom, that doesn’t make any sense.” And the next thing I knew, I had like fifty comments on that. [laughs]

*Charles:* There’s times when I make posts and I get absolutely no comments whatsoever and I’m just convinced it would have stimulated some sort of response. There are other times when I make a completely random post. For example, the other day I put salt on my Weetabix instead of sugar because I picked up the wrong container, and I got seventeen comments.

*Jill:* I tried posting something cranky and depressed and “oh god, I feel terrible and rotten” and was kind of hoping that people would maybe post something reassuring and stuff back to me, but then like an hour later, I posted something about a news article or a quiz or something like that and I got like three responses to that saying “oh that’s an interesting piece of news” “oh so that’s what’s going on with this.” And I’m like, “did you even read my other one? Did you read my little cry for help here?”

*Keith:* There was one time back around Decemberish, November somewhere around there when I tried posting a few things ... I was kind of thinking, these should get some interesting comments and they got hardly anything and then I posted this one other thing — oh yeah, it was the rat in the pipes. ... That one I was just posting because it was a thing that happened and I thought it was kind of funny. And two days later, like twenty–two comments on it. ... I’ve got this interesting philosophical, intellectual pondering and nobody cares. But the rat in the pipes, okay, they really want that.

*Jennifer:* I wrote this whole “boohooohoo poor me” kind of entry and it was public because I was really angry and really upset and [sobbing noise] and I didn’t care if the world knew about it and nobody commented. And, I was like [sad voice] “no one cares if I live or die.” And, then I posted something really stupid. It was some random thing about traffic or something like that and I got like twelve comments about it.

LiveJournal participants seek connection with others. LiveJournal theoretically provides several tools that facilitate such connections. But its structure as a linked set of individually controlled journals mitigates against the kinds of connection and feedback people seek. That people express the desire for comments in such negative terms itself exposes the assumption that this is not a conversational medium. Were
feedback an expected norm, its absence would be sanctioned, rather than a desire for its presence.

Conclusion

LiveJournal evokes, highlights, and sometimes exacerbates tensions inherent in social interaction. The model of the intimate personal diary conflicts with the reality of posting to a wide online audience. This performative nature of LiveJournal further complicates people's ability to see themselves as sincere and genuine. Their desire for feedback in the form of comments also conflicts with valued notions of an autonomous, individualistic self.

Aspects of conversation that contribute to emotional connection conflict with ideas regarding the higher value of instrumental information exchange. The convenience of the blended audience conflicts with the desire to maintain different presentations of self in different social situations. This leads to increased attention to the need to carefully manage the blended audience. The enhanced recognition this creates of different self-presentations in turn conflicts with the ideology of a consistent, core, genuine self.

Many of these tensions exist in other forms of interaction, but the particular technological features and social conventions on LiveJournal increase people’s awareness of them. For the social researcher, this also provides insight into cultural understandings of the self and the techniques individuals use for maintaining these understandings.

Meanwhile, some possess a desire for control: of self-presentation, of audience, of types and levels of interaction, as well as of mundane issues like topic and tone of conversation and amount of interaction. But more control by one partner in an interaction generally means less control for the other. LiveJournal participants appreciate the control they have over their own journal, but are uncomfortable with the lack of control they have in other journals. The tension between control and connectivity suppresses the level of interaction on LiveJournal. On LiveJournal, the “wind” may “shout back,” but it doesn’t provide much of a conversation.

About the author

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Notes
1. In one case, the interviewee had a LiveJournal account but had never posted, and used the account infrequently to read others’ journals.

2. Three work in other professional jobs, and six have other types of jobs, are unemployed, or their employment is unknown to me.

3. In Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, and Wright’s sample, which excluded LiveJournal, blog entries received an average of .3 comments, with the majority of entries receiving none; see Herring, et al., 2004, p. 8.


6. Only one of my interviewees, the professional writer with an unusually large list of “friends,” said that she sometimes gets too many comments.

References


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“Shout Into the Wind, and It Shouts Back” Identity and interactional tensions on LiveJournal by Lori Kendall

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