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GeoCities and diaries on the early web

GeoCities was a web hosting service that launched in 1995. It appealed to people because at a time when the World Wide Web was in its infancy, it offered them the ability to create websites about themselves, their interests, and their lives. Within two years Geocities acquired over one million 'homesteaders', the term used for page owners who--as per the 'cities' in the service's title--located their webspace in neighbourhoods that contained comparable content: EnchantedForest contained sites for and by children, HollywoodHills sites focused on celebrities, MotorCity on motor-vehicles, and so on. By 1998 geocities.com Uniform Resource Locators (URLs) were among the most visited online. In 1999 Geocities was acquired by Yahoo, beginning a slow decline that ended in its abrupt closure in 2009.

Although now defunct, for many people in the late-1990s and early-2000s GeoCities was an important part of everyday life. In turn, it played host to their everyday beliefs, interests, and concerns. As Ian Milligan writes:

The Old Bailey Online can rightfully describe their 197,000 trials as the "largest body of texts detailing the lives of non-elite people ever published" between 1674 and 1913. But GeoCities, drawing on the material we have between 1996 and 2009, has over thirty-eight million pages.¹

These thirty-eight million pages can be used to track near historical social, political, and cultural trends. They can also be used to reconstruct how individual homesteaders created and shared aspects of their lives. As GeoCities was an early example of a hosting platform for 'user-generated content', there were few precedents for what content to share or established web design standards to guide homesteaders. In this vacuum they experimented with the material they put online, the way their pages looked, and how their site was made navigable. Diaries were a feature of that experimentation. This chapter examines the character and form of a selection of diaries hosted on GeoCities between 1995 and 2001. In these diaries GeoCities users tested the boundaries between public and private on the early web.

This chapter proceeds in four parts. The first part offers some contextual background and the second a discussion of method. Third, I look at web diaries whose creators experimented with self-projection by combining aspects of the diary form with the nascent web technologies that GeoCities offered. Fourth and finally, I examine those

¹ Ian Milligan, 'Finding Community in the Ruins of GeoCities: Distantly Reading a Web Archive', *Bulletin of IEEE Technical Committee on Digital Libraries* 11, no. 2 (2015): 1, <http://www.ieee-tcdl.org/Bulletin/v11n2/papers/milligan.pdf>.

GeoCities diaries that--in variety of ways--replicated private, paper-based diaries. This blend of experimental and conservative, and of public and private diary writing provides a valuable window into ways in which identities were negotiated and performed circa 1995-2001.

I Background

It is not the purpose of this chapter to situate diary writing on GeoCities in the rich history of internet use, bulletin board systems, and the like. As the historian Adrian Johns has articulated, any serious attempt to do so must also consider the longitudinal intersections between early-internet users and other twentieth century techno-centric communities: home tapers, telephone phreaks, radio enthusiasts.² If we instead concentrate on near contemporary contexts, we observe that in 1993, shortly before GeoCities launched, Howard Rheingold's book *The virtual community: homesteading on the electronic frontier* established and popularised the notion that communities could exist online.³ As Stephanie Schulte has argued, American film, television, and media referred to these internet and the web communities--terms that were then as now often erroneously conflated--as teenaged communities.⁴ The role in turn of society and of instrumental policy was, Schulte continues, to harness those rebellious 'teens' to the benefit of capital. The reality was that web communities represented a much broader spectrum of society than their teenage stereotype. As Ian Milligan has argued, GeoCities was a crucial site of global, non-elite expression during the first decade after its inception. By borrowing Rheingold's 'homesteading' nomenclature GeoCities located the activities of users in everyday offline activity. And by emphasising the variety of topics users were interested in, contemporary publications on GeoCities underscored the everyday, mundane interests of its users: *Creating GeoCities Websites*, an official guide published in 1999, highlighted examples of GeoCities webpages that focused on--among other things--sport (117), family (129), baking (136), travel agencies (154), and Gillian Anderson (222).⁵

In short, GeoCities played an important role in shaping the web we know today. It was the first major web publishing platform that enabled users to put text, images, audio, and moving images online without having to learn HyperText Markup Language (HTML);

² Adrian Johns, *Piracy: The Intellectual Property Wars from Gutenberg to Gates* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

³ Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., 1993).

⁴ Stephanie Ricker Schulte, *Cached Decoding the Internet in Global Popular Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=1168272>.

⁵ Ben Sawyer and Dave Greely, *Creating GeoCities Websites* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Muska & Lipman Pub., 1999).

though a familiarity with HTML gave users more control over the appearance of their pages. As the homesteaders on GeoCities were treading virgin ground they used the platform to explore the possibilities of web publishing. Now derided 'Under Construction' notices, blinking text, visitor counters, and musical accompaniments were features of that experimentation, signifiers of the complex transition taking place in society and culture away from publishing yoked to print and towards fluid, always provisional web publishing. As Stephen Wilson observed in his 1995 *World Wide Web Design Guide*: 'The Web transfers the main responsibility for deciding what should be on the Web from large institutions to individuals [...] Since the Web represents such an experiment in culture, the answers are not always clear-cut'.⁶ One important aspect of this 'experiment in culture' was, according to Wilson, that the 'evolving culture of the Web [...] challenges old assumptions about relevance'.⁷ The user-generated content on GeoCities was then at the heart of a challenge to assumptions about who controlled flows of information. Homesteaders's experiments with the diary form, both a private record and a mainstream publishing genre, provide a valuable window into the intersections between the web and everyday life circa 1995-2001.

II Method

The pages made by homesteaders are no longer accessible at their original URLs. To view these pages I used the GeoCities collection assembled by Archive Team in 2009. To find diaries within this collection, I queried the GeoCities seedlist derived from the collection and held by the Internet Archive.⁸ This seedlist is an aggregated list of URLs from the 2009 geocities.com closure crawl. I used Unix shell tools to search for instances of the word 'diary' in the listed URLs and to sort the results by date.⁹ Any diary not listed in English as a 'diary' in the URL seedlist was missed by this search method. Whilst this was not ideal, it had the advantage of isolating web diaries whose creators clearly had the diary form in mind: GeoCities users, after all, had control over the name of the URLs of their webpages. To view each page, I entered the URL into the Internet Archive Wayback Machine.¹⁰ In some cases multiple captures of URLs captured on different dates were held in the archive. In these cases I used the capture closest to when the diary was posted online.

⁶ Stephen Wilson, *World Wide Web Design Guide* (Indianapolis: Hayden Books, 1995), 22.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ steve@archive.org, 'GeoCities Seedlist' (The Internet Archive, 11 August 2008), <http://archive.org/details/webcrawl-geocities-seedlist>.

⁹ For an introduction to using the unix shell in historical research, see James Baker and Ian Milligan, 'Counting and Mining Research Data with Unix', *Programming Historian*, 20 September 2014, <http://programminghistorian.org/lessons/research-data-with-unix>.

¹⁰ <http://archive.org/web/>

Some of the diaries found by this method raise ethical issues. Today we routinely consider material published online as publications: websites are formally defined as such, for example, by UK non-print legal deposit legislation.¹¹ And yet whilst GeoCities websites were published online and have been archived as though they were published material, user-generated content created online before the rise of iterative algorithmic web search engines may well not have been intended as 'published'. To read any of the diaries this chapter discusses a contemporary web user would have had to either browse to the relevant pages via the hierarchical structures of Geocities neighbourhoods or navigate to them via a link in another page or sent to them in an email. An author of a web diary, therefore, could write in semi-private on the open web: their personal writing always available via a URL but likely only accessible to small, local, and intended readerships in possession of that URL. As Ian Milligan writes:

Users relied on each other to find content: from living next to each other in neighbourhoods, to linking to each other using Web rings. In an era before the widespread adoption of search engines, which often required explicit SEO [Search Engine Optimisation] techniques and effort to be part of, these were important.¹²

Contemporary literature on the Internet and the World Wide Web underscores the difference between social interactions with networked technology in the 1990s and today. Wilson's *World Wide Web design guide* includes the advice--now redundant--that if you are publishing online with the intention of reaching a small, local, and intended readership 'you should probably treat them [your webpages] as quasi-private and not announce these sites to the public in order to keep them out of the indexes'.¹³ The work-in-progress tenor of this advice chimes with Ed Krol's 1994 *The Whole Internet* which likens the Internet to a frontier territory wherein 'individualism is honoured and fostered' but like any frontier is also a place where the rules of individualism are shaped by interaction with novel terrain.¹⁴ Sherry Turkel invoked this sense of uncertainty in her classic study *Life on Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. Writing in 1995, Turkel writes on early-1990s internet use:

In the real-time communities of cyberspace, we are dwellers on the threshold between real and virtual, unsure of our footing, inventing ourselves as we go along.¹⁵

¹¹ British Library, 'Non-Print Legal Deposit: FAQs', Text, accessed 27 June 2016, http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/search/non-print_legal_deposit.html.

¹² Milligan, 'Finding Community in the Ruins of GeoCities: Distantly Reading a Web Archive', 1.

¹³ Stephen Wilson, *World Wide Web Design Guide*, 25.

¹⁴ Ed. Krol, *The Whole Internet: User's Guide and Catalog*, 2nd ed. . (Sebastopol, Calif: O'Reilly, 1994), 40.

¹⁵ Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 10.

The normalisation and certainty of internet use since Wilson, Krol, and Turkel were writing is visible in our changed use of language towards network technologies. As the historian Stephen Jones observes, the 'virtual', 'cyber', 'e' nomenclature common to 1990s commentaries on network technologies sound odd today. Language should then alert us to the negotiations with novelty that were taking place during this decade.¹⁶

In light of these observations, this chapter describes in detail only those Geocities diaries whose authors appear to have seen their diaries as part of the wider web: that is, those diaries that link often to other web pages, contain markers of community affiliation, and assume a wide readership. These pages I treat as publications. Those that do not contain these markers I treat as sensitive contemporary manuscripts. In turn I do not provide references to these pages and only describe them in the broadest terms. Following Sara Hodson I deem these web diaries to be 'an obvious red-flag category, since the diary is the ultimate in private writings, ostensibly intended for no eyes but those of the writer'. Private writings of this nature must be treated ethically, Hodson writes, as they 'contain frank statements and revelations about one's self and about other people.' Indeed it might be considered problematic that these diaries are available at all. As Hodson continues an archivist would ask whether any born-digital diaries 'held in an archival repository [should] be opened for research, even when people mentioned in them are still alive? Or should they be sealed for a reasonable period? If so, what constitutes a "reasonable period?"'.¹⁷ In short, just because *we* lose privacy the moment we log on,¹⁸ and just because GeoCities archives exist, it does not follow that subsequent researchers have no ethical responsibilities towards early-web diaries.

III The Diaries of GeoCities: Experiments with projection

Of course, *pace* Hodson, not all web diaries were 'intended for no eyes but those of the writer'. Indeed a number of Geocities diarists made conscious attempts to construct permanent and broadcasted records of moments in their lives. The diaries they created were a component of a wider public expression of self and functioned both as reports designed to be shared and as diaries constructed in the process of self-reflection and self-fashioning.

¹⁶ Steven E. (Steven Edward) Jones, *The Emergence of the Digital Humanities* (New York ; Routledge, 2014).

¹⁷ Sara S. Hodson, 'Archives on the Web: Unlocking Collections While Safeguarding Privacy', *First Monday* 11, no. 8 (7 August 2006), <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1389>.

¹⁸ Angela M. Cirucci, 'Redefining Privacy and Anonymity through Social Networking Affordances', *First Monday* 20, no. 7 (26 June 2015), <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/5465>.

Between 1998 and 2001 'Our Humble Abode!' was maintained by the Singaporean couple Jess and Su.¹⁹ The site was published in WestHollywood, the 'gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender' neighbourhood of Geocities. Here Jess and Su posted entries on their holidays, Starcraft habits, and 'Petz'. The use of flashing graphics, brightly decorated backgrounds, coloured text, gifs, and jarring shifts in page layout were playful and experimental. Within the site Jess and Su each had their own pages, and Jess used her pages to make seven diary entries, one each for 1998 and 1999 and four for 2000. The entries for 1998 and 1999 had similar layout and content: each background contained a block of colour bordered left and right with a single repeating image (a pair of unicorns and angels respectively) and the text in each described Jess and Su's relationship during the year. The narratives were punctuated by web mannerisms: sentences that trail off with or are joined by two or more full stops, repeated exclamation marks, and emotions bracketed by asterisks for exaggeration. The writing was largely honest and open and yet at the same time knowingly public: on the latter, for example, an individual Su was courting in 1998 is described in both the 1998 and 1999 entry as 'XX'. Elsewhere content ranged from the precise ('on the 1st of March 11.50pm, down at Brewwerks, while sipping raspberry beer, I wrote Su a postcard') to the vague ('It was months later that she confessed in being scared that night').²⁰

The 2000 entries contained greater detail.²¹ Two were headed with entry dates ('22nd Feb 2000' and '2nd March 2000') and two the dates they referred to ('Thoughts on June 2000' and '27th May 2000 (Sat)--4th June 2000 (Sun)'). These entries addressed specific events such as the start of the new millenium, a BBQ, Chinese New Year, watching the films *The Bachelor* and *The Duel*, Su moving rooms, and chicken pox. Together the entries show a maturing but nevertheless piecemeal engagement with diary writing as a form. Indeed, the diary form is used above all to frame experimentation with web publishing: how to colour and style entries, how to handle post publication edits--on a puzzle Jess and Su had failed to complete on 22 February Jess added the next day '(We just finished it on the 23rd Feb with frames and all.. it's now hanging at Su's living room. Just above her aquarium.)'--, how best to hyperlink to other pages on the site, and how to handle

¹⁹ Jess and Su, 'Homepage', Geocities, *Our Humble Abode*, (2001), [http://wayback.archive.org/web/20090805152153/http://geocities.com/WestHollywood/CClub/4652/tribute.htm](http://wayback.archive.org/web/20090805152153/http://geocities.com/WestHollywood/Club/4652/tribute.htm).

²⁰ Jess, 'Diary 1998', Geocities, *Our Humble Abode*, (1998), http://wayback.archive.org/web/20090805152151/http://geocities.com/WestHollywood/CClub/4652/diary_1998.htm; Jess, 'Diary 1999', Geocities, *Our Humble Abode*, (1999), http://wayback.archive.org/web/20090805152151/http://geocities.com/WestHollywood/CClub/4652/diary_1999.htm.

²¹ Jess, 'Diary 2000', Geocities, *Our Humble Abode*, (2000), <http://wayback.archive.org/web/20091021124747/http://geocities.com/WestHollywood/CClub/4652/diary2000.htm>; Jess, 'Thoughts', Geocities, *Our Humble Abode*, (2000), <http://wayback.archive.org/web/20091021064445/http://geocities.com/WestHollywood/CClub/4652/thoughts.htm>.

community responses to their writing. On the latter Jess used sidebars to reflect on comments she had received. She published alongside one entry:

Or you simply can't stand Lovey Dovey Couples?!! Hee hee.. well, people have commented that we are too sticky at times.. Maybe... Hmm.. Hope we don't end up like this gif thou.. =P

Like Jess, William Connolley used the diary form to frame his experimentation with web publishing. 'Williams Word of Werrets' combined biography and recommended reading with content aimed at his extended family.²² As William wrote on the site's front page in 1999: 'Family folk should look in the family directory. Others can look there too, but 1000 photos of our newborn are unlikely to interest strangers...'. There is then a clear sense here both that there were 'strangers' who might look at the pages and that semi-public spaces could be crafted on GeoCities. An example of the latter were William's diary entries. Created between 1998 and 1999 each summarised and reflected on a period of time. The August 1998 post comprised eleven photographs and seven paragraphs, four dedicated to single topics--beekeeping, garden flowers, his 10 month old son, and a visit to London respectively--and three to a mountaineering club trip (in keeping with the site's location in the Yosemite district of Geocities, an area for outdoor recreation enthusiasts).²³ The September 1998 diary entry, entitled 'Miscellaneous nice pictures from the holiday...' merely captioned pictures taken at his holiday home and in Carpentras and Vaison-la-Romaine, in so doing inverting the relationship between word and image, and distancing the entry from established diary forms.²⁴

In 'Pipers World', Vicky Herman used a diary to narrate the life of a dog between 1996 and 1999.²⁵ Each short entry was 'written' by a Shih Tzu dog called Piper. These are formulaic homages to the diary form, reinforced by the use of a ring notepad graphic to frame the prose and a dog bone motif to divide each entry. In January 1999 Piper wrote

²² William Connolley, 'Homepage', Geocities, *Williams World of Werrets*, (1999), <http://wayback.archive.org/web/19990221011039/http://www.geocities.com/Yosemite/3206/>.

²³ William Connolley, 'Diary: August 1998', Geocities, *Williams World of Werrets*, (August 1998), <http://wayback.archive.org/web/20091027050221/http://geocities.com/Yosemite/3206/diary/1998-aug-1/>.

²⁴ William Connolley, 'Diary: September 1998', Geocities, *Williams World of Werrets*, (September 1998), <http://wayback.archive.org/web/20091027050219/http://geocities.com/Yosemite/3206/diary/1998-09/>.

²⁵ Vicky Herman, 'Welcome to Piper's (Shih Tzu) Dog House', Geocities, *Piper's World*, (1998), <http://wayback.archive.org/web/19990202130103/http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Hills/7649/>.

about his birthday ('Birthday months are always so much fun!') and his relationships with 'Mommy' and 'Daddy', telling us--in the tone of an unloved child--that:

The only thing good that did happen is that Mommy has been working from home much more that she ever did before [...] It much harder to be at home by myself all day.²⁶

This mix of excitement, curiosity, and uncertainty played out through the rest of the entries: in April Piper discussed a new car ('I love riding my new truck!'), in May a trip to see 'Mommy's roommate from college and her husband' ('They also had 3 cats! I was outnumbered but I held my own'), and in June and July his illness ('So, Mommy decides that I need to go to the Vet. I tried to talk her out of it but, would she listen? Of course not. No one listens to me. Who am I, but the dog?').²⁷

Of course for all its fictive framing, 'Pipers World'--much like 'Our Humble Abode!' and 'Williams Word of Werrets'--was an experimental projection of the self: Vicky diarised landmarks in her life--buying a car, visiting friends, her dog getting sick--through the medium of both her dog and web publishing, externalising in fictional form an internal anthropomorphisation of Piper's life. It is telling that she twice interjected when Piper's narrative voice was deemed unable to communicate adequately. On the first occasion, May 1998, she relayed to her readers the experience of looking after three dogs for a week. 'Mommy's perspective of that week' described how Vicky 'went completely insane' keeping the dogs still, dealing with their attention, and administering their medicine.²⁸ On the second occasion, June 1999, 'Mommy's Note' briefly noted that Vicky had bought a pill crusher to give Piper his medicine and that it had worked 'like a charm!'.²⁹ Both interjections breached of the fourth wall to address dog owners, indicating an expected readership of fellow dog owners for Piper's world and its anthropomorphised genre.

'Babyz Parade' played with fantasy in a similar manner. The site was situated in the children-focused EnchantedForest district of GeoCities. It contained a diary that recorded the activities of the children Shelbi and Andy from the perspective of a parent. At the top of the page Cynthia, the author, described the motivations for and intentions of the diary entires:

I've always wanted to have a place where I could record the growth/life of my two little angels, Shelbi and Andy. A place where I could record their lives...and what better place to have it, but right here at Babyz Parade where you can read it yourself! The Babyz Diary is updated often, so

²⁶ Vicky Herman, 'Piper's Diary: 1999', Geocities, *Piper's World*, (1999), <http://wayback.archive.org/web/20091020080943/http://geocities.com/Heartland/Hills/7649/diary.html>.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Herman, 'Welcome to Piper's (Shih Tzu) Dog House'.

²⁹ Vicky Herman, 'Piper's Diary: 1998', Geocities, *Piper's World*, (1998), http://wayback.archive.org/web/20091020194804/http://geocities.com/Heartland/Hills/7649/diary_1998.html.

check back if you want to know what my Babyz are up to! Please enjoy the always exciting adventures of Shelbi & Andy.³⁰

Recording and sharing, both tropes of the diary form, are thus front and centre. The entry for 3 January 2000 described Andy's cold and Shelbi learning to count. By the 8 January 2000 entry, Andy has recovered from his cold and stands up for the first time. However Shelbi and Andy were not real people. Rather both were characters in the baby training videogame *Babyz* (1999) and the diary, therefore, written as an extension of the videogame experience. Cynthia uses the diary form to give this fictional narrative authenticity and a situatedness in real world--that is, non-media mediated--experience. The authenticity trick is convincing and would only have been revealed as a conceit--at least for those outside of the *Babyz* community or unaware of the videogame--by the descriptions of keyboard commands and the availability of new downloadable content that Cynthia wove into the prose. In an echo then to 'Pipers World', this experimentation with the diarised projection of self breached the fourth wall to address a peer community, an expected readership interested in webpages that delivered content through the diary form.

IV The Diaries of GeoCities: Dear Diary

Homesteaders also used GeoCities to publish diaries whose format and style replicated entries in paper diaries. Their diaries underscore the varied ways in which GeoCities users negotiated the intersections between web publishing and diary writing.

Andrew France published twenty-six pages of diary entries to GeoCities between 26 August 1997 and 7 May 1998, the period during which he studied at Regent Bible College, a private evangelical postgraduate university in Vancouver, Canada. The pages were posted at approximately five to seven day intervals in 1997 and at greater intervals in 1998. Each page covered events and reflections since the previous page. Until early-November 1997, temporal subheadings were used to divide pages into individual entries. It is unclear if these entries were written and posted individually or all together. Whilst the header 'An awesome week.....' on the 3-9 October 1997 page indicates that the entries were considered as a coherent whole, the Monday entry on the 10-16 October 1997 page began 'As I write this it is 12.07 am on Tuesday morning', suggesting that some entries were certainly written as events occurred. Located in The Tropics neighbourhood, an area dedicated to travel, the first entry described Andrew's journey from Australia to begin his studies. The diary begins then as a travel journal connected to if not steeped in a literary genre that has its roots in James Boswell's *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (1785).³¹ From the 7-15 November 1997 page onwards, pages diverged from this form and were written together as reflections rather than accounts.

³⁰ Cynthia, 'The Babyz Diary', Geocities, *Babyz Parade*, (2000), <http://wayback.archive.org/web/20091020070050/http://geocities.com/EnchantedForest/Cottage/1997/babyzdiary.htm>.

³¹ James Boswell, *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL. D.*, 1773 (London, 1773).

Indeed by late-1997, the author's commitment to diary writing had clearly wavered. As Andrew wrote at the start of the 23-29 November 1997 page:

Here are a few key events and thoughts from this week. I was going to stop doing my entries, but I have been encouraged by a few people that have said they have been encouraged by reading my reflections. Please feel free to use anything that I include in here if it is of use. Please also feel free to tell me if you think I am full of it.³²

By the 1-14 February 1998 page Andrew had, by his own admission, become 'slacker and slacker with getting my diary entries onto the net'.³³

Andrew's diary covered many topics: spirituality, the differences he observed between Canadian and Australian culture, snowboarding, the weather, study, and when Andrew got up and went to sleep. It was written informally and used multiple full stops to trail out of thoughts and into others. The pages were interspersed with images and links to other webpages, such as essays Andrew wrote. Different coloured backgrounds and text were used to distinguish between pages. Occasional typographic errors indicate that the diary entries were written quickly and that entries were not routinely reviewed prior to publication. And his readers noticed this. The header to the 14-18 September 1997 page read 'I have received a number of comments regarding my spelling. If it was perfect you would doubt whether it was me writing the diary.....!'.³⁴ Such interactions reveal Andrew negotiating the fluidity of diary writing on a web publishing platform like GeoCities. In so doing he used the diary to acknowledge family and friends in Australia who had written to him ('Thanks for the letter and the photo Deb....') and to encourage them to call him ('I have been disappointed that more of you have not been using the voice mail. It only costs you a local call and you can talk until you get cut off... 1-2 minutes... and it is easier than writing a letter and I get to hear your voice').³⁵ We see then that Andrew's web

³² Andrew France, 'November 23rd - November 29th', Geocities, *Francey*, (November 1997), <http://wayback.archive.org/web/20010524025214/http://www.geocities.com/TheTropics/Cabana/1516/diary16.html>.

³³ Andrew France, 'February 1st - February 14th', Geocities, *Francey*, (February 1998), <http://wayback.archive.org/web/20010503113410/http://www.geocities.com/TheTropics/Cabana/1516/diary22.html>.

³⁴ Andrew France, 'September 14th - September 18th', Geocities, *Francey*, (1997), <http://wayback.archive.org/web/20010529032309/http://www.geocities.com/TheTropics/Cabana/1516/diary4.html>.

³⁵ Andrew France, 'September 22nd - September 27th', Geocities, *Francey*, (September 1997), <http://wayback.archive.org/web/20010529221236/http://www.geocities.com/TheTropics/Cabana/1516/diary6.html>; Andrew France, 'January 24th - January 31st', Geocities, *Francey*, (1998), <http://wayback.archive.org/web/20010503060938/http://www.geocities.com/TheTropics/Cabana/1516/diary21.html>.

diary did not replace the use of letters, emails, and telephone conversations to stay in touch with distant friends and family. Rather, it added another communication channel wrapped up in a form of personal writing that would have been familiar to his readers.

Not all GeoCities diaries covered long periods of time. 'Neil's 1998 Eurovision Diary'-- subtitled 'A Dream Coming True...'--used the diary form to describe on a single webpage events that took place over three days: Friday 8 May to Sunday 10 May 1998.³⁶ On this page Neil Mathur, a sixteen year old male from London, described the visit he and his mother took to Birmingham to watch the Eurovision Song Contest final. After remarking on his longstanding interest in the competition, Neil--writing after the event--recounted his experience. On the Friday he travelled to Birmingham, explored the city, met with his 'internet' friends, and went to the contest's dress rehearsal. On the Saturday afternoon Neil and his friends met a contestant at their hotel and in the evening went to the contest. On the Sunday, Neil met some contestants, said farewell to his friends, and travelled home. The entries focus on how he felt ('my stomach was beyond control. I kept thinking I was in a dream!!', 9 May 1998), what he and other people wore ('After nearly a month of deciding, it was down to a pair of black trousers, with a black under-shirt, and a yellow shirt. To go with that, some really shiny black boots!!', 8 May 1998), and the personalities of the people he met ('I met Anders Berglund (the Swedish conductor) in the shopping centre. He was a lovely man.', 10 May 1998). Like other GeoCities diaries we have seen, Neil's use of language and syntax are indicative of the informality and expressiveness possible to both personal writing and web publishing: sentences end with multiple exclamation and question marks, emphases are capitalised in bold ('My first impression of the set was--"WOW!!"', 8 May 1998; 'I WAS SOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO HAPPY!!!!', 9 May 1998), and thoughts trail into and are connected by strings of full stops ('I'll admit, I had a tear in my eye when Chiara sang, it made me think..... And of course one of the biggest cheers went to Imaani', 9 May 1998). The diary here is then both formal and informal, both conservative and exploratory, both yoked to traditional publishing forms and embracing of online mannerisms.

This interplay between form is shared by surviving entries of 'My SeeD Diary' written by Leslie between 21 February 2001 and 7 March 2001.³⁷ Organised under dated headings, Leslie described her friends, art, and interest in Japanese culture. Drawing on the diary form, the entries were personal. They record events, feelings, and reflections: a friend being given a new CD, finding education boring, her progress learning Japanese. The language and syntax of these entries are again informal, littered with trailing full stops ('I'm sick.....again', 21 February 2001), capitalisation ('WHY CAN'T I TAKE THIS?!', 27

³⁶ Neil Mather, 'Neil's 1998 Eurovision Diary', Geocities, *Neil and Paul's Eurovision Euphoria*, (May 1998), <http://wayback.archive.org/web/20001004195356/http://www.geocities.com/~euro-song/1998/diary98.htm>.

³⁷ Leslie, 'My SeeD Diary', Geocities, *Miang of Solaris*, (2001), http://wayback.archive.org/web/20021202081239/http://www.geocities.com/miang_of_solaris_1999/diary.html.

February 2001), and conversation-cum-onomatopoeic word forms ('(yawn)', 21 February 2001, 'It's...it's.....it's.....AHHH!!!', 27 February 2001, '(sigh)', 21, 22, and 27 February 2001). And yet informal and personal as Leslie's entries were, they were intended to be public, 'this is my boring page about me and my life', Leslie noted in the header, '....bla bla bla.....yaaawn.... Oh well....read on if you want!'.

Other diaries published on GeoCities had smaller, quasi-private audiences in mind. One diary by a teenager published in the WestHollywood neighbourhood, the area dedicated to LGBTQ sites, intimately described feelings of gender dysphoria, efforts to hide an exploration of trans identity from family and friends, and depression. A later diarist used GeoCities to describe in the third-person an act of cross-dressing, what the diarist did during that period, and how people reacted to them. The diary included photographs and linked to both a 'CrossDress WebRing' and a TV/CD/TS/TG Directory hosted on GeoCities. By publishing their diaries as GeoCities pages these two diarists were experimenting with writing about their lives in public, and yet as they chose to locate their diaries within hierarchical web communities they anticipated that only a restricted public would have access to their writing. The use of these semi-private web diaries in this way was not, however, restricted to individuals who identified with subcultures. A diary published over six months in the Research Triangle neighbourhood (an area for sites on research and technology), covered the life of a businessman living in Germany. With the exception of one entry, the diary described mundane matters: living arrangements, sports, career progression. The exceptional entry elaborated on the latter, and was outspoken about both the failure of individuals and his employer to deliver a project on time and how he was treated as a result. As both the individual and their employer are identifiable from previous entries, the entry is a striking example of a homesteader testing the boundaries of what could or could not be said online and in turn how the organisation of the early web shaped and constrained the content of web diaries.

Conclusion

Writing in 1998, social psychologists Katelyn McKenna and John Bargh reported that individuals with concealable-marginalised identities (such as those associated with homosexuality, drugs, and spanking/bondage) saw the World Wide Web as important because it offered opportunities to 'demarginalise' their identities that were otherwise rare.³⁸ The LGBTQ diaries this chapter has described appear to support McKenna and Bargh's findings. Nevertheless, it is clear that between 1995 and 2001 diarists from outside these groups who published to the early-web also valued community orientated web platforms as venues in which to experiment with projections of the self. In these venues informal language coexisted with established time-based framing devices, formulaic recollections and reflections were interspersed with revisions to entries and notes on reader responses, and fantasy was used to frame the sharing of real life activities that were in some cases only known about online and in other cases web based extensions

³⁸ Katelyn Y. A. McKenna and John A. Bargh, 'Coming out in the Age of the Internet: Identity "demarginalization" through Virtual Group Participation', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 75, no. 3 (1998): 681–94, doi:10.1037/0022-3514.75.3.681.

of everyday life. The remnants of GeoCities offer, therefore, fascinating insights into diary writing in the mid- to late- 1990s. They offer the opportunity to better understand how people were changing the diary form in light of the availability of new and untested web technologies, the elements of that form that endured during this period of rapid communicative change, and the value to individuals of semi-private web publication venues in the era before the emergence of the iterative algorithmic web search engine. This chapter only scratches the surface of these complex and significant near contemporary shifts to how we presented and constructed ourselves. More work is needed both to grapple with the richness and volume of the material available, and to situate that material within the wider social, cultural, and technological contexts in which early web diaries were written.

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