

Chapter 2

Micro-perspective

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview about weblogs as standalone entities. In particular, we discuss characteristic features of blogging software in general, its most important technical built-in features, as well as fundamental hosting issues. Also, this chapter presents a comprehensive review of prior weblog research by constructing an extensive weblog typology. As the title suggests, this chapter treats weblogs as single entities which accounts for the title of this chapter: the Micro-Perspective.

2.1 Weblogs: The Smallest Entities of the Blogosphere

The words weblog and blog derive from the terms *web* and *log* and a blog is no more than a specific type of website or page. Blogs originated as online diaries with entries, also known as *posts*, usually written in reverse chronological order with the most recent entry displayed first. Nowadays, there are countless weblogs around, which use a wide variety of presentation styles and cover a vast range of topics. Single blog posts combine textual parts with images and other multimedia data, and can be directly addressed and referenced via an URL (Uniform Resource Locator) in the World Wide Web. Readers of blog posts can publish their personal opinion about the topic covered in a highly interactive manner by commenting on a post. These comments can however be subject to moderation by the author of a blog.

2.2 Blogging Software and Platforms

While the first blogs around were simple websites that were regularly updated with new posts (or comments), the end of the 1990s saw the emergence of open-source and free-to-use *blog hosting services*. These service providers subsequently offered

a user-friendly and ready made blog service that enabled users with any level of computer skills to generate and publish content accessible to all Internet users. From this point on, anybody capable of using a simple text-editor program could thus actively take part in the unrestricted exchange of opinions over the web [ML08]. Nowadays, weblogging systems are more specialized, but still easy-to-use CMS (Content Management Systems) with a strong focus on updatable content, social interaction, and interoperability with other Web authoring systems. The technical solutions agreed upon among developers of weblogging systems are fine examples of how new, innovative conventions and best practices can be developed and superimposed on existing standards set by the World Wide Web Consortium¹ and the community.

Deciding which product to ultimately use is a challenge in itself that requires a careful evaluation prior to installation. It starts with the assessment of which requirements the software should eventually meet: The central issues for these considerations are the system requirements, on which the software of choice will run. The most widely accepted blogging software systems available either require a web server with Perl, PHP (or Ruby on Rails respectively) or Java with a Servlet-Container. For data storage, a relational database or data system is deployed. Some blog software incorporates functionality that requires additional software, such as GD or Image-Magick libraries for graphics processing and other products even allow functionality-extensions through the implementation of plug-ins. Following on from basic system requirements, the next consideration is blogging functionality which is to a large extent dependent on the designated field of application of the blog implementation. For example, does the user intend to install more than just one blog entity? In a corporate context it is particularly important to consider the assignment of permissions prior to any installation. For instance, does the chosen software differentiate between an administrator, editorial staff, authors or regular users? What about the commenting function in the blog? Can it be administered or controlled that comments can be written anonymously or only after registration in the blog? In addition to a built-in search functionality, a WY-SIWYO-editor, as well as the option to backup drafts of articles in the process of writing, is helpful. A personal design is also very important for a lot of blog-enthusiasts. For this reason, the user should carefully assess whether the blog software allows for alterations to the graphical design via the exchange of reversible templates and skins or CSS formatting, for instance. Bloggers may even be looking for a system back-end in their own language that could also allow the administration of multilingual posts. HTML as an output format is not noteworthy, but this should hold equally true for XHTML or standards-compliant HTML. Syndication formats that allow for the automatic distribution of content, such as ATOM or RSS should be supported by default. Email-Notification, for example whenever a new comment on your post is waiting in the moderation queue, is often unavailable. You might also be interested in advanced editing functionality of media formats such as pictures, movies or music that goes beyond

¹<https://www.w3.org>

simple administration like renaming, adding or deleting the corresponding files. Above all, security options should be carefully assessed when choosing a blogging software system. Alongside a good user administration, to manage assignment of permissions, control over unwanted comments (SPAM) is essential. Unfortunately, for well-known systems such as WORDPRESS, SERENDIPTY or MOVABLETYPE, the interfaces for the attachment of comments are well known to spammers and these should therefore be approached with careful regard to appropriate counter measures.

Table 2.1 provides a list of the most well-known and widespread blogging systems currently available [Sau07, Bar08, ML08, ST]. Among these, Wordpress, MovableType, Serendipity, and TextPattern are particularly well-engineered and stable when running. The rest of the listed blog systems worked well, but did not go so far in meeting our high expectations due to some initial difficulties during test installations.

Personally, we had very positive experiences with Wordpress in whatever context we made use of the software (see *experimental projects* in Chap. 4). Like most other researchers, it comes as no surprise to us that Wordpress is the most popular blogging software currently available: Its advantages include fast and easy installation, a well structured back-end (including a very helpful author interface), a large (German) community, numerous complimentary plug-ins, layouts, forums, templates and skins, easy administration of link lists and its availability as a free-of-charge open-source software (e.g. [Bar08, Sau07]).

2.3 Hosting Issues of Blogging

The fastest and easiest way to your own blog is via blog-hosting services, provided by Wordpress.com,² Blog.de,³ Blogger.com⁴ or Twoday.net.⁵ These services require a free-of-charge registration that usually covers at least a basic version of their software systems. Set-up of the blog requires just a couple of steps including, for example, the choice of the blog-name, basic design options and privacy settings.

Some of the major disadvantages of using a hosting service rather than self-hosting as described in Sect. 2.2 are fewer setting controls, limited opportunities for functionality-adaptation and restricted database access. Such hosters often finance themselves with faded-in advertisements, and the default URL of your externally hosted blog usually comes as a less catchy and trendier sub domain, such as, for instance, <http://MyBlog.wordpress.com/>. By self-hosting, a blogger can get everything they need for no more than 5 Euros a month. By ensuring that that the










²<http://wordpress.com/>

³<http://www.blog.de/>

⁴<https://www.blogger.com/>

⁵<http://twoday.net/>

Table 2.1 Comparison of blog software systems. A brief summary of the major blog software systems available in 2014

Program	Website	Description
Blogger 	www.blogger.com	This Google-owned blog-publishing service was one of the first of its kind and has remained very popular, especially because of its integration of Google services like Google+ and AdSense, support of publishing via mobile devices through an app and flexible layout designs
Medium 	www.medium.com	This blog-publishing platform, created by the Twitter-founders, works close to other popular web-services like Digg with functionalities like upvoting and sharing through its own social community. Unlike other blog-services it is more content- than author-focused
Movable Type 	www.movabletype.com	Movable Type offers static and dynamic page generation, plugin support, multi-user experience and strong stability. Because of its thorough functionality, it is marketed towards professional users, which for example include the Huffington Post
Serendipity 	www.s9y.org	Supports multiple database management systems and can easily be customized. Offers plenty of plug-enabled functionalities. Serendipity includes not only "usual" weblog functions, but also a powerful template-engine one can use to create flexible, robust and reusable templates
Squarespace 	www.squarespace.com	The SaaS-provider Squarespace with blogging-, CMS- and webhosting-services supports connectivity to all popular social media sites. It can be employed for personal, as well as professional use and features a very modern look
Textpattern 	www.textpattern.com	It is a compact and powerful tool for generating semantically correct pages with an intuitive Markup-language (Textile). Tables and lists can be created on the fly without the knowledge of HTML. Different sections of a Textpattern-based weblog can have different layouts, structure and presentation
Tumblr 	www.tumblr.com	This very popular, Yahoo-owned micro-blogging service with over 197 million blogs allows the user to publish all sorts of media and share them in the own social community or on other social media services. Content can be explored through hashtags and the dashboard, which shows the latest posts of the blogs, which the user follows
TypePad 	www.typepad.com	Based on Movable Type, it is especially designed for non-professional users, but also employed by organizations like the BBC and sky News
WordPress 	www.wordpress.com	The open-source blogging tool and CMS WordPress is the most popular solution for web-publishers with over 60 million published blogs and websites. It is very expendable with more than 30.000 plugins for custom designs and features. WordPress uses the Textualize-Engine to convert the content into semantically correct (X)HTML automatically and also takes care of the typography used in the article

option of running one's own PHP-scripts and a MySQL-database are included in that package, a blogger is then free to decide to install as much additional software as desired, such as plug-ins to create photo albums or online polls.

For enthusiasts with limited technical knowledge, but high motivation to experience the blogging phenomena alone and in a private context, making use of hosting

services is usually the best solution. In a commercial environment, it is generally a better option to run blogs on effectively controlled server hardware, particularly when applied in a corporate context.

2.4 Weblog Features

One prominent feature of weblogging systems is a *feed*, an up-to-date table of contents for any weblog. Feeds are exchanged in standardized, XML-based formats and are intended to be used by other computer programs rather than being read by humans directly. These machine-readable tables of contents opened a whole avenue of opportunity for users to consume content from a variety of websites. Rather than having to frequently check different websites for updates, users can subscribe to feeds in so-called aggregators, i.e. software automatically notifying subscribers about content updates. Feeds from different sources can even be mixed, resulting in a highly customized subscription to web content from different sources [LR07]. Such syndicated content can then be consumed as a push-medium, on top of the pull-oriented World Wide Web architecture. Among the many examples of popular extensions of feed formats are podcasts which have additional media files attached, such as audio or video broadcasts. As thoroughly discussed at a later point (see Chap. 11), (RSS-) feeds formed the basis for the data collection method applied in the course of the research described in this book. Social interaction is another important aspect of weblogging systems which form a notable part of the so-called *Social Web*. The most visible method of social interaction takes place when readers are invited to comment and discuss posts directly on a weblog. More subtle, interesting means of interaction have developed through the ways that blogs can become linked to one another. To overcome the limiting factor of HTTP-based systems only being aware of out-bound hyperlinks, different types of linkbacks have been developed. These will automatically detect incoming hypertext links from one weblog posting to any other weblog posting, and will insert a link from the original link target back to its source, hence making hypertext links symmetrical. Such links can be detected, for example, using the often disregarded *referrer* header in an HTTP transmission, or by actively notifying the link target about the reference. Making hyperlinks symmetrical significantly helps to weave a true Social Web between weblog authors and thus ultimately forms the interconnectivity of the blogosphere.

The situation described above, in which weblog systems are actively notifying one another, is a good example of how interoperable weblogging systems have become. Many of these systems have an RPC interface, a technology used to control web services using non-browser technologies [Scr10]. This interface can be used to notify the blog administrator about incoming links (known as ping-backs), but also to author and manage content within the weblogging system, e.g. using mobile phone software. Other promising means of interoperability are provided by new technologies based on Semantic Web standards, such as RDF and SIOC. Using these standards, the structure of a weblog's content and its role in the blogosphere can be

expressed and published in a standardized, machine-readable way which will be even more flexible than today's feeds and XML-RPC interfaces [Woo05].

2.5 Blog Typology: Classification

Think of any possible scope of application or topic you could blog about and you may be sure that there is at least one weblog in the blogosphere that has already been implemented specifically for that purpose. For this reason, the academic community is struggling to find a generally accepted typology of all weblogs in existence. Numerous well-constructed frameworks have been published that aim to establish a basic classification system, in which any weblog could be appropriately located. However, our corresponding research in this field revealed that there will always be some kind of *outliers*, such as a hybrid form of a weblog that contains characteristics of two or even more different categories. We conclude that the diversity of the blogosphere inhibits a *one-size-fits-all* classification framework. Despite this complexity it is necessary to provide a basic summary of the types or classes that weblogs can generally be placed into, as suggested by the above mentioned academic research. The following pages provide an overview of these categories.

2.5.1 Classification by Genre/Content

Probably the simplest and most general form of classification is to sort blogs according to the type of content published. The following provides, without making any claim of completeness, a short list of weblogs sorted by genre or content provided by the English and German sites of Wikipedia⁶ and Profiblogger.com.⁷ It should be noted however, that there is no single comprehensive list in existence which includes all weblog genres. Blogs are written covering all imaginable themes, some beyond the reach of traditional categorization and therefore, the following list is only meant to give a basic impression of possible genres.

- | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| 1. Political blogs | 7. Niche blogs |
| 2. Travel blogs | 8. Classical music blogs |
| 3. House blogs | 9. Quizzing blogs |
| 4. Fashion blogs | 10. Legal blogs (<i>Blawgs</i>) |
| 5. Project blogs | 11. Dreamblogs |
| 6. Education blogs (<i>Edublogs</i>) | 12. Art blogs |

⁶<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog>

⁷<http://www.profiblogger.com/?p=284>

- | | |
|-------------------------|----------------|
| 13. Music blogs | 18. Videoblogs |
| 14. Mom blogs | 19. Jobblogs |
| 15. Splogs (Spam blogs) | 20. Warblogs |
| 16. Funblogs | 21. Watchblogs |
| 17. Placeblogs | 22. Litblogs |

Koschnik followed a similar approach to Wikipedia by sorting those weblogs into the same group where *the contentual focus is more or less confined to a particular subject area* [Kos08].

2.5.1.1 Sub Classes in Weblog Genres

Some publications even attempted to define sub classes within particular weblog genres. Köhler, for instance, describes in his typology for scientific weblogs a further breakdown of the *Science blogs*-genre into *PhD-blogs*, *Institute-blogs* and four additional types with a scientific background [KÖ7]. Gordon-Murnane et al. [GM06] apply this subdivision of genres to the group of political weblogs by taking geographical reach as the basic variable of sub-classification, thus separating *national political blogs* and *local political blogs*. *Warblogs* are another interesting weblog genre in which well-defined sub-classes were formed. Endres et al. [End05] assessed their role regarding news coverage during the war in Iraq and organized warblogs into four different subtypes. Even though this classification is a valuable approach within this particular genre, similar to the above-mentioned attempts regarding scientific- or political weblogs and many others (see also [Bar08, BH02]), they cannot be taken on as a classification system that is applicable to all existing genres. In a similar way, taking genre as the key variable for a typology, Stine Lomborg proposed a theoretical and rather generalist approach to weblog classification by introducing a three-dimensional axis of abscissas [Lom09] (see Fig. 2.1).

2.5.2 Classification by Author(s)

Another popular approach regarding the classification of weblogs is the one that derives its classification from the authorship of a weblog. Just as Bausch et al. who differentiate between *Personal Blogs*, *Multi-Author-Blogs* and *Business Blogs* [BH02], the German Wikipedia site⁸ distinguishes weblogs according to the author and operator variables. Here, blogs are grouped into *Individuals* and *entities*, where the latter encompasses companies, organized groups of persons as well as associations, federations or unions. Similarly, in Technorati's *State of the*

⁸<http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog>

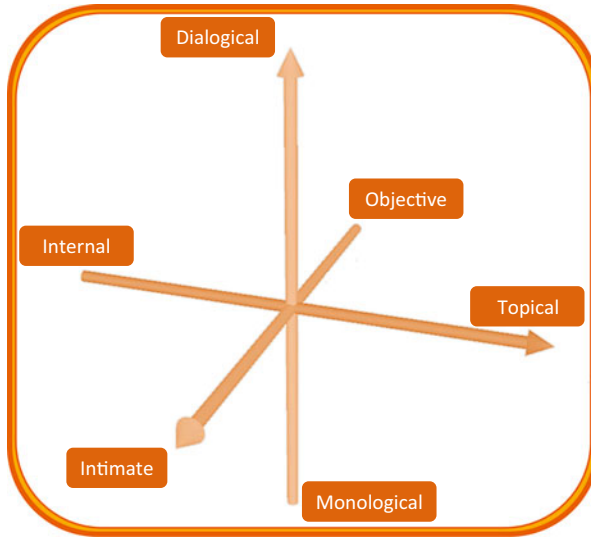


Fig. 2.1 Weblog-typology by Lomborg (Adapted from [Lom09])

Blogosphere 2008 report⁹ which is still valid, David White similarly identifies the three blog-types: *Personal*, *Professional* and *Corporate* [Whi09].

2.5.2.1 Personal and Multi-author Blogs

Personal blogs, also known as *private blogs* [AB08] or what we call *Ego-Blogs*, are the traditional, most common and most widespread blog-type found in the blogosphere. Personal bloggers usually take great pride in their blog posts, even if their blog has a very small or even nonexistent readership. These kind of weblogs often become more than just a way of communicating; they become a way to reflect on private life, everyday work or personal hobbies. Many scholars who are working on a typology for weblogs therefore denote personal weblogs as a main weblog class in the blogosphere. Rettberg et al. [Ret08], differentiate the blogosphere into *personal*, *filter*, and *topic-driven* weblogs.

Krishnamurthy [Kri02] also appoints *personal* or *individual* as the key variable to differentiate between weblogs. In his two-dimensional system (see Fig. 2.2) he arranges these two key variables against their corresponding complements: *personal* versus *topical* and *individual* versus *community*.

With so many attempts at classification already proposed it is not surprising that some have received critical feedback. Even though they acknowledge the

⁹<http://technorati.com/blogging/feature/state-of-the-blogosphere-2008/>

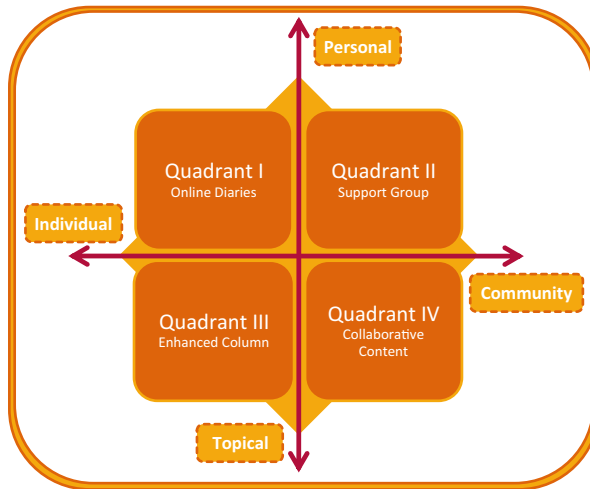


Fig. 2.2 Weblog-typology by Krishnamurthy (Adapted from [HSBW04])

classification of Krishnamurthy, Herring et al. [HSBW04] note in their paper *Bridging the gap: A genre analysis of weblogs* that there are types of weblog that cannot be sorted into Krishnamurthy's categories. To underpin this assertion, so-called *k-logs* (Knowledge Management Weblogs), are given as an example. Contrary to many other scholars Herring can support her views with original research in which she analyzed 200 weblogs with the intention of finding a classification model that fits them all. Of course, it is arguable whether a sample of 200 weblogs can possibly be representative of more than 260 million weblogs out there.

2.5.2.2 Corporate Blogs

Zerfaß et al. [Zer05] have developed a very detailed subset of the above-mentioned group of business weblogs that he calls *corporate blogs*. Using a two-dimensional depiction (see Fig. 2.3), they identify eight subtypes of corporate weblogs.

Charman et al. [Cha06] elaborates even further upon the subset of corporate weblogs and distinguishes between those blogs that can be freely accessed within and outside company borders and those that were exclusively being set up for internal use by the workforce. She calls these internal corporate weblogs that cannot be accessed outside a company's firewall *dark blogs*. Comparable to the work of Zerfaß [Zer05], she provides a comprehensive subclassification of these dark blogs.

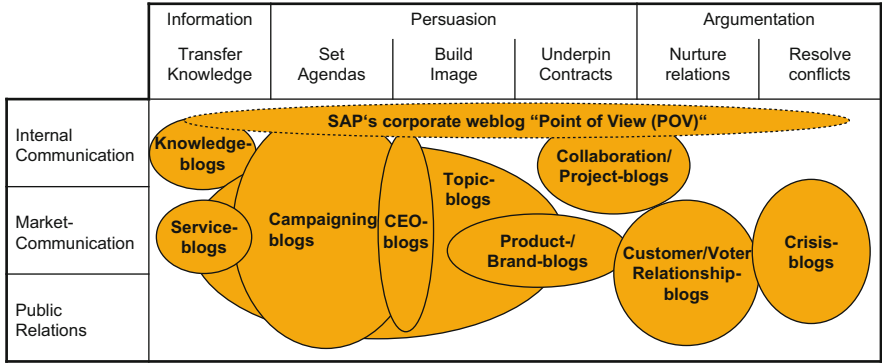


Fig. 2.3 Typology of corporate blogs by Zerfaß(Adapted and translated from [Zer05])

2.5.2.3 Nonprofit Blogs

While Zerfaß and Charmann concentrate on commercial business, Miller et al. [Mil08] describes another form of institutional weblogs, called *Nonprofit Blogs*. In her work she generates a kind of guidebook for nonprofit organizations that shows ways and means by which they could benefit from setting up a weblog to achieve particular objectives. She differentiates between useful blog-types in this context such as *news blogs* or *toolbox blogs* among others.

2.5.3 Classification by Information Flow

Having illustrated some of the ways scholars classify weblogs according to content or authorship, we would also like to highlight an attempt to sort them according to their flow of information, an approach chosen by Hamman [Ham07]. He focused solely on the flow of information between the readers and contributors of a particular weblog, and subsequently identified the three different types *Closed Blog*, *Blogs as conduit of information* and *Blogs as Participant in the Conversation*.

2.5.4 Hybrid Forms of Classification

Not surprisingly, author- or content-related classifications are not the only approaches and frequently a combined form of two or more distinct approaches can be seen. We refer to these forms as *hybrid*.

Sauer et al. [Sau07], for instance, identified six different forms of weblogs along two different dimensions, namely content and media format. What they call a *vlog*, a blog whose content is made up of audio-visual formats such as videos and podcasts,

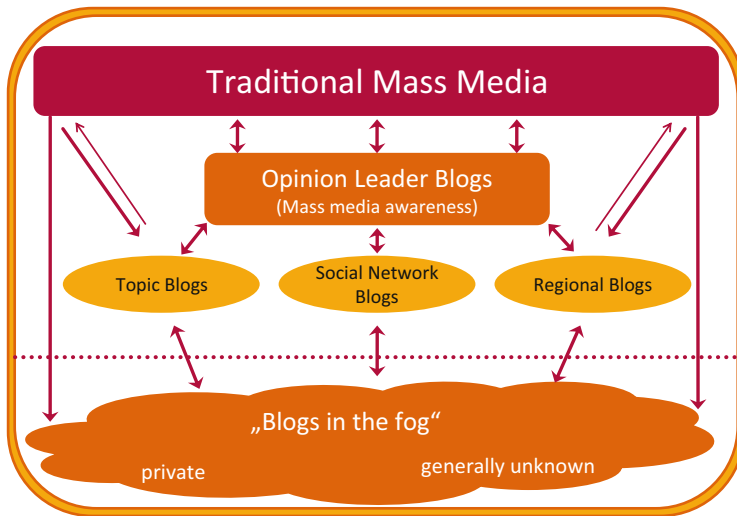


Fig. 2.4 Opinion forming blogs (Adapted from [AB08])

could at the same time fit the definition of the above-mentioned warblog, if it was solely dedicated to war reporting by making use of video posts. Numerous other hybrid classification attempts can be found in the literature (see also [Blo02]), but none appear to be capable of describing every existent weblog format out there.

2.5.4.1 Weblogs and Classical Media

Pleil et al. [EP06] also occupied themselves with finding a sorting system for the blogosphere. Their framework assesses whether blogs are opinion leaders and therefore opinion-forming. In their model (see Fig. 2.4) they identify so-called *opinion-leader-blogs* next to four other types. All of these are classified according to their information exchange and general interaction with traditional mass media and social networks which they describe as the overall differentiation variable. The last type, so called *blogs in the fog*, are platforms that exhibit no direct information exchange with the traditional mass media [AB08].

The English site of Wikipedia¹⁰ also comes up with different approaches of how weblogs can be most usefully classified. Alongside the already discussed classification by genre or content (see Sect. 2.5.1) or by media type [Sau07], Wikipedia goes on to define blogs according to which type of device is used to compose it. So called *moblogs* or *mobile blogs*, blogs that are updated with mobile devices such as PDAs or mobile phones, are gaining increasing attention from

¹⁰<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog>

quality newspapers. We are doubtful whether a classification by device can be particularly useful or informative. After all, emails are never classified differently according to whether they are sent from a mobile device such as an iPhone or a desktop computer.

2.5.5 Weblog Typology: Conclusion

The preceding overview of existing attempts to find a comprehensive weblog typology has made one thing unequivocally clear: Given the diversity and sheer quantity of weblogs, each of them set up for a different purpose, topic or readership, it is unrewarding and impractical to introduce a comprehensive framework for the entire blogosphere. Even though each one of the numerous models for classification that can be found in the literature might be meaningful for a specific and limited field of interest or area of application, they can make no claims to be complete. Our review of the existing research has illustrated that the diversity, complexity and range of weblogs out there requires nothing less than a case-by-case assessment. We therefore support Boyd's understanding of weblogs based upon the preceding work of McLuhan [McL86] asserting that "[...] a medium is defined by what it enables and how it supports people to move beyond the limitations of their body. The medium is defined by the practice it supports and the ways in which one identifies with that practice." [Boy06].

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