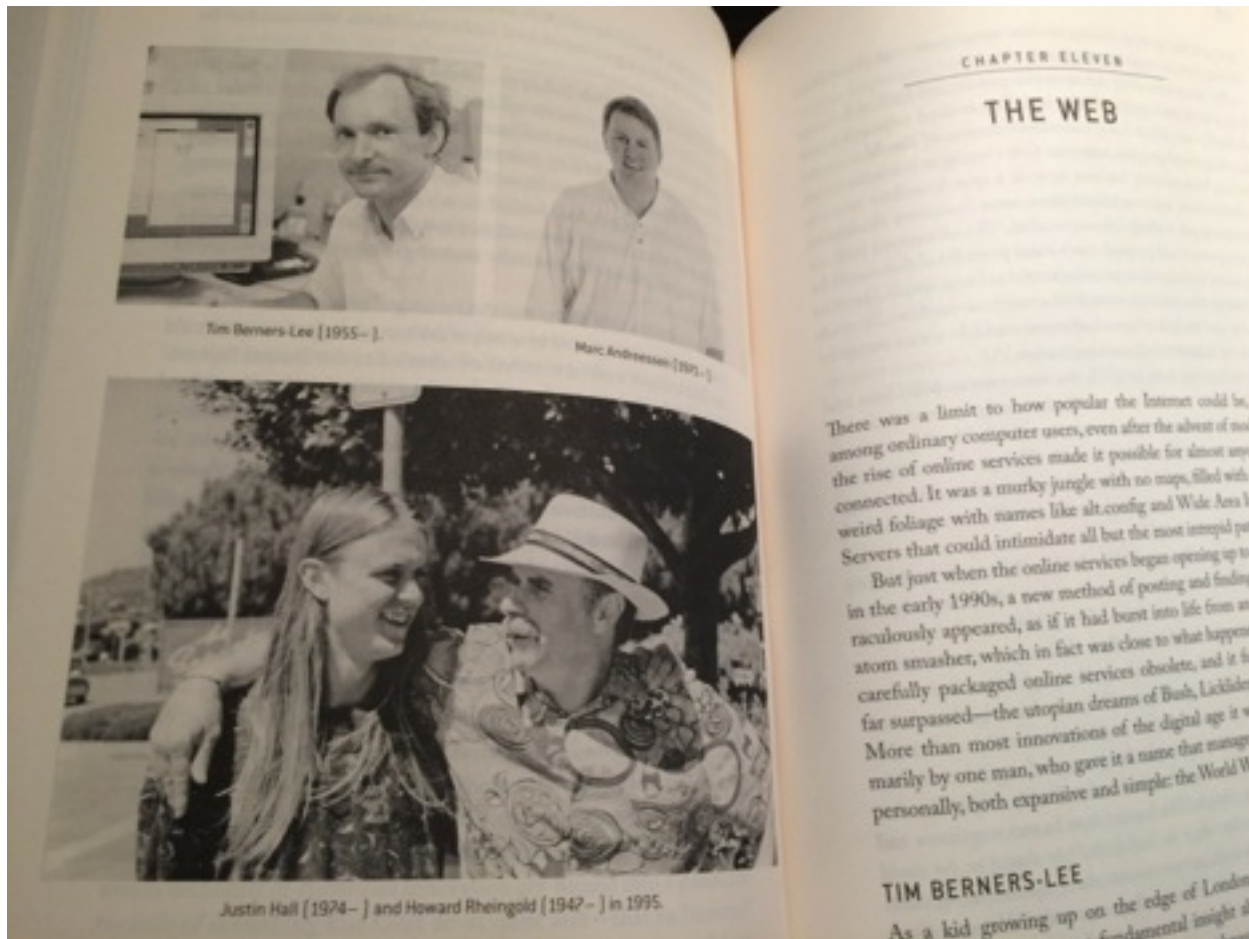




Chapter 11: The Web

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JUSTIN HALL AND HOW WEB LOGS BECAME BLOGS

As a freshman at Swarthmore College in December 1993, Justin Hall picked up a stray copy of the *New York Times* in the student lounge and read a story by John Markoff about the Mosaic browser. "Think of it as a map to the buried treasures of the Information Age," it began. "A new software program available free to companies and individuals is helping even novice computer users find their way around the global Internet, the network of networks that is rich in information but can be baffling to navigate." 54 A willowy computer geek with an impish smile and blond hair flowing over his shoulders, Hall seemed to be a cross between Huck Finn and a Tolkien elf. Having spent his childhood in Chicago dialing into computer bulletin boards, he immediately downloaded the browser and began surfing. "The whole concept blew me away," he remembered.

Hall quickly realized something: "Nearly all of the online publishing efforts were amateur, people who didn't have anything to say." So he decided to create a website, using an Apple

PowerBook and MacHTTP software he downloaded for free, that would amuse himself and others who shared his cheeky outlook and teenage obsessions. “I could put my writings and words up electronically, make them look pretty, and engage the web with links.”⁵⁶ He got his site up in mid-January 1994, and a few days later, to his delight, strangers from around the Web began to stumble across it.

His first home page had a tone of mischievous intimacy. It included a photo of Hall mugging behind Colonel Oliver North, another of Cary Grant taking acid, and a sincere shout-out to “Al Gore, the information tollroad’s first official pedestrian.” The tone was conversational. “Howdy,” the home page declared. “This is twenty-first century computing. Is it worth our patience? I’m publishing this, and I guess you’re readin’ this, in part to figure that out, huh?”

At the time, there were no Web directories or search engines, other than very staid ones like the W3 Catalog from the University of Geneva and a NCSA at the University of Illinois. So Hall invented one for his site, which he elegantly titled “Here’s a Menu of Cool Shit.” Shortly thereafter, in an homage to Dostoevsky, he renamed it “Justin’s Links from the Underground.” It included links to the Electronic Frontier Foundation, the World Bank, and websites created by beer connoisseurs, fans of the rave music scene, and a guy at the University of Pennsylvania named Ranjit Bhatnagar who had created a similar Web page. “Believe me, the author is a very cool guy,” Hall noted. He also included a list of bootleg concert recordings, featuring Jane’s Addiction and Porno for Pyros. “Leave me a note if you are interested in these, or if you have any of your own,” he wrote. Not surprisingly, given the fixations of Justin and his users, there were also many sections devoted to erotica, including pages called “Survey of Sexuality on the Sprawl” and “Pointers to Pages o’ Purveyed Prurience.” He helpfully reminded his users, “Don’t forget to wipe the semen off your keyboards!”

Justin’s Links from the Underground became the spiky pathfinder for a proliferation of directories, such as Yahoo and then Lycos and Excite, that began to blossom later that year. But in addition to providing a portal to the wonderland of the Web, Hall created something weirdly beguiling that turned out to be even more significant: a running Web log of his personal activities, random thoughts, deep musings, and intimate encounters. It became the first wholly new form of content to be created for, and take advantage of, personal computer networks. His Web log included poignant poems about his father’s suicide, musings about his diverse sexual desires, pictures of his penis, endearingly edgy stories about his stepfather, and other effusions that darted back and forth across the line of Too Much Information. In short, he became the founding scamp of blogging.

“I was on the literary magazine in high school,” he said, “and I had published some very personal things.” That became the recipe for his and many future blogs: stay casual, get personal, be provocative. He posted a picture of himself standing nude onstage that he had been prevented from using in his high school yearbook, along with the tale of the girl editors “giggling while checking out the black-and-white photo of my tweeter.” He later told the story of an evening of painful intercourse with a girl, after which his foreskin had swelled; it was illustrated with many close-ups of his genital situation. In so doing, he helped innovate a sensibility for a new age. “I always tried to provoke, and nudity was part of the provocation,” he explained, “so I have a long tradition of doing things that would make my mom blush.”⁵⁷

Hall’s willingness to push the boundaries of Too Much Information became a hallmark of blogging. It was cheekiness raised to a moral attitude. “TMI is like the deep lab data from all of our human experiments,” he later explained. “If you reveal TMI, it can make people feel a little less alone.” That was no trivial feat. Indeed, making people feel a little less alone was part of the essence of the Internet.

The case of his swollen foreskin was an example; within a few hours people from around the world posted comments offering their own stories, cures, and assurance that the condition was temporary. A more poignant case came from his postings about his father, an alcoholic who had committed suicide when Justin was eight. "My father was a wry, humanistic, sensitive man," he wrote. "Also an intolerant spiteful bastard." Hall recounted how his father would sing Joan Baez folk songs to him, but also down bottles of vodka and wave guns and berate waitresses. After Hall learned that he was the last person to talk to his father before he killed himself, he posted a poem : "What did we say / I wonder / and / what did it matter? / Could I have changed your mind?" These entries gave rise to a virtual support group. Readers sent in their own stories, and Hall posted them. Sharing led to connections. Emily Ann Merkle wrestled with losing her father to epilepsy. Russell Edward Nelson included scans of his late father's driver's license and other documents. Werner Brandt put up a remembrance page of his father that featured piano songs he had liked. Justin posted them along with his own musings. It became a social network. "The Internet encourages participation," he noted. "By exposing myself on the Web, I hope folks will be inspired to put a little soul in their systems."

A few months after he started his Web log, Hall managed to wrangle, through a tenacious volley of phone calls and emails, an internship for the summer of 1994 at HotWired.com in San Francisco. *Wired* magazine, under its charismatic editor Louis Rossetto, was in the process of creating one of the first magazine websites. Its executive editor was Howard Rheingold, an insightful online sage who had just published *The Virtual Community*, which described the social mores and satisfactions that came from "homesteading on the electronic frontier." Hall became Rheingold's friend and protégé, and together they engaged in a struggle with Rossetto over the soul of the new site. 58

Rheingold felt that HotWired.com, in contrast to the printed magazine, should be a loosely controlled community, a "global jam session" filled with user-generated material. "I was part of Howard's faction that really felt that community was important and wanted to build user forums and tools that made it easy for people to comment to each other," Hall recalled. One idea they pushed was devising ways that members of the community could develop their own online identities and reputations. "The value is users talking to users," Hall argued to Rossetto. "People are the content."

Rossetto instead felt that HotWired should be a well-crafted and highly designed publishing platform, featuring rich imagery, that would extend the brand of the magazine and create a striking *Wired*-like identity online. "We have these great artists and we should feature them," he argued. "We are going to make something beautiful and professional and polished, which is what the Web lacks." Building a lot of tools for user-generated content and comments would be "too much of a sideshow." 59

The debate was waged in long meetings and impassioned email chains. But Rossetto prevailed, and his outlook, which was shared by many other print-world editors, ended up shaping the evolution of the Web. It became primarily a platform for publishing content rather than for creating virtual communities. "The era of public -access Internet has come to an end," Rossetto declared. 60

When Hall returned from his extended summer gig at HotWired, he decided to become an evangelist for the other side of the argument, believing that the public-access aspects of the Internet should be celebrated and supported. With less sociological sophistication than Rheingold but more youthful exuberance, he began to preach the redemptive nature of virtual communities and Web logs. "I've been putting my life online, telling stories about the people I know and the things that happen to me when I'm not geeking out," he explained online after a year. "Talking about myself keeps me going."

His manifestos described the appeal of a new public-access medium. “When we tell stories on the Internet, we claim computers for communication and community over crass commercialism,” he declared in one of his early postings. As someone who had spent hours on the Internet’s early bulletin boards when he was growing up, he wanted to recapture the spirit of the Usenet newsgroups and The WELL.

And so Hall became the Johnny Appleseed of Web logging. On his site, he posted an offer to teach people HTML publishing if they would host him for a night or two, and in the summer of 1996 he traveled by bus across the United States, dropping in on those who took him up on the offer. “He took a medium that had been conceived as a repository for scholarship and scaled it down to personal size,” Scott Rosenberg wrote in his history of blogging, *Say Everything*.⁶¹ Yes, but he also helped to do something more: return the Internet and the Web to what they were intended to be, tools for sharing rather than platforms for commercial publishing. Web logging made the Internet more humanizing, which was no small transformation. “The best use of our technology enhances our humanity,” Hall insisted. “It lets us shape our narrative and share our story and connect us.”⁶²

The phenomenon quickly spread. In 1997 John Barger, who produced a fun website called Robot Wisdom, coined the term *weblog*, and two years later a web designer named Peter Merholz jokingly broke the word back into two by saying he was going to use the phrase *we blog*. The word *blog* entered the common parlance. IV By 2014 there would be 847 million blogs in the world. It was a social phenomenon that was not fully appreciated by the traditional wordcrafting elite. It was easy, and not altogether incorrect, to denigrate much of the self-centered blatherings that appeared on blogs and to smirk at those who spent their evenings posting on little-read pages. But as Arianna Huffington pointed out early on when she created her blogging outlet, the Huffington Post, people decided to partake in these acts of social discourse because they found them fulfilling.⁶³ They got the chance to express their ideas, tailor them for public consumption, and get feedback. This was a new opportunity for people who had previously spent evenings passively consuming what was fed to them through their television screens. “Before the Internet came along, most people rarely wrote anything at all for pleasure or intellectual satisfaction after graduating from high school or college,” Clive Thompson noted in his book, *Smarter Than You Think*. “This is something that’s particularly hard to grasp for professionals whose jobs require incessant writing, like academics, journalists, lawyers or marketers.”⁶⁴

In his own sweet way, Justin Hall understood the glory of this. It was what would make the digital age different from the era of television. “By publishing ourselves on the web, we reject the role of passive media marketing recipient,” he wrote. “If we all have a place to post our pages— the Howard Rheingold channel, the Rising City High School channel— there’s no way the web will end up as banal and mediocre as television. There will be as many places to find fresh and engaging content as there are people who yearn to be heard. Good telling of human stories is the best way to keep the Internet and the World Wide Web from becoming a waste wastland.”

1984



Apple introduces Macintosh.

1985

THE WELL

Steven Brund and Larry Brilliant launch The WELL.

CSC launches Q-Link, which becomes AOL.

1991



Linus Torvalds releases first version of Linux kernel.



Tim Berners-Lee announces World Wide Web.

1993



Marc Andreessen announces Mosaic browser.



Steve Case's AOL offers direct access to the Internet.

1994



Justin Hall launches Web log and directing.

HotWired and Time Inc.'s Pathfinder become first major magazine publishers on Web.

1995

Ward Cunningham's Wiki Wiki Web goes online.

1997



IBM's Deep Blue beats Garry Kasparov in chess.

1998



Larry Page and Sergey Brin launch Google.

1999



Ev Williams launches Blogger.

2001



Jimmy Wales, with Larry Sanger, launches Wikipedia.

2011



IBM's computer Watson wins 'Jeopardy!'

2011