# *Polyphony and the Workblog: Using Varied Voices to Build a Critical Consensus*

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## *Abstract:*

Looking at blogs written anonymously by call center employees, this paper observes that blogs support varied and heterogeneous perspectives while sustaining cohesively critical viewpoints that coalesce in ways that may ultimately be of use to the labor movement.

This research builds on previous scholarly work that has assessed the Internet's potential to support "polyphonic organization" within labor unions, supporting discourse among conflicting viewpoints within the membership. It also incorporates the idea that the blog represents a concrete instantiation of the dialogical self suggested by Bakhtin's polyphonic conception of authorship.

Focusing on three US-based blogs, and the connection between these blogs and the broader call center blogging community, this research highlights the mutual respect that develops as part of a shared creative process. The call center blogs studied are written from quite different and somewhat incompatible ideological perspectives, yet they are united in their focus on criticizing the call center industry and using its machinations as a metaphor for wider problems related to corporate greed. As creative writers, these bloggers form a sense of community around shared participation in the writing process.

Blogs appear to make room for a broad range of personal orientations to the labor struggle while allowing for broad consensus building around issues such as the need to limit managerial control and increase employee power. However, the short-lived nature of these blogs and the apparent failure of attempts to build coalitions among call center bloggers points also to irreconcilable differences and steadfast individualism.
(245 words)

## *Polyphony and the Call Center Blog*

Between 2004 and 2006, blogs written pseudonymously by call center employees became somewhat high profile in the blogging community, fueling a clandestine effort by employees to speak publicly about their workplaces. These blogs, written by low- to high-ranking employees, supported heterogeneous perspectives while sustaining cohesively critical viewpoints that questioned practices within the industry as a whole. However, the demise of this kind of blog in subsequent years may point to successful containment of the phenomenon. Considering the polyphonic, or many-sided and individualistic, nature of these blogs, this paper reflects on some of the strengths and limitations of blogging as an organizing medium and as a force toward social change.

The concept of polyphony, as used in this paper, originates in Bakhtin's (1984) groundbreaking analysis of Dostoevsky's ability to populate his novels with, "free people, capable of standing alongside their creator, capable of not agreeing with him and even rebelling against him" (p. 6). For Bakhtin, attempts to synthesize the many diverse and contradictory aspects of Dostoevsky's work into a monologic work are bound to fail, since his novels engage a "plurality of unmerged consciousnesses." Further, in Bakhtin's view it is impossible to define a cohesive ideology from the viewpoints of his individual characters, since "all logical links remain within the limits of individual consciousnesses" and cannot be resolved into a dialectical sequence in which opposing viewpoints are ultimately resolved and transcended (p. 9).[i] So what does this have to do with call center blogs?

Looking specifically at anonymous blogs as a locus of resistance to the labor process, this paper builds upon two recent studies that have used Bakhtinian analysis to

interpret labor struggles (Carter, Clegg, Hogan, & Kornberger, 2003) and to analyze the form of the blog as an authorial form that is particularly supportive of oppositional and contradictory viewpoints (Hevern, 2004). Looking at the use of email by Liverpool Dockers during a labor dispute, Carter et al (2003) analyze the Internet's potential to support "polyphonic organization" within labor unions, enabling workers to find "a space for discourse that is not already colonized – or marginalized – by the strategies that power uses" (p. 295), while enabling discourse among conflicting viewpoints within the membership, which recursively strengthen the union.

Applying the concept of polyphony within individual blogs, Hevern (2004) contends that the individual blog is a concrete instantiation of the dialogical self suggested by Bakhtin's (1984) polyphonic conception of authorship, writing of Weblog practices, "Voices within the self are varied, even oppositional, and resist any simple attempt to harmonize their multiplicity into an unstable synthesis" (p. 330), yet the persistence of postings over time allow retrospective identification of "enduring positions" (p. 331). In other words, blog writing lends itself to a form of self-expression that emphasizes ambivalence, presenting a self that can occupy contradictory positions, yet permitting the emergence of a broadly consistent sensibility as the blog develops, without necessarily resolving this contradiction and ambivalence.

Drawing on Carter et al, this paper considers whether the social interaction and dialogue among call center bloggers may prefigure a social movement oriented to common labor goals while tolerating individual differences. Accommodating Hevern's argument that blogs, while internally contradictory, uphold enduring positions, I consider the idea that this looseness makes individual bloggers open to diverse perspectives from

other bloggers, maintaining insoluble differences, while loosely cohering as an ideological bloc that may be useful to the labor movement.

This interpretation is counterbalanced against Lenhart's (2005) assertion that blogging's "social and political location outside of institutions is part of both its power and its problems" (p. 3)   Bloggers' tend to relish their extra-institutional status – a factor that both supports the possibility of oppositional dialogue but also militates against cohesion into or attachment to any kind of organized group whose instinct is to regulate self-expression according to shared norms and ideals.  Hoel and Hollins (2006) point out that this resilience to alignment with organizational values creates an inherent tension that prevents the unproblematic absorption of blogging into knowledge organizations that have tried to embrace it, but this resilience must also be considered as a factor that makes bloggers less keen to align their creative output to organized labor or to other explicit forms of alliance. Beyond the endlessly indeterminate networks afforded by blogrolling[ii] and commenting on each other's postings, bloggers are somewhat prone to maverick individualism.

Considering workbloggers as creative writers who are engaged in reading, critiquing, and contributing to each others' work, this paper explores how, within individual blogs, the artistic disposition militates against overt adherence to a particular "activist" agenda yet sustains passionately critical testimony about the contemporary workplace. Looking specifically at bloggers who consider their blog an artistic production, this research reveals a preference for nuanced writing that nevertheless conveys a distinct viewpoint and embodies a critical orientation to the labor process

while valuing ambivalence and uncertainty. This in turn makes bloggers tolerant of differences in status and perspective amidst broader agreement

Noting the varied and often conflicting perspectives found within the community of blogs written by call center workers, this research assesses the intersection between social change and the mutual respect that develops as part of a shared creative process. The call center blogs studied are written from quite different and somewhat incompatible ideological perspectives, yet they are united in their focus on criticizing the call center industry and using its machinations as a metaphor for some of the wider problems related to corporate greed. I assert that this heterogeneity of perspective amidst broader agreement regarding the need for change makes room for a broad range of personal orientations to the labor struggle while allowing for broad consensus building around issues such as the need to limit managerial control and increase employee power. However, the short-lived nature of these blogs and the apparent failure of attempts to build coalitions among call center bloggers points also irreconcilable differences and steadfast individualism that essentially limits any impact to the cultural realm rather than explicit alignment with formal organizations such as unions.

## *The Exceptional Eloquence of Call Center Blogs*

This study sets out from three pseudonymously written call center blogs that are located in the United States, looking at the interrelationship among these blogs and their relationship to a broader set of call center blogs. The activity level on these blogs peaked in 2004 -2005, and none of them is currently active (suggestions as to the reason for their demise are made later in the paper). This study involved reading all of the archived content for each of these blogs, as well as conducting email interviews with two of the

blog authors in 2007. Attempts to contact the third blogger for an email interview (*The Supervisor of Customer Service Hell*) were not successful.

During the 2004-2006 period, call center blogs – online diaries written anonymously or pseudonymously by call center workers -- stand out as a particularly interconnected, lively, and iconoclastic group. In 2004, *Call Centre Confidential (*callcentrediary.blogspot.com*)*, written by "Wrapstar," a UK Call Center worker, was featured in several *Guardian* articles, also winning that newspaper's blog award (Johnson, 2004). According to the blog's sitemeter, it received almost a third of a million visitors since 2003 (most of these between 2003 and 2005). In the 2004-2006 period, a plethora of anonymously written call center blogs emerged, with telling names such as *Call Center Redemption*, *Your Call Is Important To Us*, and *Call Center Steel Cage Death Match*. None of these blogs is still active, but during the period of study (2004-2006), these blogs formed a lively and loosely interconnected group, broadcasting irreverent opinions about call center work to the global blogging community.

The three call center blogs that are the focus of this paper were relatively well known in the call center blogging community during the period of their activity (being commonly blogrolled on other call center blogs). These blogs are detailed in the table below:

| Blog name / URL / Author | Location | Readership | Active Dates |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Call Centre Purgatory*<br>callcenterpurgatory.blogspot.com<br>"Anonymous Cog" | USA | AC estimates 50-100 hits per day while active. Also written up in places like callcentermagazine.com (Sheff, 2006) | 2/04 – 9/07 |
| *My Worst Call of the Day*<br>worstcall.blogspot.com<br>"Anonymous Me" | USA | 17,038 since creation of blog according to sitemeter reading October 21, 2008. | 2/05 – 10/05 |
| *The Supervisor of Customer Service Hell*<br>thesupervisorofhell.blogspot.com<br>"The Supervisor" | USA | 14068 since creation of blog according to sitemeter reading October 21, 2008. | 5/05 – 12/05 |

A limitation of this study is that testimony and observations are limited to the way bloggers present themselves in virtual space. While email interviews about bloggers' work experiences provided something of a realistic backdrop to blog postings (which are very highly fictionalized for artistic and privacy reasons), observation of bloggers in the workplace was outside of the scope of this study. My interest in these blogs concerns the creative sensemaking process itself, as manifested in virtual space. As I have argued elsewhere (Schoneboom, 2007), anonymous workblogs, while not theoretically informed, are reminiscent of Watson's (2000) 'ethnographic fiction science' – an imaginative, partly fabricated construction drawn from actual workplace experiences. Through interviews I endeavor to build a level of trust that supports the assumption that the bloggers involved in the study are being broadly honest about out their occupation and are drawing their artistic inspiration from real events. Within this somewhat fictionalized realm, I aim to create a theoretically informed interpretation of blogger testimony that

accommodates the 'made up' element in these accounts as providing a window on the role of the creative imagination in employee resistance.

## *Multiple Viewpoints, Enduring Positions*

The three call center blogs that are the focus of this paper are, superficially, similar in their critical tone regarding call centers and the broader capitalist activities that give rise to them. The author of *Call Centre Purgatory*, who writes as "the Anonymous Cog" or "AC" manages to criticize capitalist excesses through subtly exaggerated anecdotal postings about daily life in the call center where he is employed. In a typical posting, he satirizes a caller who babbles excessive amounts of caffeinated jargon, paraphrasing her real meaning as: "when will this be handled in a satisfactory manner so that we can begin to construct our forced labor sweatshops, I mean outsourcing activities in the Latin American nation of NoHayTrabajoBuenoAquí?" (Cog, 2004d). Elsewhere, he expresses similar sentiments about corporate greed by quoting or linking to poetry, literature, news articles, and the writings of other bloggers. In one posting, he copies out, in full, a poem from James Kavanaugh that he has seen on another blog:

There are men too gentle to live among wolves

Who prey upon them with IBM eyes

And sell their hearts and guts for martinis at noon. (Cog, 2005)

In another posting, he shares the lyrics of James Taylor's song "Millworker," in which one of the verses goes, "Yeah, but its my life that's been wasted, And I have been the fool, To let this manufacturer, Use my body for a tool" (Cog, 2004b). This posting is part of a series of reflections on alienation, in which AC sets out by summarizing Marx's theory of the routinization of the labor process and the demise of artisanal production:

"Instead of being able to craft a product such as a barrel, to have control of it from the time you picked the materials to the manner in which it was sold, you become an anonymous cog in a large barrel making machine" (Cog, 2004a). Subsequent postings meditate on how this logic has been applied to the call center industry, resulting in dehumanized, repetitive work.

AC's blog is characterized by an ambivalence that enriches his postings and makes for interesting reading. In a post celebrating his outsider status, entitled "The Joy of Alienation," he recounts his desire to be part of the group: "I've felt guilty I could not be as successful as the other call center superstars. I've wished I could have received the performance plaques…" However, he observes that his alienated position enables him to see the flaws in the system in which he is embedded, concluding, "Without people who are on the outside of the dominant group, looking in and seeing what is wrong with that group, there is not a chance for positive change" (Cog, 2006b).

At a cursory glance, *Call Center Purgatory* seems to spring from a secular, left-wing political perspective. Yet closer reading reveals that AC is not from a progressive political background, that he grapples with his Republican upbringing, claiming still to hold many Republican political views, and that he draws his convictions about creating equitable, meaningful labor from his Christian faith. In a series of postings entitled "Christian Capitalism," he proposes a spiritual economic doctrine based on "the idea that making profits is of secondary importance to how you treat the world around you, how your business affects the world around you" (Cog, 2004c). He alludes to Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* to promote the idea of humanized commerce, which, for AC, is a religiously inspired concept.

By contrast, *My Worst Call of the Day* (http://worstcall.blogspot.com/), while thematically similar, is written from an irreligious and steadfastly anti-Republican perspective. The author, "Anonymous Me" writes scathing accounts of the "hillbilly," stridently Christian, and xenophobic customers whom he deals with in his government job, linking their manners and beliefs to the excesses of the Bush regime.   In one humorous posting, entitled "King of the Douchebags," he recounts the story of an irate caller who is complaining about the telephone company's support for its gay employees and its donations to Planned Parenthood (Me, 2005c). Anonymous Me fantasizes about telling the customer to find an alternate phone company "preferably a Halliburton subsidiary" to do business with. In other postings, he lampoons outraged callers who protest about the illegal aliens in their neighborhood (Me, 2005b) or expect privileged customer service because they are Christians (Me, 2005a). At one point, he protests, "Imagine being forced to listen to the State of the Union Address for eight hours a day, and you'll have a sense of why I sniff glue on my coffee breaks" (Me, 2005d).

Clearly, *My Worst Call of the Day* and *Call Center Purgatory* are written from somewhat incompatible ideological perspectives, yet they are united in their focus on criticizing the call center industry and using its activities as a metaphor for some of the wider problems related to corporate greed. Their respective authors, Anonymous Cog and Anonymous Me, display different attitudes regarding religion, yet the process of blogging reveals common ground regarding a mutual sense of exploitation in their respective customer service jobs, and a sense that their work situation symbolizes deep contradictions within the capitalist system.

### The Creative Process As Common Ground

In an email interview, Anonymous Me comments that he respects Anonymous Cog's blog because of a sense of empathy in terms of their common work situation, but also because of the quality of the writing, which attracts him to Anonymous Cog's blog in spite of a clear divergence of opinion on the topic of religion: "I'll read workblogs with points of view I don't necessarily share, but the craftsmanship of the prose might be enough to keep me coming back for more" (personal communication, 1 August 2007).

This heterogeneity of perspective amidst broader agreement regarding the need for change is reminiscent of the notion of polyphony within the labor movement (Carter et al., 2003), which makes room for a broad range of personal orientations to the labor struggle while allowing for broad consensus building around issues such as the need to stem corporate greed and increase employee power. Although call center workers, unlike the Liverpool dockers in Carter et al's account, are not organizing a union, their writings are capable of operating in harmony to send out a message that is more powerful than the sum of its parts. Anonymous Me sees this loose solidarity as a mosaic, built by many different bloggers with different but often overlapping viewpoints:

"I see my relationship to other workbloggers as like pieces of a mosaic. We do all cover roughly the same ground, but with widely varying individual themes, tones, language, and perspectives. So if you read a large enough assortment of our blogs, the big picture about contemporary office work does tend to emerge" (personal communication, 1 August 2007).

Underscoring this tendency for the blogosphere to support a degree of heterogeneity in terms of ideology as well as rank, while simultaneously building consensus, there are signs of solidarity between more lowly call center employees and

middle managers. Some call center blogs are written by middle managers or supervisors who, while also criticizing the workers they supervise, also focus on the power dynamics inside the company, and the pressures of work in the industry. *The Supervisor of Customer Service Hell* (http://thesupervisorofhell.blogspot.com/) introduces herself as "the company's wage-slave, my manager's gofer, the puppet of the upper brass, the faceless representative of "The Man" -- the one that's responsible for shepherding over of all this misery that you see" (Supervisor, 2005b). She muses on her struggles to be a good manager, often complaining about insubordination among the employees that she supervises, but she also chronicles her own disillusionment and cautions against becoming loyal to the organization:

> I guess the best advice that I can give all of you is that you should never trust a company that you work for. Regardless of mission statements, executive speeches, and corporate pep rallies, the company does not want to invest in you or provide a great opportunity for you. They don't care about you, or your family, or the community. The company is always interested in one thing – profit (Supervisor, 2005a).

Mirroring the language of *Call Center Purgatory*, The Supervisor concludes about her work life, "Wherever I go, whatever I do, I'll just be a cog in the machine" (Supervisor, 2005a).

Call Center blogs are strongly interconnected via hypertext links from one blog to another. Call Center bloggers frequently devote a section of their blogroll to other call centre blogs (see figure 1, attached) and quote each other in their postings, attempting to build a kind of virtual interconnectivity in spite of differing political and spiritual

perspectives and differences in rank. *Call Center Purgatory*, *The Supervisor of Customer Service Hell*, and *My Worst Call of the Day* are all linked via each other's blogrolls. AC and The Supervisor provide lists of links to a large number of other call center blogs. These linkages are analyzed in more detail below.

## *Wider Networking Among Call Center Bloggers*

During the 2003 – 2006 period, call center employees seem keen to talk to each other and to be interested in building a social network. AC encourages other call center workers to join the now defunct discussion forum that is part of a website called "Call Center Slave" (Cog, 2006a). On a different blog, Jeber, an IT help desk worker, observes how many call center workers are blogging and relates the energy behind this group of blogs to the relative exploitation of workers in that sector. In a post entitled "Help Deskees Unite!," he writes:

> It turns out I'm not the only help desk technician who is speaking out on line. Purely by accident I happened across several blogs being published by other help desk agents, and judging by what they write, our experiences are fairly common. *Call Center Purgatory*, *Call Center Guru*, *Craziest Call Center*, *My Worst Call of the Day* and *Call Center Redemption* are all posted on Blogger[iii], which is only natural considering the below-average pay we receive for working in our cubicles (Jeber, 2005).

Call center bloggers frequently comment on each other's blog postings. For example, in response to The Supervisor's posting about company loyalty (described above), several other call center employees chime in with advice. "Miss Manager," another supervisor agrees with the need to disengage, writing that the job "will eat away at your soul and when you look in the mirror (if you ever get a bathroom break, that is), you don't even know yourself." Another call centre employee "CallGirl," concurs, "Unfortunately, I only learned not to trust when I was betrayed after 15 years with a company, so that they could replace me with a lower-paid worker. That realization took the wind out of my sails, also, and sadly, I don't think I've been the same kind of employee since" (Supervisor, 2005a).

The discussion threads and blogrolls associated with the three blogs in this study suggest a willingness among call center workers to connect to each other and to voice their concerns. However, this hopeful possibility must also be weighed against the reality that most comments are "one-off" expressions of feeling, that the blogs themselves appear to be relatively ephemeral, with attempted coalitions, such as the "Call Centre Slave" discussion forum referenced above, proving to be extremely short-lived and lacking in momentum. All three of the bloggers that are the focus of this study made the decision to discontinue writing their blogs. Call Center Purgatory signs off in September 2006, writing that he has decided to leave the call center in order to pursue an as yet undecided alternate career path.[iv] He signs off with a quote from Shawshank Redemption: "These walls are funny. First you hate them, then you get used to them, until it gets to you depend on them. That's institutionalized" (Cog, 2007). Confidently asserting his mission to "Get

busy living or get busy dying," Anonymous Cog makes it clear that he has been a sojourner in his call center job, not a "lifer" who is interested in sticking around to organize his workplace. Anonymous Me, the author of *My Worst Call of the Day*, gives no public reason for ending his blog, allowing to come to a sudden halt on October 25, 2005. Likewise The Supervisor, author of Supervisor of Customer Service Hell, allows her blog to come to an abrupt ending, leaving readers to guess as to her whereabouts and her reasons for ending the blog. This sudden ending points to the possibility that these bloggers were identified by the employers and forced to give up their blogs, or that they may have become tired of the blog and moved on to other projects or careers. Similarly, the discussion forum Call Center Slave is defunct. Attempts to follow the original link to the forum now result in a server error rather than a forwarding address, and a Google search turned up nothing for this forum, indicating that it made little impact and did not morph into any other organization or coalition.

## *Polyphony, Blogging, and Social Change*

Bakhtin characterizes Dostoevsky's polyphony as "an eternal harmony of unmerged voices or as their unceasing and irreconcilable quarrel" (p. 30). As such, there are two moments in polyphony: on the one hand, an unmerged yet harmonious unity, and on the other a chaotic and irreducible cacophony. Entertaining both possibilities, Bakhtin underscores that in Dostoevsky's work there is no ultimate resolution or dialectical progression, where opposites are resolved and transcended in a new synthesis.

Carter et al's (2003) work on the Liverpool Dockers draws on Bakhtin's analysis but suggests a partial synthesis, where the labor movement advances toward an ideological goal, without necessarily resolving the contradictions that constantly renew and challenge it. As such, their work is aligned more with the Bakhtinian sense of eternal yet unmerged harmony, than with that of irreconcilable quarrel. Carter et al's framing of a polyphonic labor movement emerges from the fact that the Dockers' email exchange is directly tied to an *organized* labor struggle that drives partial resolution and builds consensus. By contrast, the call center blogs examined in this paper must be examined in a context where labor organization seems not to be the goal or interest of the participants. Nevertheless, this paper suggests that call center bloggers represent the "harmony of unmerged voices" of the first part of Bakhtin's definition, rather than a discordant and diffuse quarrel.

Close reading of the blogs in this sample, and of the reader comments and blogroll links that they sustain, indicates a series of little overlapping worlds that are characterized both by areas of agreement and irreconcilable difference. The blogs featured in this study are often subtle and ambivalent in their exploration of ideological issues, while the writers' admiration for each others' creative process builds tolerance of ideological differences and emphasizes common goals and concerns.

As such, these bloggers are involved in a loose network that sustains conflicting views and ideological perspectives, while building consensus around issues such as the existence of exploitation within the industry. In the absence of an organizing imperative, such as a labor union that brings together call center

workers from disparate organizations, the call center example indicates a sense of affinity among workers that is constrained to the cultural realm, yet may nevertheless be effective in helping workers to subvert the ideology of their employer, potentially making co-workers within the industry more open to an organizing effort. Returning to Hevern's (2004) analysis of the blog as a concrete instantiation of the dialogical self, the call center bloggers in this study appear open to diverse perspectives, both in their own writing, where resistance to explicit attachment to a particular cause is evident, and in their interaction with other bloggers, where the process of bonding through the creative process makes individual bloggers willing to occupy, and go along with, each other's perspectives.

A handful of particularly skilled bloggers have succeeded in creating iconoclastic reflections on contemporary knowledge work that appeal to a broad audience, but these blogs are as heterogeneous as they are critical. At certain rare points within the ever-shifting, noisy, and conflicted blogosphere there is a sense of an emerging community of writers and readers that is also an emerging community of progressive values, of workers who think of themselves as too gentle to live among wolves, and who may ultimately facilitate the work of the labor movement in spite of their individualist tendencies.

## *Notes:*

[i] Bakhtin explicitly recommends his concept of polyphony to the field of sociology, arguing that Dostoevsky has arrived at a "sociology of consciousnesses," (p. 32) that may aid sociological analysis of society and social interaction.

[ii] A blogroll is a list of links in the sidebar of a blog, to a particular blogger's favorite or recommended blogs.

[iii] Blogger is a free blogging service -- Jeber here implies that call centre employees are too low-paid to be able to afford higher cost blog services such as Typepad.

[iv] In an email interview AC notes that his blog had a transformative effect in pushing him out of the call center, "The blog helped me express my creative side a lot. It saved my life and kept me sane and able to realize I am more than a call center worker" (personal communication, 13 August 2007).

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