

# The Story of Petite Anglaise: Celebrity Workbloggers and Workplace Resistance

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## **Abstract**

Blogger “Petite Anglaise,” an Englishwoman residing in Paris, was sacked in April 2006 after her employer found out about her blog, accusing her of blogging on company time and potentially bringing the firm into disrepute through her writings. Petite’s case highlights widespread attachment in the blogging community to principles of free speech and the right to maintain a detached and even critical orientation to the labor process. Her firing, and the explosive media and Internet coverage that it generated, exerted a “sleeping giant” effect, communicating the possibility that any employee could be connected to a powerful and vocal network of supporters. The case also highlights knowledge workers’ dedication to making use of workplace resources and networks for their own creative projects, pursuing self-fulfillment through avenues other than their formal work duties. Further, the story of *Petite Anglaise* illustrates the power of creative writing itself in cultivating a following, creating a sense of intimacy among a diffuse group of readers, and nurturing countercultural values that clash subtly with the notion of job commitment.

Drawing on James C. Scott’s (1985) analysis of everyday resistance, and countering Burawoy’s (1979) conception of the cyclical containment of workplace rebellion, as well as engaging critically with the recent literature on workplace recalcitrance, this paper assesses the influence of high profile fired workblogger cases in galvanizing resistance among white collar workers.

## **Introduction**

Anonymous workbloggers are employees who write online diaries about their job, often on company time. These diaries, being written under a false identity, are often irreverent, satirical, and critical, and this practice has, unsurprisingly, led to worker dismissal on numerous occasions. The first “fired workblogger” cases emerged during the 2002-3 period, when a number of employees who had used blogs to report candidly on their office experiences were found out and dismissed by their employers, raising new questions about freedom of speech in the workplace. The firing of Los Angeles-based web designer “Dooce,”<sup>1</sup> a.k.a. Heather Hamilton in February 2002 and Edinburgh bookseller Joe Gordon in January 2005, generated considerable media attention and triggered widespread changes in workplace policy that ranged from the defensive (prohibiting blogging and increasing surveillance) to the strategic encouragement of employee blogging in order to co-opt and contain the phenomenon. Individual bloggers and electronic civil rights groups such as the Electronic Frontier Foundation (see <http://www.eff.org/bloggers>) responded by defending their practice, tracking and publicizing firings<sup>2</sup>, and developing guidelines and tools that aid anonymous bloggers in eluding workplace surveillance, which included their online publication “How to Blog Safely about Work or Anything Else” (2005a).

In July 2006, well after the first wave of fired blogger incidents had come and gone, and the organizational response to blogging had developed into the controlled

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<sup>1</sup> Dooce’s firing gave rise to the widespread term “Dooiced,” which means to be fired from your job for keeping a blog.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Morpheus Tales’ posting, “Statistics on Fired Bloggers,” <http://morpheusmetales.wordpress.com/2006/10/09/statistics-on-fired-bloggers/>, which has tracked firings since 2004.

acceptance strategy outlined above, a new firing incident came to light, which returned the discussion of blogging and employee freedoms to the headlines. Popular blogger “Petite Anglaise,” an Englishwoman residing in Paris, was sacked in April 2006 after her employer found out about her blog and accused her of blogging on company time and potentially bringing the firm into disrepute through her writings. Petite, whose real name (as revealed by the press) is Catherine Sanderson, worked as a bilingual secretary for the accounting firm Dixon Wilson but she had never identified the firm or made reference to the accounting industry in her blog, and wrote only very occasionally about incidents at work.

The sacking of Petite was in some ways anachronistic – her firm was notably conservative and was clearly oblivious to the learning curve that many organizations have followed with regard to the negative publicity that could result from firing an employee for blogging. However, the case also represented a maturing of the blogging community and confirmed the persistence of anonymous workblogging in spite of corporate attempts to subsume or control it. Petite’s case highlights widespread attachment in the blogging community to principles of free speech and the right to maintain a detached and even critical orientation to the labor process. Her firing, and the explosive media and Internet coverage that it generated, exerted a “sleeping giant” effect, communicating the possibility that any employee could be connected to a powerful and vocal network of supporters. The case also highlighted knowledge workers’ dedication to making use of workplace resources and networks for their own creative projects, pursuing self-fulfillment through avenues other than their formal work duties. Further, *Petite Anglaise* illustrated the power of creative writing itself in cultivating a following, creating a sense

of intimacy among a diffuse group of readers, and nurturing countercultural values that clash subtly with the notion of job commitment.



Figure 4: One of Petite's postings from July 2006, telling the story of her firing and its aftermath.

Catherine Sanderson started writing *Petite Anglaise* in July 2004 after reading about blogging on *The Guardian*'s website and following links to blogs such as *Belle de Jour*<sup>3</sup>, the now discontinued blog of a London call girl (Anglaise, 2007a). Writing anonymously as "Petite," Sanderson's blog chronicles her personal struggles in raising a child, coping with the ends and beginnings of relationships, and trying to survive financially in the French capital. It was already a relatively popular blog before the firing incident, commanding a readership of about 3000 visitors per day (Randall, 2006), but this number swelled ten-fold to 30,000 a day immediately afterwards (Frost, 2006).

In the entire history of Sanderson's blog there are only a handful of anecdotes that relate to workplace events and characters – Petite gives the number as 12 out of 384 posts (Anglaise, 2006a). In one, entitled, "titillation," she describes the accidental baring of her cleavage during a videoconference hookup, making reference to the conservatism and sexism that prevails at the firm. In a passage that was later heavily referred to in the press, she writes of one of the firm's partners: "This other boss is very old school. He wears braces and sock suspenders (although I don't have any firsthand experience of those), stays in gentlemen's clubs when in London, and calls secretaries 'typists'" (Anglaise, 2005b). Petite also intimated in her blog that she had taken time off from work on a false excuse in order to spend time in a hotel room with her new lover (Anglaise, 2005a). And, as became important in the legal case against her, it was evident from the timestamps on her blog entries that she had blogged during work hours.

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<sup>3</sup> *Belle de Jour* won an award from the Guardian in 2003 for being the best written British blog, and was subsequently taken down and published as a book by Grand Central Publishing in August 2007. The author, a university graduate who fell into call girl work after becoming disillusioned by temp jobs, received a six-figure publishing deal. (Kurlantzick, 2004).

Petite wrote about her firing in July 2006 and was immediately bombarded with comments from readers, provoking interest from a Paris-based *Daily Telegraph* reporter who broke the story in the mainstream press, quoting Sanderson as taking a moral stand, “defining the boundaries between personal and professional activities, where the line should be drawn for bloggers who touch on the events of their working life in their writing” (Randall, 2006). Multiple press and radio interviews followed and the story was picked up by Associated Press and syndicated worldwide. In *The Guardian*, Petite described herself as a “competent and dependable worker” (Sanderson, 2007), commenting in *The Times* that she objected to otherwise good workers being sanctioned for their blogging activity (Bremner, 2007). In the following months, she was given opportunities to write opinion pieces for *The Guardian* (Sanderson, 2007) and *New Statesman*, and secured a book deal worth close to a million dollars with Penguin (Rickett, 2006) and a memoir based on her blog is due for release in June 2008. In March 2007, Petite won a legal victory against her employer, when a French labor tribunal granted an unfair dismissal verdict and ordered her firm to pay 44,000 Euros in damages. She told *The Guardian* that she hoped her case would, “send out reassuring signals to the millions of people blogging in France” (Johnson, 2007).

In the aftermath of Petite’s firing, regular followers of the blog were joined by new readers who had heard of Petite’s plight, and the slew of comments immediately following the media publicity overloaded the server that hosted Sanderson’s blog, marking her extreme popularity (Anglaise, 2006a). The comment box at *Petite Anglaise* became a gathering place for people who wanted to offer their sympathies, express their support for free speech, and report on how the story had been covered in their local

media. Readers from places as far afield as Estonia and China posted comments about how the story had reached their local and national newspapers. While not all comments were supportive, the vast majority were, leading a reader called O. to comment, “there are literally thousands of readers supporting you,” while a visitor called Monty chimed in with, “You represent the people and to all our eyes you are perceived as the victim” (Anglaise, 2006b).

More specifically, Petite’s blog became a site where other workers talked about their own fears about blogging from work. Several “Dooxed” bloggers commented about their own firing episodes, and others posted information about employee rights, including the ACAS (Advisory Conciliation and Arbitration Service) Internet guidelines (2006) and the EFF guide to anonymous blogging (2005). A reader called Sydneysnider commented, “hope everyone reading this is unionised” (Anglaise, 2006b). Some readers lamented the increased surveillance that bloggers faced at work – as the labor tribunal commenced, a reader called Morgan wrote, “This e-climate of terror will have most of us censoring ourselves for protection, even though we write because we believe in free speech and rights to personal, non-corporate opinion” (Anglaise, 2007b). Among the comments, were several demonstrations of solidarity with Petite in asserting the right to blog from work, with visitors commenting that they were reading through the comments and posting from work on company computers in their own workplaces. According to one commenter, Petite’s fans temporarily effected a “Google bomb” (influencing the ranking of a given page in results returned by the Google search engine), associating the search term “Dixon Wilson” to the Wikipedia definition for stupidity (Anglaise, 2006a).



Although most of the comments were one-off remarks, at times, readers responded to each other, building on previous comments and bringing forth diverse viewpoints amidst the largely supportive tone of the discussion. In response to the tribunal result, a reader called Paul Reichel interrupted the generally supportive vein of opinion by posting an opposing view: “You used their time and their facilities [sic] - both of which they and not you had paid for.” A debate ensued, with some readers defending Petite’s right to blog on company time or to be given fair warning rather than an immediate dismissal, while a smaller number upheld the view that Petite’s employer was partly in the right.

The incidents surrounding Petite’s firing and subsequent legal proceedings, gave her readers – many of whom were bloggers themselves -- an opportunity to reflect on their orientation to their organizational role and to elevate their acts of creative self-expression onto a plane in which the reclamation of time and resources from the labor process became a communal rather than an individual act. Petite’s high profile case elevated the everyday acts of resistance undertaken by her audience, imbuing the reading of blogs on company time with moral and political significance. Through engagement in the discussion, readers were able to affirm their ideological distance from corporate values, renewing their commitment to writing anonymously on their own blogs. Regular readers who had been attracted to the blog by the quality of Petite’s writing, became united around shared values -- such as a lack of job commitment -- that were subtly present in the blog before the incident but became overt after the firing. By demonstrating their intellectual sophistication -- expressing contempt for tabloid newspapers, for

example – Petite’s readers attempted to distinguish themselves as educated, critical thinkers, ready to contribute their ideas and analysis to the case.

While Petite’s readers made no move toward any kind of long-term political organization, their willingness to engage in discussion about the labor process demonstrated, in particular, a creative need for unfettered self-expression and a commitment to borrowing time from the work day for dialogue and artistic endeavors. Research on workblogs has indicated that bloggers do not identify their activity as resistance (Richards, 2007), and has highlighted the personal nature of the phenomenon (Lenhart & Fox, 2006), emphasizing that most anonymous workbloggers blog as an act of creative self-expression rather than an act of defiance. Amidst the media furore over her firing, Sanderson referred to her blog as a personal endeavor, yet acknowledged its inherently public nature: “I’ve often thought it’s a little like being an actor on the stage and not being able to see the audience because of the lights. You can kind of forget that they’re there and just write for yourself” (Frost, 2006). Her blog underscores the connection between creative writing and resistance, helping to unravel the seeming contradiction between writing that is intimate and personal yet able, albeit ephemerally, to precipitate large-scale political mobilization in support of worker’s rights. In the long-term, Petite’s blog, and others like it, helps members of the blogging community to strengthen their adherence to iconoclastic values, making subtle connections between their writing and a literary culture that rejects traditional career values and fuels its members’ individual efforts to limit their participation in a labor process that they find alienating.

## ***Anonymous Workblogging as Creative Refusal***

Critics of corporate culture such as Arlie Hochschild (1997), Andrew Ross (2002) and, in the UK, Madeleine Bunting (2004), have argued that the colonization of workers' emotions and creative impulses in the service of salaried time has led to overwork, time-scarcity, and neglected families and communities. Looking at workers in a high tech environment who are simultaneously seduced by the company culture yet wary of its encroachment into their private space, Gideon Kunda (1992) adds an important and subtle dimension to this analysis, focusing on how white collar workers negotiate their organizational identity as a tightrope walk that permits some distance from their role yet, in the absence of a compelling alternative, returns them to the organization as their principal source of affirmation. Echoing Kunda, Hugh Willmott has emphasized the confusion and emptiness that workers face when they try to resist corporate culture (1993).

Thompson and Ackroyd (1995) have criticized Kunda for promoting a “Foucauldian turn” in organizational sociology that forecloses the possibility of resistance in the knowledge workplace. They advocate a revival of academic research into informal and subtle forms of resistance. The mainstream media, in covering high profile fired blogger cases, has often treated anonymous workblogging as a political phenomenon, characterizing bloggers as recalcitrant employees engaged in conscious acts of rebellion. However, recent studies of blogging have cautioned against regarding the workblogging phenomenon as a conscious act of defiance and have downplayed the idea of blogs as public forums for activism and debate (Lenhart & Fox, 2006; Richards, 2007). Yet, analysis of the relationship between personal creative writing and political

mobilization in the blogosphere reveals a subtle yet concrete process of ideological convergence around anti-corporate, anti-work, and generally iconoclastic values that represent a firm and sustained detachment by bloggers and their readers from the labor process in which they are engaged.

Anonymous blogging, which allows workers to vent their frustrations and distance themselves from corporate culture using highly fictionalized identities, represents, on the one hand, a form of role-distancing that enables workers to accommodate value differences and express feelings of alienation without disrupting their job performance. The containment of blogging through periodic tightening of Internet surveillance and institution of blogging guidelines has been effective in stifling workplace and work-themed blogging. The controlled persistence of workblogging suggests Burawoy's (1979) analysis of the creation of consent to the capitalist labor process through carefully managed freedoms that make workers perceive the labor process as a game that they are winning.

However, as recent high-profile workblogging controversies have illustrated, anonymous blogging is a potentially disruptive, highly networked phenomenon that makes use of rapidly evolving Internet technologies to create new opportunities for dialogue and action. Efforts to suppress anonymous blogging by increasing surveillance and discouraging the practice through written policies have encountered ideological limitations, since they clash with corporate culture based on employee freedom and self-management. These limitations have been partly surmounted by a powerful new corporate strategy of embracing blogging as an integral aspect of the corporate culture and encouraging employees to blog openly and candidly about their work.

Yet, although this “corporate blogging” strategy has garnered vocal support from prominent employees of influential organizations and has been hailed as a moral victory over anonymous blogging, employer-sanctioned blogs fail to accommodate the continued need for unfettered critical distancing from the labor process.

Ultimately, the workblogging controversy has raised questions about whether negativity and irreverence can be tolerated in a new corporate culture that attempts to incorporate workers' whole selves into its organism. Anonymous blogs about work, and blogs written surreptitiously on company time, expose the fact that even good employees feel resentful at having their time colonized by the company, that they often find their work and the goals of the organization deeply meaningless or even troubling, that they do not trust that the company cares about them and see the threat of downsizing beneath the caring company jargon. Blogs lament the demise of union protections, and they cry out for health benefits and vacation time. Blogs start and maintain conversations on a global level that transcends organizational boundaries, going beyond the individualized and easily neutralized resistance identified by Kunda.

As creative writers and satirists rather than pamphleteers, Dooce, Joe Gordon, and Petite Anglaise are not labor activists engaged in a campaign to directly impact the labor process. Yet their actions as high profile bloggers help to create a popular culture of resistance that is based in the everyday actions of workers who are not particularly invested in their jobs or the companies they work for. Bloggers such as Petite Anglaise, the fired secretary turned millionaire, become iconic representations of disengagement from the organization. On the one hand, famous fired bloggers become, like Horkheimer and Adorno's (2001) stenographer turned starlet -- part of a projected fantasy world that

obscures exploitation and generates consent. Yet, on the other hand, their stories demonstrate and inspire authentic resistance, encouraging workers to use the technics of the knowledge workplace to support the idea of refusal (Marcuse, 1991). While not explicitly aligned with traditional labor organizing, workblogs and the interactive discussion they precipitate nevertheless suggest polyphonic models of labor activism and social change (Carter, Clegg, Hogan, & Kornberger, 2003).

The subversive everyday actions of bloggers and blog-readers build and sustain a popular culture of resistance. As conveyed by James Scott's (1987) work on peasant resistance and de Certeau's (2002) invocation of *La Perruque*, these actions are linked to social change and emancipation without necessarily following the trajectory of an organized popular movement. Most importantly, the writings of bloggers confirm that being a good and dependable knowledge worker does not denote ideological compliance. As Scott writes, "If, behind the façade of behavioral conformity imposed by elites, we find innumerable, anonymous acts of resistance, so also do we find, behind the façade of symbolic and ritual compliance, innumerable acts of ideological resistance" (304).

In spite of the very real fear of losing their jobs because of publicly declaring their feelings, bloggers continue to write critically about their work, taking advantage of technological developments to reclaim time and resources for their writing, employing creative subterfuge in order to protect their identities, and building alliances that protect their legal rights. The networks they form are diffuse and are defined around an interest in the creative process and self-expression rather than overt labor organizing or political activism. Lacking the kind of sustained organization necessary to demand and effect systematic change, their activities may actually promote consent, acting as an employee

safety valve that actually promotes the stability of the capitalist system. Yet blogs, as sites for unfettered global dialogue and creative self-development, cultivate an awareness of contradictions within the labor process, nurture opposition to the status quo, and cultivate the belief that another world is possible.

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