

Timestamps

Title	Timestamps
Subtitle	Not provided.
Lead-in / Abstract	Time decides the order in which posts are displayed on blogs and the standard permanent link. The precision of a timestamp declares that which is stamped an archived document potentially permanent, also emphasising its transience: this time is past. Why this obsession with punctuality?
Participants and speakers	Walker, Jill (AU / NO)
Short biography of participants	Jill Walker is an associate professor at the Department of Humanistic Informatics at the University of Bergen. She is the leader of ELINOR, a new network for Electronic Literature in the Nordic countries, researches networked writing and distributed fiction, and is an avid blogger.
Full text	<p>Time is discipline. Factory owners knew that, and rang the sirens three times each morning: first to wake the workers up, then to tell them it was time to leave home, and a final time to let everyone know it was time for work. Workers who had recently been farmers, obeying only the rhythms of seasons and of light and dark, now resisted the sudden sharp division of time, gossiping while working the machines or leaning idle on their shovels as the clock ticked towards lunch. The factory owners and land owners complained of their laziness and sent their children to school (bells ringing every hour) to teach them the discipline of time. After fifty years of obeying the clocks, stamping in and stamping out, the traditional gift from an employer is a golden watch.</p> <p>Today bloggers post their thoughts and links daily, many times a day, and each post is marked with a time stamp; Posted by Jill at 12:54. The software knows exactly when we hit the "publish" button, and is happy to tell us the precise date and time in an number of ways: day, month, year, hour, minutes, seconds, milliseconds. 24 hour clock, month first, spell out the month, am, pm, which time zone. We measure time with ever increasing precision. Industrialisation depended upon the discipline of precisely running clocks and alarms and bells. Railways between cities caused clocks to be synchronised, and. Today's post-industrial society has clocks inside every computer, computers inside every gadget, many of which synchronise automatically, constantly, through the network.</p> <p>Weblogs are a new genre, but their formal constraints are already clear. Ev Williams summarised the genre as requiring "frequency, brevity and personality," but when Tinka of http://distant.sun.blogspot.com deconstructed her blog she did it not by seldom posting of long posts, but by removing the timestamps, marking each post as having been posted Yesterday".</p> <p>The main function of the timestamp is, apparently, order. Posts can be sorted</p>

according to when they were written. Weblogs.com can display the hundreds of blogs updated a minute ago, two minutes ago, three minutes ago. Does this obsession with the now stem from a loneliness, a comfort in seeing that others are writing too, now? If we do not have a common here, perhaps a common now can satisfy too. Or perhaps the reverse chronological order of weblogs and their trailing RSS feeds is merely the excess heat of a time-bound culture: "[Modern] society has a linear bias to it; and that with this linear bias many natural rhythms have been replaced by artificial ones, a rhythmic society replaced by a metronomic." (Young 1989: 19)

Yet blogs are notoriously eclectic. Each post does not refer to the post written immediately before it. If their only, or most explicit, organization of information is by the time of writing, this also resists traditional ways of organising information: how can time of writing be more important than the theme, the topic, the argument?

Though most people still have to work fixed hours, obeying the clock, web workers are finding the boundaries between work time and leisure time are collapsing. We read articles in magazines bemoaning the way that work leaks into evenings and weekends, and forget that that is the way life was before factories. Time is getting mushy Ð we no longer make precise appointments, instead we agree to meet our friends "after dinner" and we send SMSes to tell them we're nearly there, we're a little late, we're waiting for them. Online, our rhythms form a new kind of cycle shaped by timezones and seasons. I wake to find other bloggers have written as I slept, and after I've eaten lunch, a new wave of bloggers awake and begin to type. In the weekends there are fewer comments and in summertime everything slows and becomes quiet. Our rituals are no longer determined by a factory siren but by a need for information: "As I came awake I was hit by a terrible absence. The first thing I do when I get up is check my email but that day and for the next two risings that familiar ritual would be denied to me. All of a sudden I missed my computer so much it hurt." (Thomas 2004: 108)

In this presentation I explore some of the prehistories of our digital temporality. I look at the long cultural traditions of situating written correspondence by stating the date and place of writing, and at the way in which digital computers, though without clocks at first, have now built the timestamp into every act of expression on a computer.

I explore how we have used timestamps as guarantees for authenticity and as whips to ensure that workers -- or computers -- do what we want them to do. Through a sketch of these histories, and a look at specific blogs and their use of time, I will explore the possibility that our current obsession with time is the mark of its declining power over our lives.

Thomas, Sue. *Hello World: Travels in Virtuality*. York: Raw Nerve Books, 2004.
Young, Michael. *The Metronomic Society: Natural Rhythms and Human Timetables*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1989.

Related internet addresses

<http://huminf.uib.no/~jill>
<http://grandtextauto.org>