

## Reblogging Fashion: Participatory curation on Tumblr ([pdf version](#))

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### Abstract

This article aims to discuss the aesthetic quality, visual experience and social practice of the microblog platform Tumblr. Having passed the 100 million blogs mark, the service has been increasingly prominent online since its launch in 2007. Thus, fashion, mass media and memory institutions as well as other more individual forms of visual expression have found the platform particularly interesting as a source for communication and networking. Disputing Jodi Dean's argument that blogging is an expression of our constantly shifting identities and provoking us to exhibitionism, this article proposes blogging and reblogging on Tumblr as a type of creative curation where digital images and content are in constant flux but always temporarily fixed through the reblog button, re-creating through different contexts and part of identity formations, rather than effects of them. Moreover, fashion is crucial in understanding Tumblr's appeal, not just by way of the style blogs and fashion focus of the site and the ambiguities of its execution, but also in the very force, which drives the blogging in the first place, a desire or addictive yearning. The platform is arguably unique in providing active user participation through anonymity, dialogue, and alternative spaces for interaction and community with a mixture of attention, production and expression, making Tumblr a central case for the future of content curation online.

Keywords: Microblog; photography; aesthetics; social media; network; Jodi Dean; interaction; digital technologies; Tavi Gevinson; agency; community; creativity; interactive media; image; anonymity

### Introduction

*Tumblr is my dream. Girls I wish I could be. Things I wish I could do. Places I wish I could go. Boys I wish I could have. Clothes I wish I could buy. Words I wish I could say.*

- Anonymous

"I'm still figuring it out". Those are the initial words of Tavi Gevinson, the quirky and vibrant 16-year-old fashion blogger, speaking at a TED Talk in April of 2012. Her presence in the fashion industry has been a fascinating one. She was invited to New York Fashion Week at age 13, startling the it-crowd with her young age. As Gevinson later said, "this is coming from an industry that fetishizes youth" (Bressanin, 2012). Since then, the focus on her age has slowly been replaced by not only her continuous unique fashion statements, but also by her strong feminist viewpoint. Inspired by the Riot Grrrl DIY-movement of the early 1990s and strong female characters throughout pop culture, she represents a new generation of young women and teenage girls using what means they have to try to, precisely, "figure it out". Colliding with a Web that has matured into providing spaces more available to mould by its users, those means of expression are now growing into an influential alternative culture.

They inherit a feminism that still has to justify its existence (Magnanti, 2012) and the “girly style bloggers” that have made their mark on the industry are still commonly viewed as superficial, non-critical and encouraging frivolous spending by the mass media. However, as fashion is a fundamental key to modern identity, and the digital image itself is increasingly dominating the overall online dialogue, young women seem to have managed to find the visually oriented microblog platform Tumblr as not just a creative outlet, but as a source for exploration and agency.

Using in-depth interviews and discussing the media discourse surrounding the development of the site, the aim of this article is to address the collective, fluid, visual and technological components that together produce a unique and influential media platform. Because of Tumblr’s specific features, it is the ultimate case study of an emerging era of creative curation, of which will be a central argument of this text.

At the time, Gevinson’s blog, “The Style Rookie”, stood out with its collages, mood boards and innovative style choices, and in some ways preceded what Tumblr would develop into. Her current project, *Rookie Mag*, a website for teenage girls, encourages girls to contribute with texts and pictures, but the site also has a Tumblr equivalent, keeping a more interactive tone analogous to the Tumblr community. For both Gevinson and some of the individually created Tumblr blogs, the aspiration is to broaden the idea of what it means to be a “girl”, offering a place where girls can represent themselves.

Tumblr, on their part, has reached out to the fashion community like no other social networking site has. The boundaries have suggestively been blurred between the commercial and the personal, and the fashion business was quick to jump on the Tumblr bandwagon as the aesthetic innovations and style desires of users (or consumers) became apparent. Indeed, many fashion Tumblrs look very much like mood boards for designers and stylists. However, they do not necessarily have the same functions. In fact, the idea of those mood boards is more of an inspiration intertwined with everything else that is collected and carefully picked out on each personal blog. *Elle Canada*’s Michelle Sponagle describes how well the platform works within the fashion circuit:

For visual types—like the fashion set—Tumblr is a cyber-utopia. It kicks down the walls that limit creativity. Pictures are big and bold—not postage-stamp-size—and text can be long or short (a carefully constructed essay or a random thought) (Sponagle, 2011).

According to Tumblr themselves, the site now hosts 100 million blogs and have produced over 45 billion posts (Tumblr’s About page, March, 2013). That means about 600 posts per second. Through their team blogs (staff, editorial, engineering, support, international etc.) everything from code to content is reported and discussed. In this way the platform aspires for if not complete transparency, at least increasing openness with their members. A simple Google Trends search (although “free” data as in Google should be taken with a grain of salt) comparing Tumblr with its similar competitors Wordpress, Pinterest and Flickr shows a considerable lead for Tumblr in web search interest world wide. However, looking through different traffic and ranking sites, not surprisingly, it varies. Business Insider ranks Tumblr the 10th largest social network, US Quantcast 21 (October 22, 2012) Alexa 36 globally, 19 in the U.S. (October 22, 2012) and Compete 50 (October 22, 2012, U.S. only). These numbers are usually based on a combination of an average of daily visitors and number of page views. However, when searching for academic articles on the microblog platform, not many researchers seem to have considered it a valuable topic of investigation. Yes, journalistic pieces are plentiful, dealing with “how to” lists, the best Tumblr blogs, business, PR or news about the site. But as one blogger rightly observes, there seem to be a gigantic blind spot among researchers, and as Tumblr grows, so does this obstruction (Ewing, 2012). Why is such a culturally rich, incredibly fascinating convergence of expressions, media forms, visual practices and intricate network of collective and individual stories left unexplored?

Fashion is crucial in understanding Tumblr's appeal, not just literally, by way of the style blogs and fashion focus of the site, but also through the ambiguities of its execution. Many Tumblr themes express the duality of escapism from and dealing with reality simultaneously. This extends to our offline worlds, as our small digital cameras and smart phones are always at hand to augment our offline reality and converge it with our online experience. Every moment is a potential picture. Every picture is a potential source of expression. Or as Patrizia Calefato writes, "Fashion is vision" (2010: 344). Tagged, edited, remixed, put in sequence, remade, reused, re-contextualized; the digital image has become social, liquid and open. Hence, Tumblr is not just aesthetically stylish, but arguably one of the best channels for contemporary cultural reflexivity and mediation, and a sign of the Web in general entering a new phase in its evolution.

Yet, there are more fashion points to be made. First in a methodological approach, by using fashion's "pick-and-mix" attitude to online creativity; a way to think forwards by reusing past imagery, found in designers such as Margiela, McQueen and Westwood (Evans, 2003: 296f). Secondly, in the very force which drives the doing in the first place, the *desire*. As the initial anonymous quote of this article indicates, some have termed Tumblr a "longing machine", referring to the German word *Sehnsucht*, which translates as "addictive yearning" (Chocano, 2012). Using sites such as Tumblr and Pinterest evokes a feeling of being addicted to fantasies about an ideal and a longing for the incomplete. Moreover, I should also state a more basic driving force of personal curiosity about Tumblr, coming from years of blog experience and daily Tumblr use. Based on these approaches, I argue that, with its endless variations of themes, of sharing academic content and news as well as creating cultural trends and being a personal vent, Tumblr far extends the experience of other blog platforms. It is an emotional output, an aesthetic, a filter, a notepad, a scrap book, a participation in a networked community (reblogging means liking it), a visual interaction, a verbal interaction, an archive, a gallery, a dialogue, a monologue, a stream of vision, a yearning, a free space, a personal space, a shared space, a controlled space, a surreal space and an augmentation of some part of the self. Depending on mood, time of day, or image, it is a place of conversion, a constant cycle of influence.

## About Tumblr

Before discussing the key issues of agency, creativity and curation, a framing and definition of the site is of relevance. To start at the beginning, it was launched in February of 2007 by then 21-year-old David Karp and developer Marco Arment (who later also created the popular web service Instapaper) with the tagline "Blogging made easy" (Cheshire, 2012). The site is more akin to a constant chain of associations, where users post mostly one thing at a time, such as an interesting photo or a single link, but in continuous sequence, rather than "the verbose ramblings of most weblogs" (Turnbull, 2007). Karp wanted to converge other more (media) specific sites such as Myspace, Youtube and Flickr, so that music, art, fashion, photography, videos, GIFs, graphics, quotes and other types of text could easily fit into one single output, with an extremely simplified and neat design. As the point is to follow other Tumblrs and preferably reblog what you find inspiring, it is usually fairly easy to start browsing and digging deeper into the Web of Tumblrs. Basically, any Tumblr is a way in to the Tumblrsphere, as there are always links to take you further. What is then distinctive about Tumblr is its convergence of other (more or less) social blogging sites. At the heart lies the notion of following, as you do with Twitter or Pinterest, but not on Blogspot or Wordpress (even though you can hyperlink). The ones you follow are what make up your feed or stream (visible on what is called Dashboard); it is what makes your time on Tumblr come alive. With the feed also comes the commenting and sharing of material, or mentioned "reblogging" (the reblog button was introduced in May of 2007, two years before Twitter's retweet. It allows reposting another user's post with one click).

The general feel of some of the expressions found on Tumblr are often "in the air", images frequently referred in social media as "so Tumblr". There are a myriad of aesthetic and conceptual topics, given they are often harder to pinpoint as crystallized themes. Tumblrs like "Jillsies", "Studded Rose", or "Je

"Suis Perdu" mix professional fashion editorials with pop culture, street style and Flickr photographs to create a type of kaleidoscopic field of visual inspiration. Others deal with darker topics of religion, sex, death, horror, decadence, witchcraft or other things that are generally uncomfortable or even flat out offensive. Coming back to Tavi Gevinson and alternative spaces for expression and introspection, these types of Tumblrs illustrate a different image world, juxtaposing desire with fear in ways that might be hard to find in traditional mass media.



Figure 1. Screenshot of "Solid" Tumblr archive, November 2013 ([disgustedd.com](http://disgustedd.com))

The simplicity and immediacy of Tumblr makes it easy to materialize every weird pop cultural whim you might have. Like the imageboard and community 4chan, which I will return later, there seems to be a great desire for finding odd themes and comic content combinations that take a life of their own as they spread and go viral. It can be clips of cats and dogs doing funny things, photoshopped images, GIFs, or more conceptual blogs, like a Tumblr about people making bad decisions ("People Who"), "Google Poetics" (search topics on Google unintentionally becoming poetry) or widely popular "Hey Girl" (photographs of actor Ryan Gosling with captions of emotional or feminist quotes) (Meltzer, 2012). Popular TV shows usually have Tumblrs dedicated to them, often remixed or re-combined in one form or another (for example "Arrested Westeros", which takes still images from the HBO medieval fantasy television series **Game Of Thrones**, and adds subtitles to them taken from the cult sitcom **Arrested Development**). It is the contrast between different well known pop cultural artefacts that make up the pun, additional to creating memes (an idea or style that spreads from person to person), which is also a big part of what 4chan does. With some of these concept Tumblrs, it is the idea of the title, coming up with the theme, which is the actual joke. The rest is often just a referent back to that original idea, a continuation of that stroke of genius we might all have at a certain moment. In other words, some pictures, subjects, filters, seem to convey "Tumblr", using images and photography to create certain collectively shared aesthetics.

### Methodological Considerations

I see Tumblr as a unique model for understanding what role curation plays in a changing media world (Harbison, 2011). Thus, my aim is to use extensive interviews with Tumblr bloggers interwoven with a deeper analysis of the creative direction of the platform at large. However, Tumblr users are in the multi-million numbers. Even though not all of them focus solely on images, selecting fitting examples to illustrate this never-ending project is both an easy and a totally impossible task. Moreover, and this should be stressed, many Tumblr users make a point of being anonymous, not giving out contact information or names. In many ways, Tumblr is a tight knit community where most interaction is non-verbal and feedback means reblogging, liking or occasionally commenting other users' posts. However, as many Tumblrs focus on finding the most interesting, creative, beautiful, weird or shocking images online, it can be assumed that they are active in other aspects and at other parts of the web. This also means that users are often open, friendly and cooperative. As a Tumblr user

myself, I contemplated whether my online presence would be to my advantage or not. When approaching users without any other contact information then the “ask” space on their Tumblr, I then considered the possibility of asking as my Tumblr “alias” and if that would be a more effective way of generating answers. In the end, I tried both being anonymous as well as asking for their participation via my own Tumblr. However, the only way I got replies was through Tumblrs offering their email on their blog. Out of around 70 inquiries, I received 4 in depth interviews. This in itself can be viewed as an implication. The network and the users are there for interaction, but always on their own terms. Additionally, many users express similar notions to the questions I am posing, using their Tumblr as a diary or a notebook, giving similar, all be it secondary information on the topics I am researching.

My Tumblr interviewees are, by Tumblr name, Mudwerks (retro oriented) Liquid Night (strong focus on art photography) Lost And Mound (pop cultural and illustrative) and from a magazine point of view, Duncan Cooper, editor of the American music/fashion/pop culture magazine *The Fader*. The interviews were conducted during the first two weeks of October 2011, apart from Lost and Mound, which was made in June of 2012. The four respondents replied with first or full name, and did not express any wish to be anonymous as they are not on their Tumblrs. I still chose to only mention them by their Tumblr names, as it is the blogs and the practices that are the focus of this article. Questions ranged from shorter inquiries regarding their online presence in general to more open-ended questions regarding their emotions and attitudes towards Tumblr and image use. Their replies varied greatly in length and character. Moreover, my individual user perspective will give additional information to a wider understanding of the platform that requires a discussion on mass media as well as digital online discourse. Having used Tumblr (and other blog platforms) personally for a several years and actively studied it for a long time, it is safe to suggest that it is a passionate platform, constantly changing, persistently under debate. As clear and simple as it might seem in its design, as difficult is it to grab hold of, not the least analytically and methodically, which goes for the much loved anonymity of its members as well as the ambivalent intentions of the company management.

## Big Turning Small

The convergence of the social, interactive and networking aspects of Tumblr is arguably what separates it from blogs in general. To be sure, many have debated whether “classic” blogging is dead, and that a part of the recent boredom with conventional blogs might be that people have moved on to more flexible platforms such as Tumblr. In *Blog Theory* (2010) Jodi Dean writes that it is the *newness* of the blogs that has worn off (2010: 33). Although *Blog Theory* is a few years old, a considerable period in Internet time, this is still partly true as Tumblr grew out of a notion that blogging should be quick and easy, not about “hammering out a blog post” as Karp puts it (*Wallstrip*, 2008). But blogs have of course not died either. Put alongside other forms of expression, they have matured and taken on a more diverse role. Not only in terms of different platforms providing different levels of “seriousness”, if there is such a thing, but Dean also states another shift in interest; corporate blogs (2010: 34). As blogging was supposed to be authentic, free and personal, its sudden overtake by ads, along with the argued boredom of writing long texts, has lead to people turning elsewhere for creative expression. She states:

Blog updates can be syndicated into one’s profile and links can be shared with one’s friends, but unlike blogs’ reliance on the persona of the blogger, social network sites prioritize connections to others – whoever and whatever the others might be [...] Contacts matter more than information, angle, or opinion (Dean, 2010: 35).

Yes and no. In the case of Tumblr, it is again arguably the *combination* of the personal and the network that has made the platform successful. Dean consistently divides blogs and social networks as two separate spheres. However, even Myspace, which at present mostly is seen as an abandoned amusement park, offered the ability to write a diary or post blog entries at one’s personal page. All of my interviewees instead describe the feeling of a “stream of conciseness”, amplified by the ease of

use and instantaneous technology, making the personal constantly leak into the network.

According to Wikipedia, Tumblr has now surpassed Wordpress in users, breaking the 20 million mark in June of 2011 (Tumblr on Wikipedia). As of this writing, Wordpress has around 65 million sites, Tumblr 100 million (April, 2013). It has more page views per month than Wikipedia and Twitter (Schonfeld, 2012). Perhaps it is no wonder that mass media increasingly have started to turn to the platform to find new readers. Critique, mostly from traditional mass media, towards blogs in general, i.e. being dumb, narcissistic and centered on “only-our-opinion-counts” (Dean 2010: 37) has turned quite silent in relation to Tumblr, as an increasing number of magazines, newspapers, television companies, but also advertisers, brands and the financial and tech sectors, including *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *LIFE Magazine*, *Vogue*, *NBC*, *CNN Money Tech* and *The Huffington Post* have started to use Tumblr as an additional platform for their news and creative outlets.

Of course, other blog formats are now common within the newspaper websites as well. However, actually creating Tumblrs, a platform working according to quite different parameters than blogs in general, and noticeably less “verbal” than the traditional blogs of diary entries or personal opinions, would arguably never have been considered a couple of years ago. During the time spectrum between the emergence of blogs and online communities in general (such as Myspace) of the early 2000s and now, Web 2.0 and social media has taken off, and this has arguably altered the way communication works, not only between individuals, but also between users and mass media, and between people and images. By posting on Tumblr, you are “setting your content free”, making it available for other parties to reblog, share and comment. On the site’s Terms of Service, this is stressed: “When you make something publicly available on the Internet, it becomes practically impossible to take down all copies of it” (Tumblr.com, 2012). Additionally, you might also make archived content come alive again, as on “The Lively Morgue”, launched by *The New York Times* in February of 2012 (Laird, 2012). Here, forgotten photographs are then set free in more ways than one, illustrating the expansion of space and time on the platform.

This also suggests a radical change in media power relations. Tumblr doesn’t really work according to an hierarchical “author-reader” model, rather the site operates in a constant networked community where texts, images, videos and sounds float around from context to context. Traditional media, in this case newspapers and magazines, does not necessarily have control over the content that is being published, which in turn also challenges the idea of ownership and property. More so, the whole idea of content being networked and interactive means that a reblog might as well come from a well-known newspaper, as from a private user. Nothing is initially “better” in quality, or a given because it originates from a well-known source. On Tumblr, big media becomes user-generated turf. *All* content providers have to obey the rules of the collective, rather than readers having to agree to the pre-decided hierarchies of the newspaper and its employers. Duncan Cooper, who runs the Tumblr for *The Fader*, expresses this awareness:

[O]riginally I intended to alternate every 'original' tumblr post with a reblog from elsewhere, but as I followed more people (generally I try to follow back everyone that reblogs a fader post) the timeline became more crowded and harder to parse for 'good content,' stuff our followers might be interested in (2011).

Tumblr user “Lost and Mound” states something similar with regards to content curation:

[I]magery is a big deal to me. SO much can come across that can't otherwise. They *can* make me feel more connected... in the way of a joke or a popular subject or a cult theme. But they can do the opposite if they are things that seem unattainable or imposing. A lot of tumblrs are just beautiful supple images, of things I'll never have and paradises I'll never go to. Those are the kind I browse but don't follow. Who needs a waterfall of impossibilities over running their dashboard? (2012).

Then again, Dean's argument is that social networks "let us see ourselves being seen. Instead of writing for strangers, a characteristic of blogs insofar as they are available to search engines, social network sites privilege sharing with friends, with a circuit of others that one has explicitly 'friended'" (2010: 36) is not a valid way to describe Tumblr. It works differently. Mudwerks Tumblr instead define it as "a non-social/social network – less direct communication and more indirect...which fits me perfectly...hard to explain...but tumblrs know what that means" (2012). Tumblr combines the stranger and the friend by converging the micro blogging (often short messages) anonymity (if chosen) as well as reblogging ("not me and mine but us and ours"). It is rather the stranger as friend, as users are more likely to follow their interests than to mainly friend their friends, as on Facebook.

### **Commercialism, Creativity and Attention Econom**

Indeed, the relationship between the fashion industry and Tumblr is a good illustration of the overall image managing and curation online. Digital media online offers increased access to multiple frameworks, but is also progressively freed from the restraint of time and space, which in turn has impact on how we experience fashion as more than commodity (Khan, 2012: 237). In 2010 Tumblr hired Rich Tong, co-founder of street fashion blog community *Weardrobe.com*, as a fashion director for Tumblr. An interesting move. As Sponagle states, it is difficult to imagine Facebook, Spotify or Flickr doing the same (2011). Tong then hand picked Tumblr bloggers to cover New York fashion week in 2011. As Rebecca Stice ("The Clothes Horse"), one of those bloggers, said in the *Elle* article: "fashion moves quickly – and so does Tumblr" (Sponagle, 2011).

*The New York Times* takes this successful pairing even further. In the article "Where Fashion Gazes at Itself", Kayleen Schaefer digs deeper into Tumblr being quite active in courting the fashion industry, realising their mutual interests early on. She interviews photographer Jamie Beck who uses Tumblr precisely for its interactivity, stating that the pictures then can be shared. "Ninety percent of my work isn't a super masterpiece, but if I can reach people who can appreciate it, then it's successful" (Schaefer, 2011). However, Tong also left the company in April of 2012 as certain fashion brands and their agencies started to complain about Tumblr picking favorites and charging for brand exposure. Frustration from the industry was starting to seep out, either directed at Rich Tong, or towards Tumblr's business practices in general (Popper, B, 2011).

Then again, well-known fashion professionals are now turning *en masse* to Tumblr. This does not mean, however, that they are automatically more popular, aesthetically more refined or visually more interesting. It is more meritocratic than that. If the blog is dull, rarely updated, or simply not inspiring, users *will* move on. When self-promotion overshadows creativity, it shows, and users preferring to be anonymous enhance the appreciation of putting the blog first. Because Tumblr is precisely simple, easy and content driven, there is nothing to hide behind if your choices of posts are poor or you are lacking in online social skills. As Lost and Mound notes:

Anyone can reblog. Sure, it feels rad when someone reblogs something of your own. But these 10,000 user strands of a reblogged kitten gif are always so removed from the genius who made the kitten gif. I only reblog if it's someone I know's stuff, OR the thing is undeniable that I can't not (2012).

Duncan Cooper also describes this shift from a magazine point of view:

I'd say The Fader Tumblr is about reaching an audience that isn't included in our other content streams. [...] Tumblr is a little different because unlike Twitter and Facebook, we don't re-post everything on Tumblr. What we choose to post is a little subjective, always determined in part by the image. [...] There's no question Tumblr is more visually oriented than any other Fader platforms. In keeping with what I perceive as the Tumblr norm, every Tumblr post has the minimum amount of text possible to convey the message. So if it's an

artist people might know, I'll include their name as a link and that's it. If it's a recognizable face, sometimes no text at all. Nowhere else would we do this (2011).

It is a step away from the “news-and-commentary tactic” of the original site (O'Dell, 2011). In 2010 Tumblr did not just hire a fashion editor. They also employed a former Newsweek journalist, Mark Coatney, to recruit news organizations to Tumblr (Chittal, 2010). This is commercial media thinking big, focusing more on the platform than the individual user. In an interview with *CNN* online, Coatney states: “It speaks to that perhaps apocryphal quote of the 20 something guy who says ‘I don't seek out news, news finds me.’ News has become this thing that comes to you” (Kantrowitz, 2011). Suggestively, this is a sign of corporate power parasiting on creativity by infiltrating this platform where something is “happening”, much like Dean's discussions on corporate blogs doing the same to the blogosphere a few years ago. News and citizen journalism in general is a major issue online, of which I will not deal with. However, it needs to be stressed that the success of Tumblr as a popular platform among traditional media arguably works according to other rules. If you wish to stay more underground and secret on Tumblr, it is fully possible to do so.

The question is whether Tumblr is a tech company among other tech companies, or/and a social media platform? The duality undoubtedly reflects a more general discourse of the web being either creative or business oriented. Until recently, David Karp and his team refused to have advertisements on the site, taking a firm counter position to some commercial aspects of blogging. In an interview with *The Los Angeles Times* in 2010, Karp states: “We're pretty opposed to advertising”, (followed by “It really turns our stomachs”) showing that the younger generation of Web and blog users are extremely sensitive to “loud” advertisements taking up what we might call personal space and screen real estate (Milian, 2010).

What attitudes like Coatney's again fail to notice are the inner workings of the network itself. Yes, Tumblr *can* work as a portfolio for a photographer, it *can* work as a business card for a fashion professional, and it *can* be a social outlet for brands. But that is not the main function of the platform at large. Instead, Tumblr is more of non-bureaucratic media. As Cooper pronounces, it is a rethink of the whole dialogue as dialogue. The idea of actively collecting and discovering is of much greater interest to the users. True, as with Twitter, information is presented as a coherent stream in the dashboard of the blog. But there needs to be something communicated, or curated, through the personal Tumblr as well, which is of course also the whole point of Tumblr. It should be clear by now that the platform is not so much about passively receiving information, but of sharing, creating, finding, collecting, composing, expressing and processing. My interviewees express this awareness, describing keeping up to date with whom they follow and sometimes even waiting for the right moment to reblog a post (Liquid Night). As with many social platforms, the possibility of using the blog in more commercial terms is of course presented as an option. This does not mean that blog users will consider it.

Things have changed since 2010, indeed since I began writing this article. On the Advertising Week in New York in late September of 2012, Karp spoke enthusiastically of building a new world for advertising (Heussner, 2012). This means placing branded Tumblr posts into the Radar feature of the dashboard that highlights editorially selected posts. It means letting brand sponsors in. It means hiring new staff, most notably the ad sales chief Lee Brown from *Groupon* (Heussner, 2012). Tumblr now has 103 employees (Tumblr's About page, October 2012). The platform is trying to experiment with advertisements that are appropriate for the given digital environment. Karp states:

On Tumblr, advertising takes the form of creativity-centric posts that look organic to the site, not disruptive, full-screen, ‘big honkin’ interstitial ads that make you want to close out of your browsing experience and head somewhere else [...] Tumblr, Twitter, Instagram, all of us, and all the marketers, brands and media companies, our interests are more aligned than they've ever been, which is we want people to pay attention (Heussner, 2012.).

Indeed, paying attention is paying people. Building the Tumblr brand has, thus, meant hiring in-house editorial staff responsible for creating original content, promoting and cherry-picking interesting blogs and stories. Moreover, in May of 2013, Tumblr was sold to Yahoo for over \$1 billion, an arrangement that we have yet to see the effects of. But as Neil Ungerleider rightly observes, this is “communications services that double as mass-media” (Ungerleider, 2012). Confusingly enough, the more Tumblr tries to be like mainstream media, the more conventional media tries to adopt the workings of the platform, including the fascination for GIFs and memes (Ingram, 2012). For example, Tumblr partnered with Livestream (streaming service) for what was called “Live GIFing the 2012 Debates”, which involved digital artists and bloggers creating GIFs of the Obama/Romney presidential debates as they were happening. Sites such as *The Atlantic* and *The Guardian* followed suite (Gabbatt, 2012). Moreover, in June of 2012 *The Times* launched an opinion Tumblr which features free content access to columns behind the paywall (Halliday, 2012). And when news sites *Gawker* and *BuzzFeed* went down due to hurricane Sandy in October of 2012, they relied on Tumblr to post content, instantly redirecting their readers to their Tumblr counterparts (Crum, 2012). This development is a vital part of the future of content (Ingram, 2012).

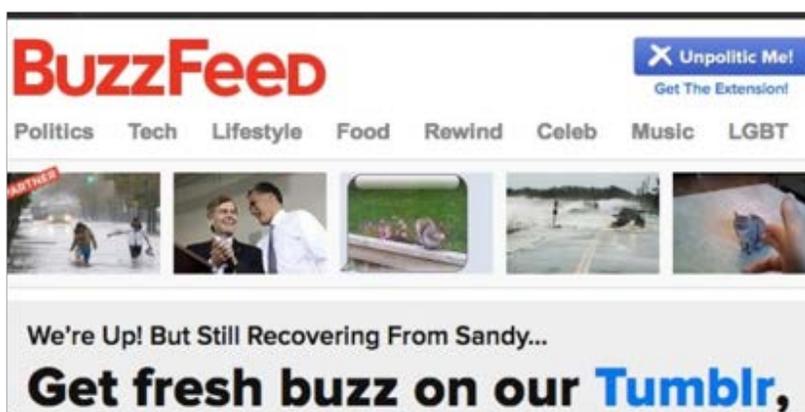


Figure 2. Screenshot from WebProNews.com, originally published October 30, 2012

Still, different theories do collide. On the one hand, the notion of the Attention Economy – in short, the idea that due to overflow of information, human attention is a scarce commodity – is put in contrast, on the other hand, to a participatory, spontaneous and creative culture. From a dog eat dog perspective, this type of personal branding and web PR make sense. But it does not always rhyme well with the actual everyday practice of social networks more based on in-group behavior, subtle variations and exploration. Emotional connection between strangers is a far cry from personal branding:

Sometimes I find things that connect even more significantly than I ever could've hoped – which is incredibly pleasing because, for me at least, it speaks to our interconnectedness – that these individuals who have been creating their respective works of art over the centuries, have touched upon similar themes, photographed/drew/painted the same places – but it's always different because there was a different pair of eyes, a different mind and heart, behind each piece. That fascinates me to no end and keeps me blogging because I am always able to find something that somehow connects one post to another. I find it beautiful (Liquid Night, 2011).

Similar arguments have been made by Cole Stryker, pinpointing an important aspect of neighboring but vastly darker imageboard and community 4chan, which arguably extends to other platforms such as Tumblr. “4chan allows its users to be jerks, but more importantly it provides a platform of social networking that focuses on what one is saying rather than who is saying it” (Stryker, 2011: 277). In tandem, Tumblr users are often anonymous, or at least they keep their personal information to a minimum. It might be a coincident, but the difficulty in finding users willing to answer questions about

their blogging, or even get in contact with them, is arguably a sign of this. The personal Tumblr is enough, and very few seem to be in it for attention in a traditional sense. Much less for money or recognition. This is also evident in the fact that Tumblr does not display the follower count, shying away from a kind of quantitative “popularity” value system and making Tumblr unlike current Web conventions. One such place, Facebook, where personal branding is actually practiced (at least to some extent), is also the one place that is supposed to be authentic and private. “Cashing in on your passion” in this sense almost becomes something of an oxymoron, as personal branding speaks to a type of blog practice that represents the opposite of Tumblr. It is also quite a one-dimensional, even cynical view of the driving forces behind people’s creative expressions. Rob Walker points out that “good design is not just about how a thing looks but rather about how a thing works. But maybe design is also about how a thing feels. The design of Tumblr, the blogging tool and social network, is guided by feeling” (Walker, 2012). Overlapping with the idea of actively participating in the stream of data, danah boyd speak of 4chan hacking the attention economy: “While the security hackers were attacking the security economy at the center of power and authority in the pre-web days, these attention hackers are highlighting how manipulatable information flows are” (boyd, 2010).

Even though Tumblr is nowhere near being a hacking community, I argue that its way of resisting certain commercial interests and presupposed ideas about blogging and visual culture still functions as an alternative web culture. In early 2011, MTV advertised Tumblr by broadcasting commercials and launching a Tumblr blog with original content, which attracted quite a few new members to join the platform. This sparked an interesting reaction among the “veterans” of the site. By placing “5t4s” (according to Internet documentation site Know Your Meme meaning “fight force”) somewhere on one’s Tumblr, users defined themselves as “in-group” who did not join Tumblr because of MTV, or for any other “mainstream” reason. A similar concept is found on 4chan, where “Oldfags” are anonymous people claiming to know more about the community than other members. The idea of commercializing a network, which to a certain extent is necessary to keep it alive, divides and subsequently disrupts the dynamics of the community. As other Tumblr users felt “the originals” acting superior and elitist, the “5t4s” labeled it “watermarking”, suggestively reclaiming a space experienced as being “theirs” (Know Your Meme).

Through the eyes of a fashion theorist, these dynamics are not surprising. Indeed, fashion itself seems to have changed how it perceives itself, focusing more on aesthetics and imagination than commodification (Bancroft, 2011: 68). Fashion’s dealing with the interchange of uncertainty and longing, of self-creation and anxiety, power and subversion, and the constant process of cultural exchange and translation emerge as core elements of Tumblr practice. By creating its own rules Tumblr is influencing the people who are supposed to be influencing them. By prioritizing content over creator it is questioning the self-promotion dominating the media discourse. By insisting on anonymity and ephemera as a default it is, at least in part, undermining not only Jodi Dean’s notion of blogs as individual enjoyment to reproduce oneself, but also Mark Zuckerberg’s dream of a completely transparent Web, which will, he claims, lead to utter truthfulness online (Kosner, 2012). In some ways then, the users are curators of their own blogs, but also the guardians of the site. The question for Tumblr is not only whether it is possible to be a decentralized distribution and communication service as well as working towards a more traditional model of, say, a newspaper. It is also about understanding that the creativity itself born out of the platform can be as ephemeral as the memes. As resilient to not playing by the rules and as closely connected to the underworld as certain groups and members on Tumblr can be, most social media platforms are sensitive eco systems, and often short lived because of this. At the core of content curation lies some form of active participation.

### **Agency (of individuals, of images)**

*I love Tumblr because it's the one place that I can express myself, whether it be through pictures, quotes, or anything else on my blog, and feel good about it. I can explore and*

*contemplate and so much more without the pressure of judgement by people I may or may not know. There, I'm free.*

- Jessy S, Amplicate.com

There is a pressing matter, even in current literature, of the question as to why and how users blog. Returning to Dean, she uses Slavoj Zizek to discuss the idea of blogging being an expression of our constantly shifting identities. When we blog, we give ourselves up to the gaze of strangers. According to Dean, blogging is a source of great attraction, provoking us to exhibitionism, but at the same time, the very medium that motivates our desire to create and express ourselves freely, “deliver us up to others to use for purposes of their own” (Dean, 2010: 56f). This is what Zizek labels a decline of symbolic efficiency, which creates an unstable order. On the one hand this could free us from rigid norms, but to Dean, “the fluidity and adaptability of imaginary identities are accompanied by fragility and insecurity” (Dean, 2010: 57). Conversely, as expressed in the blog Possum Ego: “We are not the sum of our blog comments” (2009). Nor, I argue, are we the sum of our blogs. This overlaps with the idea of authenticity and an assumed striving for one singular persona. It is one thing to wish for cohesiveness in everyday life, quite another to be exactly the same in every situation, online as offline. Seen in a spectrum then, we find the online virtual worlds of Second Life and the dream of constant identity invention on one side, and on the other, the complete, totally transparent and “true” individual of Facebook. None of these identity formations are real, but precisely those of extremes. Additionally, there seems to be an implicit assumption that communication is still one sided, or only directed outwards, rather than dynamic and retroactive. That we might actually, if we blog, be precisely the sum of our blogs.

This, in a way, would imply a constant state of emergency, as we then would appear to be in endless need of expressing ourselves. And it arguably involves very little of actual agency. Choice is present in both the case of Dean and Zizek. Understanding and seeing the effects of these choices? Not so much. Instead, there is a third way of approaching (micro) blogging. Mudwerks describes this complex relationship to all aspects of the medium:

[Images] stimulate thought and for me, creative thought [...] there is something very powerful about sharing an image that speaks to you personally (for whatever reason) - and having people respond to it. THAT is the lasting effect which brings me back (2012).

The driving force here is the *cycle*, the actual process of image managing and image sharing. In a way, this is an expression of precisely this reflexive existence in constant flux. Like fashion, it becomes a medium for expressing ideals when existing forms of art are not sufficient (Cunnington, 1941: 260f). Irrational and functional, it is the start off point, the taken for granted state of mind, not the created effect of “too much blogging”. Perhaps even a form of “reflexive habitus” which sociologist Paul Sweetman introduced in 2003. Consequently, the use of Tumblr is a way of dealing with this sense of instability, rather than it being a frightening or troublesome outcome of Zizek’s decentered subjects and pathological narcissism.

When Tavi Gevinson gave a talk at the ideaCity conference in 2010, before she had materialized the *Rookie Mag* website, she describes feminist teen magazine *Sassy* as her ideal space for counter culture. A place where fashion is fun and not about pleasing other people, where girls are allowed to speak up and find alternative role models that go beyond clichés (cool, intellectual or otherwise) but also a space that is your own when reality seems frightening or alienating. Agency then, in this context also becomes the basis of privacy, where you are able to chose what, when and how to share information. My Tumblr interviewees, although varied in age and gender, describe a similar desire for connectivity and personal space:

[I]t's like trying to describe why a film grabs you or a certain work of art... makes you tingle...something intrigues me and I want to capture it – sharing it is a form of capturing it

and taking ownership of it. somehow making it YOURS (Mudwerks, 2012).

I have mentioned 4chan in passing several times throughout this text. In the numerous social platforms that has emerged out of the Web 2.0, Tumblr and 4chan (and to some extent, Reddit, a social news website) in their separate ways, not only work distinctively different than Facebook or Twitter. They also have a specific relationship to each other, not the least through their use of imagery and memes. In both cases, these platforms seem to strive for maintaining an underground identity (at least on some level) and in both cases they have become representations of the darker sides of Internet practices, a glimpse of the “deep web”, pushing boundaries both in content and in form. Anonymity is available as a choice within both sites, and often utilized. Over the course of my Tumblr research, this idea of anonymity actually became even more prominent. If the interaction is not related to Tumblr content and communicated through the network, there is silence. And as with 4chan, Tumblr users often refer to “getting it” or not, which may relate to everything from general knowledge of “being on Tumblr”, to specific humor, manners or memes. Furthermore, as much as anonymity might have been abused in media discourse (through hackers or bullies), it is also a form of protection, a mask through which certain things become plausible. It might even be a necessity, of a form of survival.

Even the images themselves are freed of given categories. By shifting context and meaning, they dodge a fixed gaze and challenge certain conventions. An interesting phenomenon is the increased number of Tumblrs with pornographic content, often bordering on art (and fashion) and therefore seemingly accepted. As Tumblr grows, the darker aspects of 4chan is finding its ways to blogs as well, but as the content is constantly chosen and re-chosen (or blogged and reblogged), so is the original tone of a community replaced by the aesthetics of each individual user. Mixing images from fashion, art, independent or amateur photography and film with more obvious pornographic content but also other types of media (for example gifs) blurs the boundaries of what we are experiencing when we browse Tumblr blogs. Even this type of already culturally charged content relies heavily on this multi-layered network of images, users, blogs and other social platforms as this ever-changing nature of in-group understanding keeps questioning certain expectations (Stryker, 2011: 180). Tumblr is an ultimate case study in an emerging era of curation.

## The Age of Curation

As the Internet continues to grow (and the number of blogs and social platforms), the idea of a curated web and curated content has recently started to be debated. Borrowing the expression from the art world where the curator works as a specialist who keeps and interprets a collection or an institution’s content, the idea of a kind of qualified eye has arguably already shifted in context and function. On *Wired* online, Eliot Van Buskirk states that curation is already “fundamental to the way we view the world these days” (2010). Facebook could be seen as a kind of curation (they have recently introduced Tumblr like blogs such as “Facebook Stories”, highlighting popular themes on the site). Music blogs are arguably curated. Apple is a type of curated technology. YouTube recently revealed that curation is “core to their strategy of contextualizing video content” (Rosenbaum, 2012). This borrowing of older definitions for possible “new” practices is a criticized habit, as we constantly try to refer phenomenon online with offline aspects already familiar. Sometimes, the term changes and fits, sometimes, misunderstandings and misuse of the word follows.

In relation to what is created on 4Chan, Tumblr as a platform arguably works as a curator as well, filtering, re-categorizing and re-contextualizing the often “raw” material from the imageboard. The fashion oriented Tumblrs work similarly with their combination of seasonal picks, art photography and other aspects of pop culture. Indeed, curation is something different from aggregation, and there is thought and emotion behind each Tumblr, not just automatic filtering or mindless pressing of keys. Undoubtedly, the idea of curation that goes beyond its original art context has been debated for some time, not the least in regards to certain Internet practices and expressions. Marisa Melzer describes

this as a more formal linkage built-in to the community that leads to Tumblr's focus on curation.

If you follow someone because you love her impeccable taste in vintage photos of Stevie Nicks, you might find that she is frequently reblogging from another Tumblr—and then start following that tumblelogger, too. It's akin to the way that taste organically develops; you like a band, and you hear them mention an influence, and then you go out and buy that record, too (Melzer, 2010).

This way of thinking has spread to mainstream media as well. When *The New York Times'* magazine *Times* created its first Tumblr in March of 2011, it generated headlines on social media sites online. Then editor Joao Silva stated: "It's a great way of bringing to the surface a lot of these great visuals that for any reason may have been overlooked [...] We take a very curatorial approach to the editorial decisions we make. I think that aspect lends itself perfectly to Tumblr" (O'Dell, 2011).

Tumblr isn't only used for photographic and visual expression. With its combination of network and self-explanatory content and it is apparent that it is attractive to a number of professions and institutions. You follow and you interact; yet you keep a sense of stability in the fact that the Tumblr you manage has its own unique combination of material. What makes your Tumblr interesting is your personal choices, put together to create your personal set of aesthetics. Sometimes this will correspond with others and sometimes it works as a portal to dig even further into something that you find exciting. Curation on Tumblr is participatory, it is creative and it is flexible. Moreover, as my interviewees express in different forms, the idea of curation moves back and forth on a continuum, with a more traditional, institutional role of the curator as the keeper and overseer of collections on one side, and a more individualized and emotional stream of conciseness on the other. Liquid Night describes this overlapping of image use, curation and collecting:

The blog began very simply as a collection of images, quotes, and songs that struck my fancy and took at least 6 months before it began to evolve into the more structured, thoughtful site that it is now. I've been enjoying art and collecting images in various forms for almost as long as I can remember. So initially it was simply a place to consolidate these images. But eventually I started weaving them together with increasing deliberation - first purely aesthetically to make the stream of images a little more engaging and pleasing to the eye, and then it steadily deepened and became what one sees now, which is, as far as I can manage, a continuous stream of interconnected works (2011).

At a conference in Munich in January of 2012, Karp stated that there are nine curators to every creator on the site (Gannes, 2012). He also said that the average post is reblogged nine times (ibid.). Needless to say, the site really took off when the reblog button was introduced as a way of reacting to other people's original content.

It would be easy to wave this aside by arguing that reblogging is uncreative and passive. But there is more to it than that. As Felix Salmon writes, reblogging not only amplifies what others have created, it also gives people who are shy, less innovative or uncomfortable a tool to still be able to express themselves (Salmon, 2012). It is the pleasure of juxtaposing fantasy with the recognizable and intimate. As Tumblr, and even more curation-oriented site Pinterest, are essentially visual, it also requires a different set of standards for what is considered imaginative and innovative (reading and writing are two very different things). A mainly curated blog can indeed display something glorious, precisely for actively being curated the right way. As with a mix tape or a mash-up, some form of meaning, pleasure or productivity is always involved. As Lost and Mound notes, Tumblr is a mixture of attention, production and expression: "It's the same as my human drive to create: to share, to look at it myself, to get little hearts and comments" (2012). Liquid Night mentions a similar cycle: "[It is] my desire to explore and appreciate the interconnectedness of things [...] an ongoing and potentially endless series of evolving motifs linked via images, quotes, and the occasional song" (2011). The way one single image can travel and shift context shows that "mainstream" is not as easily obtainable as one might think, but always become personal on some level. Opinion is thus replaced by taste, but

this taste is created collectively, linking individuals, cultural institutions, but also software together in new ways. The otherwise sharp line between the established and the personal is here redefined. Many art and museum curators argue that the word has been thrown around so much it has become vacant of meaning (Schwiegershausen, 2012). In its place, I argue that the editing and collecting of Tumblr bloggers is not to be overlooked as a curated practice. Neither should the presence of certain institutions on Tumblr be viewed as mere catering to the audience. Hopefully established through this text is that traditional monologue consumption is not what made Tumblr popular. Instead, sharing and storytelling, the idea of the remix, even the notion of the “unoriginal genius” put forth by Kenneth Goldsmith, Marjorie Perloff and others, are all practices which challenge the idea of creativity and creation. Consider designer Yoji Yamamoto’s advice to young people: “Start copying what you love. Copy, copy, copy, copy. At the end of the copy you will find yourself” (Showstudio, “In Conversation”, 2011).

## Conclusion

I began this article by arguing that Tumblr is a central case for the future of content curation online. The platform not only provides an active user participation by offering simple technology and clear design through reblogging, themes and tagging, but this curated eye is also traceable through the less obvious yet clearly articulated meanings of emotion, taste and aesthetics. As old media institutions are increasingly turning to Tumblr for this type of practice and interaction, the platform arguably not only work as a model for generating and sharing content, it is a driving force in this development, a catalyst for a shift from content consumption to content creation. If Tavi Gevinson’s style and image remixing can be seen as an embodiment of a contemporary free flowing web culture, then Tumblr is an extension of this, adding an even more seamless process of integrating image into emotion, the personal in the commercial, information to customization. Hence, some of the curation dilemmas facing tech companies are arguably already finding practical solutions by the users themselves.

Moreover, this type of creative interaction not only with other users, but also with machines, software and robots, means further investigation into how we deal with active data. Content is arguably never complete, but always in motion. As the technology facilitating the organization of user data and curation is still suggestively in its infancy, users are in the meantime figuring out ways to create, collect and distribute content and networking their ideas through the channels and platforms available, learning and inventing as they go, subsequently not always using technology in the ways that were originally intended. This is where you find the desire of the introductory anonymous quote of this article; a type of longing that drives itself. Thus, blogging on Tumblr is both a means and an end. Calling it by its rightful name, *curation*, is finally taking these practices seriously. This has implications not only on the future of data, information and content, but also on the power relations intertwined within this knowledge production. Through anonymity, agency and reblogging, Tumblr, and the users of Tumblr, are arguably challenging existing power structures and offer alternative ways to understand our social fabric. Who gets empowered and whom do these shifts disempower? To quote Jean-Luc Godard: “It is not where you take things from, it is where you take them to.”

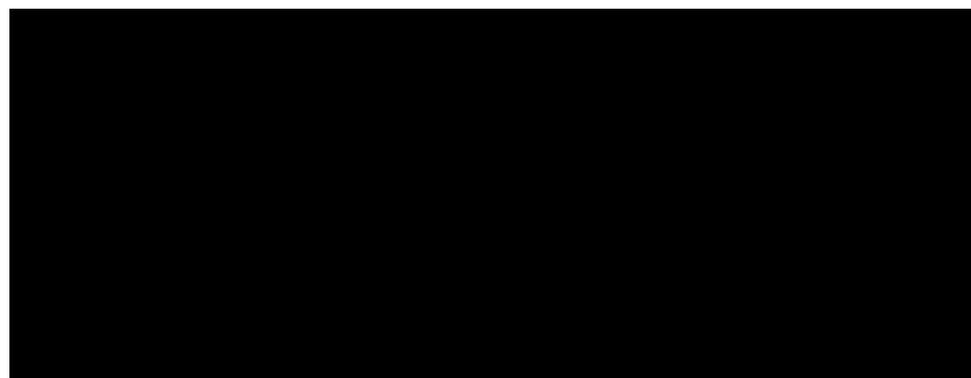




Figure 3. Tumblr Video from Cloaque.org, 2013

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## Interviews via email with

Duncan Cooper, *The Fader Magazine*  
Mudwerks Tumblr  
Liquid Night Tumblr  
Lost and Mound Tumblr

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