

Book review

Rosenberg's writing style shines in 'Say Everything'

Are you happy? Depressed?

Angry? Bored?

Or maybe you've discovered that there actually was a conspiracy.

Then tell the whole world about it!

That is the subject of Scott Rosenberg's latest book, "Say Everything: How Blogging Began, What It's Becoming, and Why It Matters."

Blogging essentially refers to the practice of maintaining an online journal or diary, where anybody can, if they are so inclined, read your thoughts, feelings and ideas on just about any topic.

The first descriptor for this phenomenon was "weblog," which was coined by John Barger in 1997. Barger was a pioneer in the field of artificial intelligence and an avid contributor to Usenet, a collection of newsgroups that predated the World Wide Web. Later, Peter Merholz, a Web designer in California, shortened it to "blog."

Rosenberg is a good storyteller. This was evident in his first book, "Dreaming in Code: Two Dozen Programmers, Three Years, 4,732 Bugs, and One Quest for Transcendent Software," which dealt with how software is developed. His prowess with the written word is even more evident in his latest book.

He is able to hold the reader's interest through a narrative approach that engages readers' interests on a number of levels. Rosenberg is a master of the anecdotal style and infuses "Say Everything" with several tidbits that collectively serve to bring to life the points he is making.

He is also exceptionally meticulous in his research; every reference he makes is carefully documented in the "Notes" section at the end of the book and the links he refers the reader to all seem to work.

For the most part, Rosenberg takes a very balanced approach to his subject matter. He obviously sees blogging as inherently good; i.e., a kind of logical extension of the ongoing evolution of how human beings continually seek to fulfill their innate need to communicate and connect with each other. He is clearly a fan of the technology and its increasing use among a growing segment of the population. At the same time, however, he does a commendable job of describing the potential downside of blogging — especially at the personal level.

He notes, for instance, that blogging can be hazardous to your career. Particularly instructive is the story of Heather Armstrong, who routinely wrote about the frustration she was experiencing while working for a software company on her blog, "Dooce." (In Web-speak, "dooce" now refers to what happens when someone loses his or her job

because of something they have written in a blog). Her characterizations of her co-workers as well as the management at her place of employment were particularly scathing. She was eventually fired and mailed the URL for her blog to all the vice presidents in the company. Like many bloggers incorrectly assume, she thought she had "security through obscurity."

Rosenberg also chronicles the often spirited discourse between more traditional journalists and contemporary bloggers. One of the pivotal illustrations of these divergent perspectives entails an analysis of Dan Rather's now infamous "60 Minutes" segment on the nature of George W. Bush's involvement in the Texas Air National Guard.

Regarding the controversy, Jonathan Klein, a former CBS executive, commented that "You couldn't have a starker contrast between the multiple layers of checks and balances and a guy sitting in his living room in his pajamas, writing what he thinks." But Rosenberg counters with the now-known reality that "The trouble was that the guys in pajamas were making more sense than CBS was."

Other criticisms of blogging elucidated by Rosenberg include the notion that it tends to overvalue uniqueness at the expense of more enduring concepts and that bloggers tend to break everything down into smaller and smaller

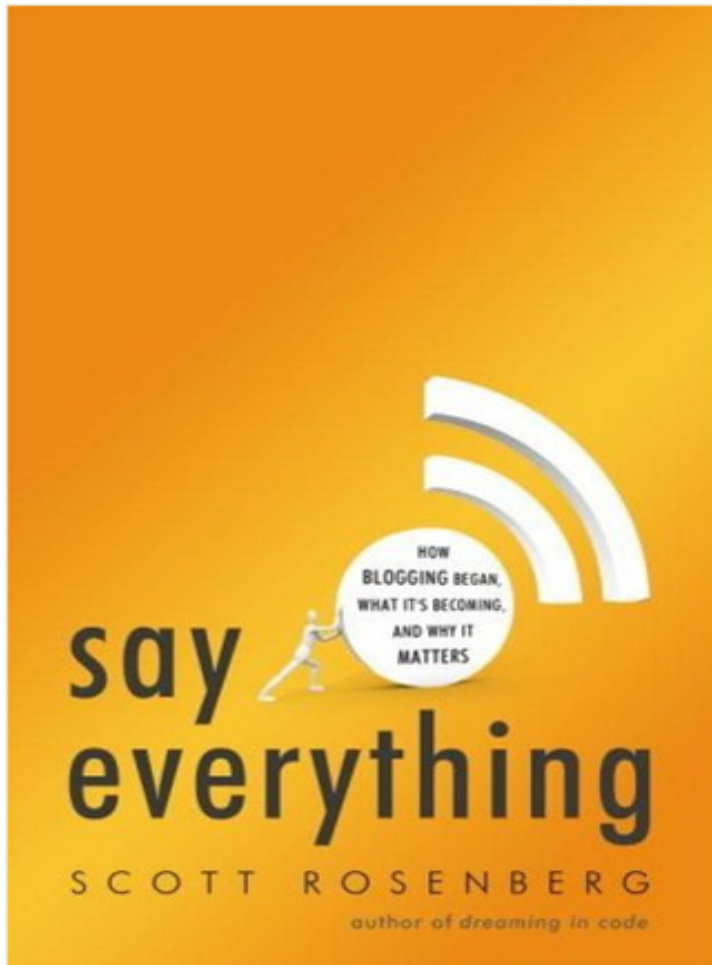
components to the point where the "big picture" is often completely obscured. He even cites Nicholas Carr, a business author and outspoken critic of blogging, who argues that the practice is reprogramming our brains and "changing the nature of human intelligence." By the way, you can learn more about Carr's concerns by visiting his blog.

Finally, Rosenberg attempts to refute the myth of "overload" that always seems to accompany any technological innovation that enhances access to information. He is convinced that our cognitive ability to adapt will continue to evolve as it always has. In fact, Rosenberg asserts that "... we find our species experiencing an expanding universe of information as a consistent condition of its existence." Agreed, but the rate of expansion seems to be the point of contention for most critics.

The popularity of blogging has continued to increase exponentially even as other Web ventures have faded into footnotes. It is becoming infused into the fabric of our culture as the critics have largely been ignored by the true believers. Blogging increasingly influences every aspect of our personal, social and political lives. In short, it is here to stay.

You can read all about it in my next installment.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University



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