

Blogging by the Rest of Us

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ABSTRACT

Weblogs (or *blogs*) are frequently updated webpages with posts typically in reverse-chronological order. Blogging is the latest form of online communication to gain widespread popularity and it is rapidly becoming mainstream. Media attention tends to focus on "heavy-hitting" blogs devoted to politics, punditry and technology, but it has recently become apparent that vast majority of blogs are written by ordinary people for much smaller audiences, and on largely personal themes. Surprisingly little is known about this "blogging by the rest of us", especially from the blogger's point of view. This paper presents the preliminary results of an ethnographic study of blogging as a form of personal expression and communication. We characterize a number of blogging practices, and then consider blogging as personal journaling. We find blogging to be a surprisingly versatile medium, with uses similar to an online diary, personal chronicle or newsletter, and much more. The next few years should provide a fascinating opportunity for research and design as blogging tools improve and blog usage evolves and flourishes.

Author Keywords

Blogs, weblogs, CMC, webpage, online communication, online journaling, WWW.

ACM Classification Keywords

H5m..Information interfaces and presentation (HCI): Miscellaneous. H.5.4 Hypertext/Hypermedia- User Issues. H.5.3:Group and Organization Interfaces: Web-based interaction.

INTRODUCTION

A weblog or *blog* is a frequently updated webpage, typically consisting of fairly brief posts presented and archived in reverse-chronological order. Blog posts are primarily textual, but many include photos and other

multimedia content. Most are interlinked in that they provide links to other sites on the Internet. Many are interactive, in that they invite and post commentary on their contents. Blogs are the latest form of online communication to gain widespread popularity, and their use is rapidly becoming mainstream. Current estimates place the number of sites calling themselves "blogs" at over 1.3 million, of which about 870,000 are actively maintained [6]. Exponential growth is expected in the next few years as blogging becomes more familiar and the tools continue to improve.

Blogs in their current format started around 1997, with Dave Winer's *Scripting News*, a web record of Winer's reflections and commentaries on a wide range of topics; it is currently the longest-running blog on the Internet [2]. In recent years, tools such as Blogger have made blogging much easier and more widely accessible, effectively (as they advertise) "pushbutton publishing for the people" [1]. Blogs vary greatly in nature and content. Most are unabashedly partisan, infused with personal perspective and attitude. Major blog sites devoted to politics and punditry (e.g., the Dean campaign's "Blog for America"), and to technical developments (e.g., "Slashdot") receive thousands of hits a day. Media attention has focused on these "heavy-hitters", but it's recently become apparent that the vast majority of blogs are written by ordinary people with much smaller audiences in mind [7].

Some attempts have been made to categorize and characterize blogs recently. For example, Krishnamurthy [4] proposed a classification of blogs into four basic types, along two dimensions: personal vs. topical, and individual vs. community. Herring et al [3] estimate that the vast majority of blogs (over 70%) are written by individuals on largely personal themes. Surprisingly little is known about this "blogging by the rest of us", especially from the blogger's point of view. This paper presents preliminary results from an ethnographic exploration of blogging conducted initially as part of an HCI class at Stanford University in April-June of 2003. The focus of this research is on understanding blogging as a new form of personal expression and communication, with a specific interest in uncovering a range of motivations and purposes that individuals may have for creating and maintaining blogs. In this paper we present our initial findings on the use of blogging as a form of personal journaling. As an example, a

screen-shot of such a blog site found recently on Blogger's list of "fresh blogs" is shown in Figure 1 below.

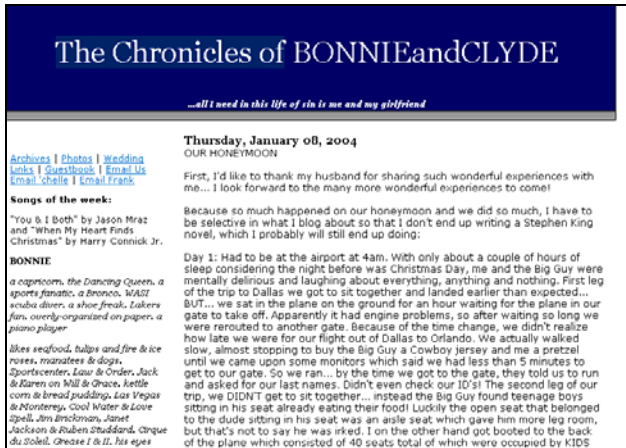


Figure 1. Screen-shot of example blog site.

METHODS AND SAMPLE

Ethnographic interviews were conducted between April and June 2003. Interviews were conducted in conversational style but covered a fixed set of questions about participants' blogs, blogging habits, thoughts on blogging, and use of other communication media. Most participants were interviewed in person, and most were interviewed at least twice, often with follow-ups over the phone or in email. Blog posts were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively and continue to be read during the writing of this paper. To better familiarize ourselves with blogging, we created a class blog within which to discuss the research.

Twenty-three people (16 men and 7 women, ranging from 19-60 years of age) were interviewed. All lived in California or New York, although countries of origin varied. Ten participants were current or former Stanford students. All were well-educated, middle-class people either in school or employed in knowledge work or artistic pursuits. We developed the sample by searching (on Google's Stanford portal) primarily for blogs hosted in the Stanford vicinity, so that we could interview participants in person. Our sample seems fairly representative; recent findings suggest that at this time, bloggers are primarily current or recent students, living in the US (or Western Europe) and blogging in English [1]. Our participants used a wide variety of blogging tools, including Blogger, Blurry, Xanga, MoveableType, RadioUserLand, and customized scripts. Several participants began with Blogger (recently acquired by Google), but as they gained experience, they migrated to other, more sophisticated tools or created their own. In the description of results to follow, all names are fictitious and all statements are quoted with permission.

Blogging Practices

Many of the people we interviewed were the sole authors of their blogs, which functioned primarily as online journals.

Several were also involved in other kinds of blogs--including group blogs--for other personal or professional purposes. Our participants found out about blogging either through friends or colleagues, or by surfing the Internet, and they learned of other blogs through blogs they were already reading (many blogs include a fairly stable "blogrolling" section containing links to other blogs of interest), through friends or colleagues, sometimes through the inclusion of the blog URL in an instant message profile or homepage. Their blogs varied greatly in posting frequency, from as little as once a month to several times a day. (A quantitative analysis of number of public posts during the 3-month sample period ranged from 3 to 253; mean = 80). Some posts were extremely brief, others rather long-winded (words/post ranged from 80-494; mean = 209.2). While most participants posted fairly consistently during the time we've been reading their blogs, others stopped for long or short periods; one participant ended his then-current blog and started another.

The content of our participants' blogs showed great diversity, even in so small a sample. We found blogs devoted primarily to documenting daily life, travels, family events, or sharing the progress of an ill loved one; to disseminating information on topics in health and science; to political commentary and "rants" on miscarriages of justice; to commentary on issues in the history of science and technology, to the discussion and publication of poetry, and much more. Many of these blogs showed an intriguing combination of serious commentary with personal revelations. Bloggers seemed very aware of their target--and potential--audience. For example, some kept their writing suitable for occasional perusal by parents or family members of different persuasions:

"My mom mentioned something that was in [my blog]...my grandma reads it, too; she just got the Internet....It means that I kind of have to censor--less cursing and stuff."

Blogging thus seems to provide scope for an enormous variety of expression within a rather simple format.

A recent content analysis of a large sample of weblogs suggests that media characterizations exaggerate the extent to which most blogs are interlinked, interactive, and oriented towards external events, and under-estimate the importance of blogs as individualistic, intimate forms of self-expression and communication [3]. The blogs in our study lend some support to this view. While many did discuss external issues and events, they often did so from a distinctly personal perspective or included personal content. In addition, most of the blogs we studied did not show high interactivity in the form of frequent posted commentaries. Most blogs had a fairly small set of regular readers, a few of whom might send in comments occasionally, perhaps on a topic of interest, or just to "keep in touch". Feedback also occurred elsewhere: in readers' blogs, "in real life", or via email or other communication media. Finally, although most of these blogs had links to other Internet sites

(including "blogrolling" lists), the content of blog posts in our sample was in general not highly interlinked. Number of external links per post (i.e., those with absolute addressing--starting with <http://>"http://" and not referring to a file on the same site) ranged from 0 to 5, with a mean of 1.

The following section presents our initial findings more specifically on blogging as a form of online personal journaling.

Blogs as Personal Journals

Many blogs seem to function in the age-old tradition of **diaries** and **personal record-keeping**. While the blogger is aware that his or her journal is on the Internet, the primary audience seems to be oneself, and perhaps a very few occasional readers. Eddie, a Stanford undergraduate, said he used his blog primarily for personal record-keeping:

[I use it] just to have like a record of like all the stuff that I kinda did? [I]t's just to kind of get a snapshot of where you are in life and maybe like twenty years from now...you might browse through one day and be like, "Hey I actually remember stuff like that."

In a related vein, Fred, another undergraduate, says that he views this blog record as "verification" of his life:

A lot of times, it's just for personal reference...to not forget it [events in my life]. [...]Because if I don't remember it...and there's nothing physical...no remnant of time passing...then, like, how do I prove to myself that I even existed? ...or did anything?

This rationale is so familiar among bloggers that it is humorously referred to as "*blogito ergo sum*" ("I blog, therefore I am"). As is also common in diaries, blogging was often used as an "outlet" to "vent" deeply held thoughts and feelings. Another student, Lara, described her emotional, even confessional posts as "me working out my own issues". Others expressed a need to "rant", to "get it out there", and to "let off steam" on issues they felt passionately about.

Several participants said that they used online diaries because of the advantages of using a computer rather than paper (typing is easier, faster and more familiar than writing by hand these days, and has the benefits of superior document editing and management tools). Moreover, on the Internet, their posts were stored and accessible to them essentially anytime, anywhere. Of course, anyone who posts on a public blog knows it differs from a private diary; the potential audience is as vast as the Internet. Yet many bloggers seemed surprisingly unconcerned about privacy. Only one participant had a private, password-protected blog (containing information about and photos of his young daughters, and targeted exclusively for family and other intimates). Even in public blogs, most bloggers have the option of designating specific posts as "private". Still, this appeared to have been done very rarely in our sample. One

explanation may stem from the realization that while much of this personal information may have meaning for the author and perhaps a few friends and relations, others would find it "uninteresting". As Michael, a computer scientist with a photographic blog documenting his young son's life, said, "a lot what's [in blogs] is pretty boring drivel...But [in my blog] it's *my* drivel!". He added:

This isn't private, in part because it's easier...But I guess I believe in the large unwashed denizens of the web. You know, there are these incredibly personal pages on the web, but who the hell cares?. I'm doing it for myself and my friends...So I'm not really concerned.

This sense of openness was surprisingly common, even in very sophisticated users revealing very personal information. Katie, a graduate student in electrical engineering, said she didn't mind publicly "letting go" or "putting out" her personal posts. It even gave her a sense of "connection", of not being "isolated". She said:

I am what I am, and I'm comfortable with who I am...Blogging is about yourself, unlike avatars or other digital identities.

Michael, Katie and several others occasionally used "trackback" software to see who tends to read their blogs, and both had received infrequent messages from people they didn't know about something in one of their posts. In general, their experiences were good; no one reported real problems or concerns. Katie acknowledged that as blogging becomes more widespread, privacy-related difficulties might arise. But she seemed to see Internet presence as inevitable, and expressed confidence that "society" would eventually evolve "rules" to ensure appropriate behavior. Many of the blogs in our sample provide accurate identity and even contact information, often through links to the author's home page. A similar tendency to reveal this sort of information in blogs was noted in Herring et al's recent research [3].

Beyond diary-keeping, sharing the ongoing story of one's life (and, often, that of one's spouse and children) with others is a primary use of many blogs in our sample. These blogs resemble a continuing **chronicle** or **newsletter** more than a diary, and seemed especially common for newlyweds or parents with remote relatives. Harriet, a Stanford graduate student, started her blog to "document my life" (and that of her husband) for her family and close friends in Iceland when they moved to the United States. They share posting duties, which typically involve many photographs, and she's currently putting up pictures of herself at various stages of her pregnancy. Harriet blogs mostly in Icelandic, although she expects her local friends to appreciate the photographs, and she sometimes provides titles for them in English.. Interestingly, she found herself posting in English when she was on vacation back home. Tammy, a biostatistician, said used her blog "kind of as a journal...just to keep people updated. Like, there's a lot of people from college or whatever that I don't keep in touch

with very well.” Similarly, Katie described her blogs as a means of relating her life to others by telling her continuing “...story in close to ‘real-time’”. Several people described blogging as a vastly superior alternative to sending out mass emails.

Several participants said they started blogging in earnest when they purchased digital cameras and began to post pictures on the Web. Using blogs essentially as sharable **photo albums** or **scrapbooks** seemed especially common for those far from home and/or with young children. Harriet noted that in Iceland, “baby book” blogs were extremely common. Michael described his “photographic blog” for his son, Kevin, as

...a way to dump a whole bunch of stuff...mostly time organized...on what [Kevin]’s been doing. Not updated daily or hourly, like a lot of blogs are. But [it] functions in the same way...lets friends and family know what we’ve been doing.

Blogs’ reverse chronological format also lends itself easily to use as **travelogues**, (including advance itineraries), as well as **status updates** or **progress reports**. For example, Don, a consultant, began blogging to document his wife’s health condition when she became gravely ill and nearly died. He found blogging an important way to communicate with others who were concerned about his wife--and him--during this difficult period:

[Blogging is helpful] when people’s lives are compromised in some way...when [my wife] was sick, [I] was going through [the] hospital with the lens of how can I share this with others?

Why use a blog for this instead of email or a personal web page? Arthur, a Stanford professor, noted that a blog is physically easier than email and affords a greater scope of communication. Potential problems like remembering changing addresses or whether a recipient can accept large photo files are obviated. Moreover, as a “pull” rather than a “push” technology, blogging feels less intrusive. As Lara observed, no one is “forced to pay attention”.. Readers can go to the blog in a “voluntary” way, to “catch up” at their convenience. Several participants said that homepages were less spontaneous than blogs, more “static” and considered, and perhaps less authentic. Jack, a poet and graduate student in English, summed up this point by noting that in webpages “you don’t hear their voice in the same way.”

OTHER BLOG USES

Our sample includes many other uses of blogs besides those discussed above. For example, some blogs seem to act as primarily as **news digests**, designed to inform people on topics within the author’s areas of expertise or interest. Others are more like a **newspaper op/ed page** or **featured column**, a platform for providing opinion and commentary. A blog can also function as a **forum** for ongoing work projects, artistic efforts, and community-building. We found blogs used for each of these purposes--and often for multiple purposes--by both individuals and groups.

Discussion of these uses is beyond the scope of this paper, but will be forthcoming in a paper currently in progress [5].

DESIGN ISSUES

While design issues cannot be discussed in detail here, we note the potential for improvement in several areas:

- better integration with other online communication and document management tools
- improved ease of use, including better website integration and management
- improved audience specificity and privacy tools
- facilitating the inclusion or reference to photographs (and perhaps other media)
- facilitating search and browsing within and across blogs (and blog tools)

Some of the more sophisticated blogging systems do address some of these issues in paid “premier” editions of their tools, but often at the expense of ease of use.

CONCLUSION

Blogging is a burgeoning form of online communication coming into its own at this time. This paper presents the preliminary results of an ethnographic study of blogging as a form of personal expression and communication. We characterize a number of blogging practices, and then consider blogging as a form personal journaling Our findings converge well with a recent study emphasizing the importance of blogs as individualistic, intimate forms of self-expression and communication. We find blogging to be a surprisingly versatile medium, with uses similar to those of an online diary, personal chronicle or newsletter, and much more. The next few years should provide a fascinating opportunity for research and design as blogging tools improve and blog usage evolves and flourishes.

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