

Blogs and Bloggers

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A combination of the words “web” and “log,” weblogs are websites on which posts are organized in reverse chronological order. Peter Merholz was reported to be the first person who shortened the term “weblog” to “blog” in 1999. He wrote in his own blog that “I’ve decided to pronounce the word ‘weblog’ as wee’-blog. Or ‘blog’ for short” (cited in Rettberg, 2008, p. 26). Blogging is a cumulative process in which a blogger shares his or her thoughts, feelings, and opinions. Blogging has become a popular way to create sense-making narratives along with the arrival of the Web 2.0 era at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Blogging is a form of self-expression. It should be acknowledged that the needs and desires for personal expression can be found throughout human history. Pamphleteering was an early example of how opinions were printed and distributed through the medium of pamphlets in the sixteenth century. Blogging is hardly a novel phenomenon but for the advances in communication technologies. Driven by web technologies commonly known as Web 2.0, websites have moved away from the “read-only” mode to the “read and write” mode in the early 2000s. It has made a significant difference to Internet users. In earlier times when forerunners had just begun to blog in the early 1990s, they had to write their own HTML codes. Yet, in the era of Web 2.0, the emergence of blogging sites and hosting services provides netizens with easy-to-use interfaces and platforms to write on the Web. Functions like time-stamped entries, trackback, threaded comments, and tagging enable bloggers to write and interact with one another without prior knowledge of programming languages. While they offer obvious convenience to users, such blogging platforms nonetheless preset and condition certain blogging practices.

With features like syndication, hyperlinks and blogrolls, blogs link and connect to one another, and blog communities are formed. The term “blogosphere” refers to the totality of blogs and blog communities. Blogging is both personal and social in this new era of communication. With the proliferation of blogs in the early 2000s, a wide range of content and a multitude of voices in the web space emerged. In 2004, Merriam-Webster chose “blog” as the word of the year for it was the most searched-for word in their online dictionary that year.

User-generated content abounds in the emergent participatory culture. Blogging, along with other forms of production like podcasts and video production, is part of a wider development that is called prosumption, or produsage (Bruns, 2008). Unlike in the days when media production and consumption appeared to belong to two discrete domains, the boundaries between production and consumption, and hence producer and consumer, blurred. An optimistic, if not celebratory, undertone could be identified

in earlier discussions about this “architecture of participation.” There have been high hopes that these would result in forms of alternative, counter, or grassroots culture that could challenge the dominant and mainstream culture. In other words, blogging might contribute to a more active civic participation. With influences of corporatization, commercialization, and consumerism, however, there are more mixed feelings about the democratizing potential of the new media.

Some define blogs according to their content or genres. Personal blogs are akin to diaries and mainly focus on personal lives. Filter blogs are characterized by hyperlinks throughout the text, which facilitate easy navigation and allow extended reading across different websites. Topic-driven blogs feature all sorts of subject matter, from serious political news and commentaries to various lifestyle issues, including but not limited to food, travel, fashion, beauty, and so on.

Bloggers blog for different reasons. Blogging is first of all a form of self-expression and it is also a good way to record major life events. Its social nature allows for social interaction, information exchange, and community building. Considering the aspect of self-expression, researchers are interested in issues about self-presentation, self-disclosure, and self-display. Blogging can cause controversy when content blurs boundaries between public and private, or facts and fiction. American blogger Heather Armstrong, for example, was fired from her design job because of a blog post about her company and colleagues in 2002. Given that her blog was called Dooce, the phrase “to be dooced” has entered into popular usage since then, meaning to be sacked because of one’s writing in blogs. Fake blogs, often adopting a confessional style, on the other hand, generate discontent when readers eventually find that the blogs they follow are mixing up facts and fiction.

Blogs featuring specialized and specific subject matter provide researchers with valuable and authentic first-person narratives and perspectives. Content analysis and thematic analysis have been conducted, for example, to examine competing political ideologies in political blogs, or to gain access to first-hand information about particular experiences as written in illness blogs, travel blogs, parenting blogs, and so forth.

Studies have examined how blogging is used to facilitate active, self-directed, and reflective learning. Blogs have been considered to be forums for collaborative learning, and it has been suggested that they promote learning through engagement and a sense of community. In addition to educational uses, blogs are used for information dissemination. Science blogging and academic blogging are ways to share new knowledge with the general public. In short, blogs can be used for all kinds of personal, social, and business purposes.

When blogging grows in both prevalence and popularity, questions about the exact number and scale emerge. Technorati.com, an online company, was launched in 2003 to track the number of blogs, which was said to have risen from 100,000 in late 2003 to 3 million by July 2004. It was estimated that there were 70 million blogs in August 2007. It also ranked blogs according to their influence. This indexing and tracking service was, however, terminated in 2014. With or without Technorati.com, it has been understandably hard to determine the exact number of blogs because of the existence of inactive and spam blogs in blogosphere. In 2009, according to Statista, a statistics portal, there were 127.04 million online blogs across various platforms, such as Livejournal,

Wordpress, or Blogger. Other statistics shows that there are 392 million cumulative total blogs hosted in Tumbler as of January 2018. Considering only the number of bloggers in the United States, the portal finds that in 2015, 28.3 million Internet users updated a blog at least once per month. It is estimated that the number of bloggers in the United States will reach 31.7 million users in 2020 (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/187267/number-of-bloggers-in-usa/>). In China, microblogging is gaining increasing prominence in everyday lives. In 2017, China Internet Network Information Center (abbreviated as CNNIC) found that about 41% of Chinese netizens use microblogs (<https://cnnic.com.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/>).

Experts in computer-mediated communication and engineering have been developing methods to measure the vast blogosphere. They aim to identify influential bloggers and trending topics through analysis of features in blogs, network analysis, Big Data analytic, or sentiment analysis. Researchers have tried to produce ranking models that would help spot trending topics and public sentiments in the sea of information.

Bloggng subtly changed with the arrival of major social networking sites in the mid-2000s. From 2004, Facebook began to open up to different groups for social networking. Members could eventually share their updates on a personal newsfeed or maintain their own blogs with their Facebook account. In 2005, YouTube was officially launched and video blogging, which came to be known as vlogging, rose in popularity. In 2006, Twitter introduced tweets that could be up to 140 characters. In 2009, Sina Weibo, the Chinese microblogging site, was launched. Instead of maintaining personal blogs on major blogging platforms, Internet users could now share their opinions, thoughts, and feelings in these new domains. Microblogging has become the new buzzword. The sense of community as explicated in the notion of the blogosphere takes on different meanings when online conversations move to these walled gardens. The heyday for blogging seems to be over and some may see blogging as a fading fad, while to others it has become more prevalent and mundane for people to express themselves, albeit now through microblogging, in the web universe.

It has to be recognized that blogging has long moved away from self-expression of personal endeavors. It has become common practice for companies and organizations to maintain their corporate blogs. Mainstream media, for example, are participating in the blogosphere by hosting their own news blogs. Other corporate blogs are to advance specific business and organizational goals. They are used for official information dissemination and direct communication with clients. In particular, blog-mediated crisis communication is receiving more research attention in the field of public relations.

Bloggng is often viewed as a form of parajournalism and invokes much debate about its relationships with, and impact on, traditional journalism. In earlier days when news-oriented blogging became increasingly notable, there was much discussion about whether bloggers should be considered as journalists. If bloggers are journalists, what rights are they entitled to, and what about their responsibilities and ethical standards? It has taken courts, policy makers, and scholars considerable effort to define blogging and journalism practices, especially in view of issues related to defamation and protection of free speech.

The question is partly due to the fact that journalists and bloggers share similar areas of occupational expertise (Lowrey & Mackay, 2008), although the latter are

generally not doing as much reporting as the former, and instead focus more on editorializing and curating content. As such, blogs are more often characterized with highly personalized and opinionated undertones, which contradict with the professional ideology traditional journalism adheres to. To name a few, accuracy, fairness, and objectivity are values that are much emphasized.

The divide between bloggers and journalists is not necessarily clear-cut. Journalists can also be bloggers. Journalist bloggers discuss news and negotiate news values in j-blogs and form their respective blog communities. Over time, news organizations have incorporated blogging into their regular journalistic practices. J-blogs are maintained at an organizational level. Despite worries over objectivity, analysis of news blogs from 2008 to 2012 has found that blogs maintained by news organizations and journalists became less opinionated throughout the years (Mitchelstein, Boczkowski, & Wagner, 2017). Meantime, live blogging in journalism plays an increasingly significant role in the coverage of breaking news and sports events. While these blogs allow for more interactivity and instantaneous reporting, they present challenges for verification and cross-reference in the news-gathering process. The speed-driven live blogging raises questions about the impact on accuracy and credibility.

Research has found that blogging has brought changes to agenda setting and gate-keeping. In the former case, bloggers and journalists are influencing one another in terms of topics and follow-up stories, resulting in “intermedia agenda setting.” Mainstream news media have been found to attribute to sources originated from blogs more readily over the years, while blogs further write on or comment about news stories in news media. Intermedia agenda setting affects the source cycle in news production (Messner & Distaso, 2008). It might result in more overlaps in content despite the information abundance enabled by communication technologies. On the other hand, the traditional roles of journalists as gatekeepers are giving way to “gatewatchers” (Bruns, 2003). Given that there is a wide array of sources, together with numerous breaking news and stories that are shared on the Internet, keeping a close watch of what is happening out there is becoming more important. Gatewatching further contributes to collaborative news production in the online environment.

The amount of news or related content being produced, shared, and commented on is enormous. It is fast-paced and viral stories can spread almost instantly. Professionals or amateurs, journalists or bloggers, blogging or microblogging, all these add up to an environment that is constantly updated with latest happenings around the globe, resulting in a form of “ambient journalism” (Hermida, 2010). It changes how news is consumed when audiences are constantly flooded with bits of information from official or unofficial sources. With such ambient awareness, there are calls for attention to how the public is informed, or misinformed, amid these changes in news collection and dissemination.

In the age of participatory culture, it remains a key concern whether there are actually more opportunities for individuals to voice out and to be heard. The rise of “A-list bloggers,” elite bloggers who have a huge readership, suggests that attention is still scarce and participants compete for attention with varying degrees of success. Similarly, in the age of media convergence, it is dubious if we indeed have more diversities and choices, or rather, more imitation and copycats in content production. Notwithstanding

these unsettling debates, independent journalism, citizen journalism, and grassroots journalism, often presented in blog forms, remind one of the spirits of “alternative journalism.” While skeptics might question the meanings of “being alternative” when all kinds of boundaries appear to collapse with more media convergence, others stress their roles in facilitating civic participation as a form of “monitorial citizenship” (Moss & Coleman, 2014). These practices serve as outlets for alternative voices or even as “re-joining tools” for journalism. Wall (2004) asserted that blogs could be conceptualized as “black market journalism,” which opened up possibilities for challenging the dominant mainstream model. In China, studies of Weibo have discussed the value of j-blogging in providing a spin-off journalistic sphere (Fu & Lee, 2016).

Blogging, as widespread, useful, and popular as it has grown over past years, has yet to come up with a sound business model. Bloggers write for free in most instances, except in cases with options for voluntary donations or micropayments. There have been debates about how free labor of bloggers could have been exploited by online media platforms. Recent developments show that some platforms are finding ways to pay bloggers for their work according to the number of views and traffic they generate.

In the meantime, the rise of social media influencers, or key opinion leaders (KOL), as micro-celebrities, suggests that blogging and/or microblogging could be profitable. Influencers often have tens of thousands of followers on social media. Marketers pay influencers in the form of sponsorship or advertising fees. In return, they relay marketing messages through blogging or microblogging. The aim of the marketers is to reach their target audience through word of mouth or “two-step flow of communication.” Despite the fact that blogging is involved in this latest trend, it is not likely to be a sustainable business model for the majority of bloggers who are not set to become Internet celebrities.

Blogging emerged along with Web 2.0, which had once cast high hopes for a more democratic and participatory public sphere. The proliferation of blogs does bring forth a great diversity of views and range of content, yet in view of later developments, including the rise of microblogging, conflicts with professional journalism, and commercialization, the more utopian views are bound to meet further challenges.

SEE ALSO: Agenda-Setting and Priming Theories; Alternative Journalism; Citizen Journalism; Convergence; Gatekeeping Theory; Journalism; News Cycle; User-Generated Content

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