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Bloggers are driven to document their lives, provide commentary and opinions, express deeply felt emotions, articulate ideas through writing, and form and maintain community forums.

WHY WE *Blog*



Blogging is sometimes viewed as a new, grassroots form of journalism and a way to shape democracy outside the mass media and conventional party politics [3]. Blog sites devoted to politics and punditry, as well as to sharing technical developments (such as www slashdot.org), receive thousands of hits a day. But the vast majority of blogs are written by ordinary people for much smaller audiences. Here, we report the results of an ethnographic investigation of blogging in a sample of ordinary bloggers. We investigated blogging as a form of personal communication and expression, with a specific interest in uncovering the range of motivations driving individuals to create and maintain blogs.



ILLUSTRATION BY GARY CLEMENT

Blogs combine the immediacy of up-to-the-minute posts, latest first, with a strong sense of the author's personality, passions, and point of view. We investigated blogging practice to help determine why people blog, finding that bloggers have many varied reasons for letting the world in on what they think (see Figure 1).

We conducted in-depth interviews with bloggers primarily in and around Stanford University, audio-taping in-person and phone interviews from April to June 2003. The interviews were conversational in style but covered a fixed set of questions about the



Figure 1. Image from a blog in our study showing the blogger's daughter in a blogging T-shirt.

informants' blogs, blogging habits, thoughts on blogging, and use of other communication media as compared to blogs. We interviewed most of them at least twice, with follow-up sessions in person or by phone, email, or instant messaging. We read their blogs throughout the time we were writing this article. To identify motivations for blogging, we analyzed the content of the blogs and the interview data. Interview follow-ups helped us clarify puzzling questions and gain additional understanding of the reasons for blogging.

We interviewed 23 people altogether, 16 men and 7 women, aged 19 to 60. All lived in California or New York and were well-educated, middle-class adults in school or employed in knowledge work or artistic pursuits. We developed the sample by searching Google's Stanford portal (www.google.com/univ/stanford/) for "blog" and for "Weblog," creating an initial list of Stanford-hosted blogs. We also contacted several bloggers we knew personally. We then snowballed the

sample, asking informants for the names of other bloggers to contact. We used pseudonyms when discussing specific informants and obtained permission for all quotes and images.

Blogging Practices

The informants typically found blogs through other blogs they were reading, through friends or colleagues, and through inclusion of the blog link in an instant message profile or homepage. Most blog pages reserve space for linking to other blogs.

Some bloggers post multiple times a day, others as infrequently as once a month. Bloggers sometimes poured out their feelings or ideas and sometimes struggled to find something to say. One informant stopped blogging when he inadvertently hurt the feelings of a friend he had mentioned. He took down his blog and later put up another, this time without advertising the URL in his instant messenger profile. Other bloggers experienced blog burnout and stopped blogging from time to time.

We found tremendous diversity in blog content, even in our limited sample. On the serious side, Evan, a graduate student in genetics, posted commentaries on science and health, covering such topics as AIDS, heart disease, science education, and health care policy. On the other end of the scale—blog-as-personal-revelation—Lara, an undergraduate, wrote: "I've come to realize

rather recently that I can't regret that I didn't form any romantic attachments [my phrases for such things are always overly formal to the point of stupidity, and I don't know why or what to use instead, but bear with me] because, at the end of the day, a boyfriend would have taken away from all the awesome things that happened with people in the dorm, and all the great friendships that I formed and that will hopefully continue after this year (if you're reading this blog, you're most likely one of those people). Thinking back to the last couple of years, it's pretty obvious that I was really stifled by my insular, extremely time-consuming group of friends, and part of my discontent stemmed from a relative dearth of fun, casual relationships with interesting people. My friends are great, but they are also tightly knit to the point of being incestuous, and when I hang out with them it is difficult to maintain the time and energy necessary to play with other people."

This post encouraged a future connection to friends while Lara worked through her emotional issues.

Most bloggers are acutely aware of their readers,



Bloggers sometimes poured out their feelings or ideas and sometimes struggled to find something to say.

even in confessional blogs, calibrating what they should and should not reveal. Although Lara's post appears highly personal, she also kept a separate paper diary. Many bloggers have personal codes of ethics dictating what goes into their blogs (such as never criticize friends or express political opinions that are openly inflammatory). Not that bloggers eschew controversy—quite the opposite—but they express themselves in light of their audience. One blogger of liberal political opinions sometimes wrote posts she knew would irritate her Republican uncle. She was tactful enough to keep lines of communication open. Another blogger kept his writing suitable for a family audience: “Yeah ... 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 provides scope for an enormous variety of expression within a simple, restricted format.

Motivations

Previous survey research [1, 6] examined some reasons people blog but without the rich data of in-depth interviews. In our sample, we discovered five major motivations for blogging: documenting one's life; providing commentary and opinions; expressing deeply felt emotions; articulating ideas through writing; and forming and maintaining community forums. This list is not exhaustive, covering all bloggers, but does describe our sample. These motivations are by no means mutually exclusive and might come into play simultaneously.

Blogs to ‘document my life’. Many informants blogged to record activities and events. Harriet, a Stanford graduate student, blogged to “document my life” for her family and friends in Iceland, as well as for her fellow students. Blogs were used by many as a record to inform and update others of their activities and whereabouts, often including photos. Depending on the audience and content, a blog could be a public journal, a photo album, or a travelogue.

Don, a technology consultant, called blogs “be-logs” because he felt blogging is used to “log your being.” This took a serious turn for him when his wife became gravely ill. He took over her blog to document

the progress of her illness and treatment through text and photos. Blogging was an important way for him to communicate during this time: “[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?”

Keeping family and friends abreast of life events is a key use of blogging. Katie, a graduate student, said she blogged to relate her life to others by telling her own personal story in close to real time. Even Evan, whose blog was primarily about scientific subjects, let his friends know of his whereabouts and sometimes to report a cold or other minor disturbance in his life. Arthur, a Stanford professor, and several others, found blogging a superior alternative to mass email: “[I started blogging] to communicate with friends and family, as well as [for] professional connections. It's easier than sending lots of email. I'll just put it on my blog.”

Why use blogs instead of just sending email? Arthur felt blogging involves less overhead (such as addressing) than email, with added scope for other communication, including “rants” and speculation. Several bloggers emphasized the broadcast nature of blogging; they put out information, and no one need respond unless they wished to. Blogs are not intrusive. No one is “forced to pay attention,” observed Lara, as they are with email. Reading is voluntary, when convenient.

Why not Web pages? A blog is a kind of Web page. What drew writers and readers alike to blogs is the rhythm of frequent, usually brief posts, with the immediacy of reverse chronological order. Writers could put up something short and sweet, expecting their audience would check in regularly. Readers knew they would be likely to get fresh news of friends, family, and colleagues in the convenient format of the blog, with no work-related email or the distractions often found on a homepage. Several informants saw homepages as more “static” than blogs, more formal and carefully considered, and somewhat less authentic. Jack, a poet and avid blogger, said, “[With a Web page] you don't hear their voice in the same way.”

Blogs as commentary. Our bloggers found their voices by using blogs to express their opinions. While

blogs are often portrayed as a breakthrough form of democratic self-expression, the darker side of the stereotype casts blogs as indulgent chatter of little interest to anyone but the blogger. Many of our informants were sensitive about this characterization and emphasized they blogged to comment on topics they found pertinent and important. A blog, said one, can be “a point of view, not just chatter.”

Sam, a technology consultant, was knowledgeable about information technology and politics in developing countries. He started blogging to comment on a conference he attended but then decided to devote his blog to technology in developing countries: “[My blog started as] ... a critique on [a] ... conference called

comments on popular trends, works by other authors, relevant links, and personal experience.

Arthur, a humanities professor, explained why he blogged, saying: “I guess I’m an amateur rock and cultural critic. I also comment on things that I’d be embarrassed to email to others. I mean [they would think], ‘Why do I care?’ On the blog, you can be an amateur rock critic.”

Blogging provided an outlet for expressing a point of view on topics the authors considered much more than just chatter.

Blogs as catharsis. Several of our informants viewed blogging as an outlet for thoughts and feelings. Their content was sometimes patently emotional. Lara

described hers as “me working out my own issues.” Undercurrents of more subtle but deeply felt emotions fueled other blogs. Jack started blogging around the time of the start of the Iraq war in March 2003, because, despite attending demonstrations and supporting anti-war politicians, he felt “futile” and that “no one was listening.” Vivian, an attorney, called her blog “Shout,” writing about such topics as the misapplication of the death penalty in the U.S. justice system.

Blogs helped explore issues the authors felt “obsessive” or “passionate” about. Blogs gave people a place to “shout,” or express themselves by writing

to an audience of sometimes total strangers, sometimes their best friends and colleagues and family members.

The format of frequent posts, diary-style, was both outlet and stimulus for working through personal issues. A blog often serves as a relief valve, a place to “get closure out of writing,” as Lara said of a post on the death of her grandfather. Another claimed, “I just needed to, like, get it out there.” Others needed to “let off steam.”

Blog as muse. Still others found they could “get it out there” in a more constructive manner through what previous research termed “thinking with computers” [7] (see Figure 2). Evan liked blogging because for him it was “thinking by writing.” He wanted to see if he really had anything to say about what he had been reading in the news and in scholarly journals. Blogging let him test his ideas by writing them down for an audience. Alan said, “I am one of those people for whom writing and thinking are basically synonymous.” His blog “forced” him to keep writing, a discipline he deemed important for his work. Jack noted that as a graduate student, “nobody wants to hear from me yet.” For the moment, blogging gave him a small

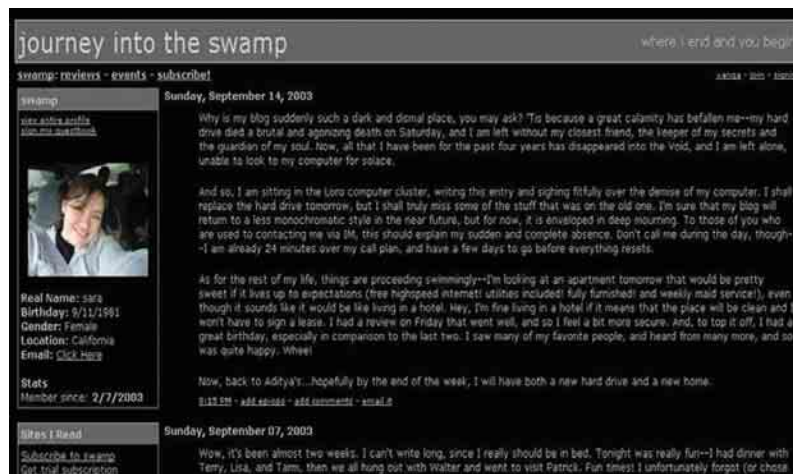


Figure 2. Journey into the swamp: where I end and you begin, an individually authored blog focusing on the author’s daily life and her thoughts on literature and pop culture.

World Summit on the Information Society, which was a project that began a few years ago by the International Telecommunications Union ... I was kind of interested in the way people reacted to it, putting a lot of resources into this conference, so

I started tracking that, and I got very discouraged with ... what was going on. So I just switched to ... information technology in developing countries as a theme [for my blog], so that’s really about all I’ll ... write about, looking at it ... from a critical standpoint.”

Part of the allure of blogs is the easy way they move between the personal and the profound. Alan, a historian of science, started a post by documenting his life, describing an incident in which his daughter wanted to watch a Sesame Street video clip. He added commentary on how “DVDs make it very easy to treat movies not as whole works, but as collections of scenes.” He ended the post with a discussion of John Locke’s worries about the way numbering biblical verses would change people’s perceptions of the Bible (with a link to further discussion on Locke). Alan’s post integrated

audience and a chance to “prove to myself that I can do it,” that is, write.

Jack, Evan, Alan, and Vivian observed that some of their posts might have a future life in magazine articles, scholarly research, or other conventional publications. Alan said scholars generate a tremendous amount of material that usually stays private but could actually be a public good if released and shared with a general-interest audience. Vivian saw her posts as “good fodder for ... political arguments later on.” Jack archived his posts himself because he wasn’t sure how long they would last on the www.blogger.com Web site and felt that some of them would “continue to be interesting to me.”

For those who think by writing, blogging provides two main benefits: an audience to shape the writing and an archive of potentially reusable posts. Most bloggers reported they had regular readers. They could direct their writing at them, solving the key problem of knowing for whom they were writing. Having readers helped keep the writing moving along, as bloggers knew their readers expected new posts.

Blogs as community forum. Some of our informants expressed their views to one another in community settings. One blog supported a community of poets. Two supported educational communities. Another was devoted to a “collective” of people who exchanged political opinions. We also learned of workplace blogs supporting workgroups we could not investigate directly because they were proprietary. Workplace blogs are a form of communication we expect to see much more of soon, as people become more familiar with reading and writing blogs.

Rob, who taught a class called dorm.net/residential-rhetorics, focused the class blog on locating the “intersection of residence community and all electronic communication tools,” noting: “We’ll try to take advantage of the general nature of Weblogs as ‘public journals’ in using them for personal reflection, in the context of a learning community, on issues that arise in the course, both rhetorical and content-related.”

He required students to conduct field studies, post weekly blogs on assigned topics, and read and comment on one another’s posts. He hoped to “facilitate

the building of the learning community by getting [students] in conversation with each other electronically.” Students found that blogging created a sense of community that would be less likely to emerge in a conventional classroom setting.

Colleen, an academic technology specialist, created a blog for an undergraduate archaeology course. The professor posted periodic reports on a class project involving the cataloging of artifacts from a 19th century San Jose Chinatown site. This blog succeeded as a Web site but failed to generate a sense of community among the students. The professor and teaching assistants made most of the comments, the students almost none. The students were either not moved to comment or decided not to, given the lack of a course requirement. As with other electronic media, blogs in themselves are not sufficient for building a community.

The most authentic, grassroots blogging community we investigated was that of a group of poetry bloggers. Comments on blog posts flew back and forth on the blogs, in email, and in person. Jack belonged to a poetry community and kept a set of links to others’ poetry blogs that “map[ped] a community,” as he described it. The community generated “peer pressure” to post regularly because people regularly checked the blogs for new posts. Jack said there was “a kind of reciprocity expected because I read others’ blogs, so I have to make my contribution.”

This community changed over time. During the study, several poetry bloggers began to post original poems, although at first many considered it “egotistical.” Jack changed his mind on the issue, and the community became his muse; his poems developed as a “conversation” between himself and other bloggers. Jack began posting poems about halfway through the study, though he had initially told us the blog was not a proper forum for poems. Later he said: “I ... discovered that allowing myself to post poems was helping me write poems, since I could think of it as material for the blog to be immediately posted, as opposed to being stowed in a drawer somewhere.”

Here, thinking by writing intersected with blogging as community forum.



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Six Stanford students formed a political blog called “The Cardinal Collective.” Its members were “selected to represent a political spectrum” by the students themselves. Only a few had met face-to-face; an invitation to participate depended on having interesting political opinions and writing skill, also as determined by the students themselves. The blog was also an intended for a wider audience, since people were invited to subscribe. Some posts were linked to InstaPundit, a widely read political blog, opening a wider frame of public participation for the blog.

Various electronic media support communities [8], including chat [5, 11], group Web sites [2], listservs [9], and multi-user dimensions (MUDs) and MUD object-oriented technologies (MOOs) [10]. Chat, MUDs, and MOOs are forums for textual interaction but generally don’t provide access to archives or photos. Web sites support rich information but are usually limited in terms of interactivity.

Listservs promote a higher level of interactivity than blogs. Blogs can be characterized as having limited interactivity [4, 6]. The modal number of comments in individually authored blogs has been found to be zero [6]. Many of our informants liked the interaction-at-one-remove provided by blogs. Max said: “I feel like I can say something in the blog and then have it be sort of like my safety net. Whereas like in a more immediate and personal like form of impersonal digital communication ... I would sort of have to face their reaction. Metaphorically speaking, anyway ... two bad things that blogging does for me, anyway, endorses [are] laziness and cowardice.”

Blogs combine information and modulated interactivity. Bloggers value that they can post and share their thoughts without the intensive feedback associated with other forms of communication.

Conclusion

In our sample, we found a range of motivations for blogging. Blog content was equally diverse, ranging from journals of daily activities to serious commentaries on important issues. Blogging is an unusually versatile medium, employed for everything from spontaneous release of emotion to archivable support of group collaboration and community. Our investigation is an early look at blogging as a mainstream

use of the Internet. Much work must still be done in examining this flourishing phenomenon as it grows and changes. **C**

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