

Introduction

Axel Bruns & Joanne Jacobs

Blogs, it seems, are everywhere. Like few media phenomena, and certainly like no media form since the emergence of the World Wide Web itself, blogs seem to have captured the public imagination. Indeed, the very term “blog” itself was chosen as Merriam-Webster’s word of the year 2004.¹ Blogs played key roles in the U.S. Presidential primaries (even if the world’s first mainstream blogger-candidate Howard Dean crashed back to earth when the broadcast media joined the party); bloggers were invited to cover the national conventions of both Democrats and Republicans; and blogs also played a significant role in reporting unfolding world events from the London underground to the streets of Iraq, to the shores of Indonesia and Thailand. CNN, BBC, newspapers and other mainstream media now regularly turn to the blogosphere to gauge public opinion on controversial issues, and this coverage of “what the bloggers are saying” has begun to replace the traditional vox-pop interview with the person in the street.

But to focus on such early achievements of blogging, notable though they may be, is to miss out on much of the variety of opinions, ideas, knowledge, and creativity which can be found in blogs. While certainly a sign of the shifting balance between what bloggers have come to call the MSM—the mainstream media—and the average citizen, to discuss only those blogs which debate the news or express political views ignores much of what exists in the wider blogosphere, beyond the pundits and citizen journalists. Similarly, much debate of blogging appears to focus on the so-called ‘A-list’ of established, well-known, and often controversial bloggers while bypassing the vast range of other participants whose engagement only makes the blogosphere possible. Without them, the A-list would be little more than a collection of personal opinion sites; it is only the intercast between blogs and bloggers known and unknown—however uneven in its

A-List:

a common term used to refer to the best-known (most read, most linked to) bloggers—many of whom blog about the news, or about blogging itself.

power relations—which has turned blogging into the global phenomenon it has become.

Far from being defined by the activities of a Lawrence Lessig, Meg Hourihan, Glenn Reynolds, Esther Dyson, or even Salam Pax, Weblogging is a broad-based movement, not the province of a select few. In 2004, according to a study by the Pew Center, adoption of this emergent tool grew at a rate of 58% in the United States alone; 32 million Americans were blog readers by the end of the year, and “7% of the 120 million U.S. adults who use the Internet say they have created a blog or web-based diary. That represents more than 8 million people.”² While there is some information on who these people are likely to be (male rather than female by a small margin, probably under 30 years of age, relatively well-off, well-educated, and well-connected via broadband), what remains unknown, however, is just how they are using blogs both as readers and as producers of content—only one fact is certain: not all of them will be engaging in news commentary and political discussions.

(Many) Uses of Blogs

This collection is born out of our need to begin to better identify and understand these uses, to map them and chart their implications for those who engage in them as well as society at large. As Clay Shirky has put it in his discussion of the power law distribution between A-list bloggers and the wider blogging community,

at some point (probably one we've already passed), weblog technology will be seen as a platform for so many forms of publishing, filtering, aggregation, and syndication that blogging will stop referring to any particularly coherent activity. The term 'blog' will fall into the middle distance, as 'home page' and 'portal' have, words that used to mean some concrete thing, but which were stretched by use past the point of meaning. This will happen when head and tail of the power law distribution become so different that we can't think of J. Random Blogger and Glenn Reynolds of Instapundit as doing the same thing.³

We agree that this point has now passed; indeed, we would argue that the fact that the Pew Center study also found only 38% of U.S.-based Internet users to have an understanding of the term “blog” might not indicate complete unfamiliarity, but rather also leave open the possibility that these users had encountered blogs under a different guise: as *LiveJournals*, as community discussion boards, as news bulletins, or as creative outlets. Asking users what a “portal” is might generate a similarly low response rate, and yet many are no doubt using portals as part of their everyday Internet diet.

Beyond the basic definition of “blogging” as the reverse-chronological posting of individually authored entries which include the capacity to provide

hypertext links and often allow comment-based responses from readers, then, the term “blog” now has little meaning unless a descriptive qualifier can be attached—in the future it is likely that we will come to speak primarily not of blogging *per se*, but of diary blogging, corporate blogging, community blogging, research blogging, and many other specific sub-genres which are variations on the overall blogging theme. Our discussion of blogs, bloggers, and blogging must become more sophisticated; it makes as little sense to discuss the uses of blogs as it does to discuss, say, the uses of television unless we specify clearly what genres and contexts of use we aim to address.

This multiplicity can be a threat, too, as it can prevent an effective understanding and utilization of the technology: because there is now a vast a variety of styles of blogs—from online journals to *de facto* news sites, learning tools, knowledge bases, and community support spaces, to name just a few—it is difficult for some disciplines to imagine how blogs might be used for their benefit. Further, and partly because of the mass amateurization of publishing online, blogs have been criticised in some professional sectors as being illegitimate or even dangerously skewed information archives. Yet it is the specific implementation of a blog that determines its value: its operational structures and response mechanisms, as well as the style of writing and method of recording ideas, commentary and institutionally relevant information, all influence the significance, reputation and success of a blog. There is a clear need to interrogate the range of blogging styles used by different disciplines and cultural groups and to develop a lexicon to articulate the most effective blogging mechanisms for different contexts. Examples of how blogs are already being used can provide some insight into how they can be further developed for particular interest groups and industry sectors. The use of blogs in generating competitive advantage, and their application as knowledge management tools, is crucial to understanding the relevance of blogs for a range of professional organisations as well as for community groups.

Uses of Blogs

In charting some of the current uses made of blogs, then, this book is organised into a three distinct sections. Drawing on the experience of blogging pioneers and researchers from a variety of professional and community contexts, the book documents the growth of blogs online and provides a detailed scholarly analysis of successful and powerful blogging uses. We begin by investigating blogging applications in various key industries, such as the highly visible and controversial practice of news and filter blogging as a supplement to mainstream journalism and the increasing uses of blogs in publishing and business. Our contributors examine the economic benefits of blogs and blogging for fields such as public relations and marketing, and

consider their impact on the wider economy. Towards the end of this section, they contemplate emergent uses of blogs in legal and educational contexts, and evaluate the process of engagement with the medium of blogging in these fields.

The second main section looks at the social and communal aspects of blogging. From general analyses to very personal accounts of the effects of blogging in particular contexts, chapters in this section explore the value of blogs as a means of social expression and participation, and consider how the negotiation of identity online can be realized through the instrument of blogging. Authors in this section provide views on the impact of blogging on scholarly authority and the communication of research in the academy; they also examine the politics of blogging with a focus on traditional party politics, gender politics, and subcultural community participation. Further chapters particularly explore the not always comfortable intersection between blog technology and its users, looking variously at the extent to which such technology might empower or disenfranchise disabled users, at different conceptualisations of blog hosting environments in the South Korean blogosphere, and at how blog technology has spawned a new genre of fictional blogging.

Finally we review some of the technological and legal possibilities for blogging, such as the expansion of the form from a predominantly text-based mode to one which incorporates audiovisual materials, as well as the legal questions which arise from the blogosphere's complex and multilayered interlinkages that cross global jurisdictions. We present some ideas about the impact and ramifications of blogging, and about the future development of blogs and their uses across industrial and social contexts. At the end of the book, you will also find the contributors' biographical details and a bibliography which draws together some of the key texts and resources used by our authors.

We acknowledge that this bibliography, and indeed our coverage of blog uses itself, is by no means exhaustive; neither can it be. Bloggers and blog researchers may feel that their specific, favourite form of blogging has not been covered in enough depth, or that especially some new and emerging approaches to blogging have not been sufficiently represented in this collection. This is unavoidable, however—even when we first developed this book project in late 2004, some of the more recent uses of blogs (such as corporate 'dark blogs', or fictional blogging) had barely emerged to public attention. Fast-paced as development in this field continues to be, studies of blogging must for now remain temporary snapshots of practices in the blogosphere—a new edition of this book a few years from now might present a significantly different collection of articles, using terms as yet uncoined.

Blogs and the Blogosphere

At the same time, while even today some commentators already debate the use of the word “blog” to describe this plethora of online publications, we would suggest that the nature of these publishing efforts still merits use of that term to describe the method of informing an interested public about issues and ideas;

again in analogy to television, there remain certain shared social, organisational, and technological features which delineate blogs from other forms of online publications (even if the boundaries are blurred).

For example, it is the social networking of blogs and the potential for collaboration that provides a decidedly human dimension to the publishing and publicizing of information. By personalizing content, blogs go beyond a purely informative role, and provide a platform for debate, deliberation, and the expression of personal identity in relation to the rest of the (blogging) world. Replacing somewhat outdated email lists and personal Websites as vehicles for exchanging ideas and information, blogs represent for authors an opportunity to reach out and connect with an audience never before accessible to them, while maintaining control over their personal expressive spaces. The blogosphere, understood as the totality of all blogs and the communicative intercast between them through linking, commentary and Trackbacks, is perhaps unique in its structure as a distributed, decentered, fluctuating *ad hoc* network of individual Websites which interrelate, interact, and (occasionally) intercreate with one another.⁴ And it is here, rather than in individual blogs, where the power of blogging is situated; as Hiler writes, “it’s not the individual weblog that fascinates me. It’s when you tap the collective power of thousands of weblogs that you start to see all sort of interesting behavior emerge. It’s a property of what scientists call complex adaptive systems and it’s enabling weblogs as a collective to become more than the sum of its parts.”⁵

In this environment, anyone (with access to the network) can participate; the barriers to entry are low and there is no central authority to grant publishing rights or accreditation, nor to prevent bloggers from linking and responding to information or ideas found elsewhere on- or offline. Thus, in a time of redefining our value systems, of competing belief frameworks and of global threats, bloggers have the chance to question their understanding of issues, engage in

Producers:

users of collaborative environments who engage with content interchangeably in consumptive *and* productive modes (and often in both at virtually the same time): they carry out **produsage**.

Blogosphere:

common term to describe the overall community of blogs and bloggers, which is interlinked through a large number of cross-references between individual blog entries.

discussion, present their ideas, seek out approval for their notions, and grasp some sense of purpose, order and hope.

As a distributed, broad-based practice of content production, blogging can be seen as a key sign of our times: the industrial, mass media age was dominated by the value chain of the production of physical goods, from producer to distributor to consumer, and exemplified best perhaps by the production line invented by Henry Ford (who gave this Fordist model of industrial production its name). This model extended to manufacturing as much as to the media, where audiences were similarly regarded as mass consumers and the maximization of audience shares was the highest goal.

From Production to Prodsusage

Today, as the information age replaces the industrial age, the Fordist mass production model has been replaced by one of individuation, personalisation, and customisation, but this is only a first step: from customisation follows interaction, from interaction follows interactivity, and from interactivity follows, in the right setting, intercreativity. This undermines the distinction between commercial producers and distributors on the one side, and consuming, passive audiences on the other; participants in interactive spaces are always more than merely audiences, but instead are users of content; further, if they become involved in intercreative environments (as bloggers do), they also are active producers of content.

In becoming active publishers, commentators, and discussants, then, bloggers turn into what we can usefully describe as *producers*—a hybrid of producer and user.⁶ All bloggers are both potential users (in the narrow sense of information recipient) as well as potential producers of content, and the blogosphere overall is an environment for the massively distributed, collaborative *prodsusage* of information and knowledge. This conceptualization advances well beyond Alvin Toffler's famous term "prosumer", which at worst may describe little more than a well-informed consumer who nonetheless remains engaged only passively once a consumption choice has been made, and may never actively engage in the production and expression of new ideas. Shirky similarly argues against the professional consumer:

in changing the relations between media and individuals, the Internet does not herald the rise of a powerful consumer. The Internet heralds the disappearance of the consumer altogether, because the Internet destroys the noisy advertiser/silent consumer relationship that the mass media relies [*sic*] upon. The rise of the Internet undermines the existence of the consumer because it undermines the role of mass media. In the age of the Internet, no one is a passive consumer anymore because everyone is a media outlet.⁷

The media, however, can also be seen as producers of the perception of community, and thus of society at large; media help us understand who ‘we’ are and how we relate to the societies we live in. If, as blogging and other collaborative media phenomena appear to indicate, there is now an ongoing shift from production/consumption-based mass media, which *produce* a vision of society for us to consume as relatively passive audiences, to produsage-based personal media, where users are active *producers* of a shared understanding of society which is open for others to participate in, to develop and challenge, and thus to continually co-create, then this cannot help but have a profound effect on our future. At worst, it may generate more debate and disagreement, as long-standing values and traditions are questioned; at best, it may offer renewed hope for a more broad-based, democratic involvement of citizens in the issues that matter to them. Understanding the emerging uses of blogs, and the patterns of interaction, intercreation, and produsage which they enable, is an important step in charting the path ahead, and in identifying the obstacles and opportunities which we may encounter along the way.

NOTES

1. BBC News Online, “‘Blog’ Picked as Word of the Year,” 1 Dec. 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/4059291.stm> (accessed 26 Oct. 2005).
2. Lee Rainie, “The State of Blogging,” *Pew Internet & American Life Project*, 2 Jan. 2005, http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_blogging_data.pdf (accessed 5 Jan. 2005), p. 1.
3. Clay Shirky, “Power Laws, Weblogs, and Inequality,” *Clay Shirky’s Writings about the Internet: Economics & Culture, Media & Community, Open Source*, 2 Oct. 2003, http://www.shirky.com/writings/powerlaw_weblog.html (accessed 20 Feb. 2004), n.p.
4. The term “intercreativity” was introduced by World Wide Web inventor Tim Berners-Lee in his book *Weaving the Web* (London: Orion Business Books, 1999).
5. John Hiler, “Borg Journalism: We Are the Blogs. Journalism Will Be Assimilated,” *Microcontent News* (1 April 2002) <http://www.microcontentnews.com/articles/borgjournalism.htm> (accessed 27 Sep. 2004), n.p.
6. For more on the concept of the produser, in a journalistic context, see Axel Bruns’s book *Gatewatching: Collaborative Online News Production* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005). Axel is currently extending his study of produsers and produsage in various contexts; more information can be found on his blog at <http://snurb.info/>. See especially “Some Exploratory Notes on Produsers and Produsage” (<http://snurb.info/index.php?q=node/329>), “Vlogging the Produser” (<http://snurb.info/index.php?q=node/328>), and the “Produsers and Produsage” section (<http://snurb.info/index.php?q=taxonomy/term/46>).
7. Clay Shirky, “RIP the Consumer, 1900-1999,” *Clay Shirky’s Writings about the Internet: Economics & Culture, Media & Community, Open Source*, May 2000, <http://www.shirky.com/writings/consumer.html> (accessed 31 May 2004), n.p.