

Blogger Motivations: Power, Pull, and Positive Feedback

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Abstract

In the spring of 2005 I spoke with college student bloggers about their motivations for starting and continuing their blog, a frequently modified web page. The content of these blogs ranged from personal to political to poetry, although the majority of those I interviewed kept personal journal blogs. There were several factors that motivated these college students to begin and continue the sometimes risky activity of blogging including: the power over the web site, the pull medium where their audience actively accesses content, and the generally positive feedback from unknown readers, particularly on personal subjects. I found many similarities between blogs and personal home pages with one important difference—people read them. This one factor, which results from the expectation of frequent updates, has resulted in the formation of read/write communities of varying size and influence.

Introduction

In the mid-to-late nineties the personal home page generated invective against trivialities, valorization of personal expression, visions of media democracy and of continued corporate media domination (Döring, 2002). These same discourses have regained momentum with the meteoric rise of weblogs, usually abbreviated as blogs (Henning, 2005; Langellier & Peterson, 2004; Orłowski, 2003). Blogs are "frequently modified web pages in which dated entries are

listed in reverse chronological sequence" (Herring et al., 2005). The author of a blog is referred to as a blogger; the act of posting entries to a blog is called blogging. Blogs are principally an extension of the personal home page web-genre, defined as "Web sites published and maintained by individuals or informal, small groups" (Döring, 2002).

The two main types of blogs are the filter and the personal journal. The filter generally has a link with commentary format and focuses on external or non-personal topics such as politics or technology. This is the oldest and most widely read genre of weblog, a log of web surfing pre-digested with commentary for the reader (Blood, 2000). The most numerous type of blog is the personal journal or diary-style blog. A few formal small groups and companies use blogs, although these uses are not widespread at this time.

I discovered blogs in the spring of 2004, relatively late on the adoption curve which began to take off in late 1999 (Blood, 2000). Howard Rheingold's statement about the WELL (Whole Earth 'lectronic Link), an early forum service, is an apt description of the experience. "Finding the WELL was like discovering a cozy little world that had been flourishing without me, hidden within the walls of my house" (Rheingold, 1993). I have kept a personal home page since 1995, and I was surprised that I had not known of this growing format and its communities earlier.

There are two defining differences between blogs and other forms of personal home pages. The first is that blogs must be regularly updated. This is the only characteristic that must be met for a blog to be considered active, rather than abandoned or dead. The second difference is that the blogger does not need to know the underlying code of web pages or have her own web space. While tools like Macromedia Dreamweaver and Geocities lowered technical and financial barriers for web page creation, hosted blogging tools are significantly easier. It is possible to

update a blog without the aid of specialized software, and many customize or self-host their blogs. A hosted blog can be created simply filling in a form, while a self-hosted blog requires the blogger to install software on a web server and generally requires some knowledge of HTML, CSS and PHP. Although there are only two defining differences between what will be referred to as static home pages and blogs, the patterns of use are different (Efimova & de Moor, 2005; Kumar et al., 2004) particularly regarding readership. This results in significant differences between personal web pages and blogs with regard to social interactions.

The results of a survey by the Pew Internet & American Life Project showed that blog authorship rose approximately 40% during 2004, from 5% of online Americans to 7%, which is more than eight million people (Rainie, 2005). Why are millions of people suddenly creating the obligation to post updates to a web site? What motivates them to continue or to stop?

One key segment of the blogging population is U.S. college students. Forty-eight percent of bloggers are under age 30 according to a Pew survey (Rainie, 2005), but according to a content analysis of blogs on the eight leading hosting services, 92.4% of hosted blog¹ creators are under 30 (Henning, 2003). Another content analysis of blogs found that 57.5% of the blogs in their sample were written by people who identified their profession as student (Herring et al., 2005). Clearly U.S. college students are at the forefront of the current blogging trend.

A 2002 survey from the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that "one-fifth (20%) [of U.S. college students] reported that they began using computers between the ages of 5 and 8 and by the time they were 16 to 18 years old all of them had begun using computers." (Jones, 2002) According to the same survey, "85% of college students consider the Internet to be an easy and convenient choice for communicating with friends" (p. 4). Computers and the

¹ Hosted blogs are easier to create and accorded less prestige than self hosted blogs among those knowledgeable about blogging. Self-hosted blogs are probably preferred by older bloggers.

internet are integrating into personal social life much as computers were integrated into industry in the 80's and 90's (Couch, 1996).

I chose to interview Chicago area college student bloggers in person to investigate my research questions. I spoke with fourteen student bloggers in the Spring of 2005. I found that the social act of blogging strengthens weak social ties, provides a "protected space" (Gumbrecht, 2004) for venting and letting others know about emotions, and via the requests of readers provides further motivation for writing regularly and, in the case of personal journal bloggers, documenting one's life.

Literature Review

Several researchers have attempted to describe the totality of weblogs, often called the blogosphere. Hosted blogging began in 1999 (Blood, 2000), and one recent content analysis of hosted blogs estimates that worldwide "there are 31.6 million hosted blogs, growing to 53.4 million by year end" (Henning, 2005). The number of blogs and the number of bloggers is likely quite different. Few have attempted to describe—or even count—the population of bloggers using generalizable techniques. The only estimate I am aware of, over eight million, only includes the United States (Rainie, 2005).

Some are beginning to explore the interconnections and behavioral patterns in the blogosphere. A study of the LiveJournal service, a popular blog host, has found a unique pattern of activity on blogs, "sequences of responses often take place during a brief burst of activity as an interesting topic arises, jumps to prominence, then recedes" (Kumar et al., 2004). A more narrowly focused study tracks a single conversation's flow (Efimova & de Moor, 2005).

Against common perceptions of some who read and write filter blogs, blogs are "partially interconnected and sporadically conversational" (Herring et al., 2005 p. 1). As

Benedict Anderson (Anderson, 1991) points out, national communities are imagined as well, but there has been a pervasive fallacy in the blogosphere that claims "weblogs are densely interconnected... . Because of this ...[they] have grown their own culture" (Wikipedia, 2005). Faced with the evidence (specifically Henning, 2003) that most blogs are not widely read, updated, or densely interlinked it has even been argued that the community "resides in the mind of the individual blogger as an online imagined community resulting for the shared experience of instant publishing" (Lampa, 2004) rather than in actual links.

Filter bloggers should not be conceptualized as the core of a single community of bloggers. They are one extremely interconnected segment of a much larger blogosphere that tends to focus "on local community interactions among a small number of bloggers, from, say three to 20" (Kumar et al., 2004). In fact, it is likely that the conception of the centrality filter bloggers, who are estimated to be a small fraction of the blogosphere is rooted in societal ageism and sexism, as the majority of bloggers are teenage girls, while the majority of filter bloggers are adult males (Herring et. al., 2004).

Another branch of research involves the application of genre theories. Bloggers and blog proponents initially hailed the blog as a unique genre, but Herring et al (2005) state that "the blog is neither fundamentally new nor unique" (p.2) but that it has both offline and online antecedents including diaries, notebooks, static web pages, and email. They go on to note that "it will no longer be meaningful to speak of weblogs as a single genre . . . weblogs will become . . . a socio-technical format" (p. 25-26) supporting a variety of uses. I believe it has come to pass.

Most blogs conform largely to the personal journal genre. One estimate that excluded the blog hosts that focus exclusively on personal journals (i.e. LiveJournal and DiaryLand) estimated that over 70% the remaining blogs were primarily personal journals (Herring et al., 2005). If

diary hosting sites were included, this percentage would increase significantly, as LiveJournal alone had 6.6 million accounts in early 2005 (Henning, 2005). The most widely read genre of blog is the filter, described above. A blend of these two genres is the non-personal journal or knowledge-log (k-log), which may or may not constitute a third main genre. There are small numbers of video blogs, photo blogs, audio blogs, and persona blogs, to name a few. A blog can employ any genre, and genre mixing is frequent, although one tends to predominate.

Most research with blog authors focuses on the presentation of self and the conception of audience. One key element of self-presentation is the level of anonymity the blogger chooses. Computers and the internet are the most pervasive identifying *and* anonymizing technologies available today. This is related to the phenomenon noted by Couch (1996) where information technology both enhances and erodes hierarchy based on the social practices that inform its use. On a technical level this anonymity largely disappears without expert knowledge, but on a practical level, a great deal of anonymity is possible. CMC requires action rather than omission to fully conceal authorship.

Before the technology of the written word developed the concept of authorship was very limited. It did not become what we now understand as authorship until the emergence of the printing press (Eisenstein, 1979). The word anonymous, which came into English in the sixteenth-century along with the printing press, originally indicated that a text was unsigned. It is likely that many authors of early anonymous texts were not actively concealing their identity because the authors were often known to the original audience, the privileged circle of manuscript readers, and did not need to identify themselves. Authorship has evolved from its original limited meaning and now generally describes any work where the source cannot be identified, either through omission or by design (Ferry, 2002).

Bloggers very carefully consider and reconsider their audience of friends and unknown readers in the past and present. That is not to say that this consideration is comprehensive. Often many potential readers (parents, employers) are not considered, but consideration of the audience was universal, persistent, and evolving among those I interviewed. They choose a level of anonymity that they are comfortable with based on this consideration. Bloggers come to know their audience through in person comments, phone calls, instant messages, emails, and comments on the blog posts, if enabled. My study extends other qualitative studies of blogging by further exploring blogging motivation as an interactive process that is constantly adjusting to feedback, which is limited on the blog itself, yet often spills over into other media and interpersonal interactions.

Methods

As is true of personal home page authors (Döring, 2002), bloggers tend to be reflexive about their web publishing practices. There is a wide corpus of these reflections available on the web. I chose interviewing over content analysis because many authors do not post about their blogging and it was valuable to hear this perspective. Also, posted reflections are speaking as the blog persona, which is no more or less real, but different from the interpersonal interactions I was able to construct through interviewing. The interviews were recorded and lasted from 20 minutes to 1 hour, typically lasting 35 minutes. The questions were open ended and each participant was asked the same general set of questions as well as specific follow-up based on the flow of conversation.

I also keep a blog, which I began about six months before this project started. In December 2004 I switched to a self-hosted blog that I continue to maintain². Also in December I

² <http://blog.erickamenchen.net/>

initiated a group blog for the department of communication at UIC³. My blog is a mixed research journal and filter, and the group blog is primarily a filter.

I recruited interview participants through locally focused e-mail lists, university e-mail lists at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), and flyers on the UIC campus and other area campuses. My recruitment criteria were very broad, I sought college students who keep or kept any genre of blog. I knew three of the participants personally. I was able to complete fourteen interviews over a two-month period in early 2005. After the interviews I collected basic data about the amount of information on the blogs for a seven week period, six weeks before the interview and one week after.

Participants

Nine of the students I spoke with were female personal journal bloggers who used a hosting service, and most of my findings will pertain to this category of blogger. The age range was 18 to 28 including 11 undergraduates and 3 graduate students. The average age was 22. There was diversity in the length of time blogging, from six weeks to seven years. Four had blogged for less than six months and ten had blogged for over two years. They used a total of seven different blog hosting services and two were self-hosted. Both self-hosted blogs did not have comments. Xanga was the most popular host with six of the participants; three used LiveJournal.

Among 11 journal bloggers the average number of posts was 2.3 per week. Only two linked to other places on the web an average of once a week, most did not use links at all, as they focused on their personal experiences. Of the nine whose blog allowed comments, an average of 75% of their postings received comments, with an average of 7.6 comments per week. The

³ <http://research.machinechicago.com/wordpress/>

average number of links to other bloggers in the sidebar of the blog, was 27, although 4 had zero. Xanga users were more likely to have links to other bloggers, likely because of a feature that made it easy to automatically incorporate them.

Findings

Why We Start

The reasons for starting a blog are very similar to those described for starting a home page. Walker (2000) describes home page motivations as either intrinsic, that is, started to contact the people on the internet or extrinsic, to maintain relationships formed elsewhere. Gumbrecht (2004) uses a similar distinction of community-minded verses independent to describe bloggers. With growing numbers and acceptance of online only friendships, it could be that an internet-only friend would constitute an extrinsic interpersonal motivation, rather than an intrinsic motivation to contact bloggers.

Most students I spoke with had an extrinsic motivation for starting their blog and did not consider it a serious commitment. Gina said, "I started because this guy I like had one. I was reading his page, and I was like why don't I start my own thing?" Starting a hosted blog can be accomplished for free in under five minutes, so it is not surprising to find that people begin with a wait and see attitude.

I began with a hosted blog on Blogger.com and then switched to self-hosting an installation of WordPress on my server. My motivation was largely intrinsic, to connect with other graduate student and research bloggers and participate in that community. One of the bloggers I interviewed, Gary, also had an intrinsic motivation; "I started writing about folk music, and stuff, and the most interesting part for me was keeping that running tally online, what became an online journal, that's what people liked reading."

Why We Stay

I found many authors reported an autodidactic motivation, but rather than teaching themselves HTML or web design as personal home page authors report (Döring, 2002), several bloggers I spoke with feel it helps them to express themselves through writing. Rachel said simply, "I like to write. I should be writing."

Related to this is the responsibility felt to maintain the blog because of direct requests from others. Kimberly said, "The guy across the hall hasn't posted since January 15th and I keep going Brad you've gotta post." Gary said, "one time I was sick [and hadn't posted] and people wrote me and were like are you okay? Are you still alive?"

I found that blogging does not directly overlap with existing forms of communication available to college students, with the exception of personal web pages. Blogging is the most convenient "pull" medium where people who want to can "check in" with the blogger and get information they would otherwise have no ready means to obtain. Kimberly, who had recently graduated from high school said:

I thought of giving up [my blog] but it's my one way of keeping in contact with certain people . . . some are still in high school, but they might leave a comment. It's my way of letting people into my life so they at least know hey I'm still alive.

When one student blogger was blogsurfing (browsing from her friends blogs to their friend's pages) she found out that the sister of an acquaintance of hers had a serious accident, something she would not have known without blogs as she did not keep in touch with the person directly. She appreciated the information, yet also felt it was "creepy."

Similar to those who use paper journals, bloggers also feel an impetus to document their lives. Some who had documentation as a primary motive used privacy features to restrict access to particular posts to friends only or themselves only, although most did not restrict access often. Two participants who used the private posting features extensively said that the posts are more

likely to remain private on the blogging service than in a paper diary. One also said that private posts are less likely to be found than files on a personal computer because the computer may be used or owned by others, and it is more convenient to have access to the posts from any internet connection. Many also said that blogs better meet the documentary purpose as they are more likely to read past entries on a blog than in a paper diary. The reason for this seems to be the frequency of online access and the format of the blog, although this point is unclear.

Among the fourteen students interviewed seven of the bloggers did not identify themselves or used a pseudonym, three contained first names only, and four contained full names. In contrast, nine contained pictures of the blogger either in the profile or in the entries. This may be explained because as pictures are not searchable and names are, thereby providing limited anonymity. There is no simple dichotomy between anonymous and non-anonymous blogs. They exist on a continuum that is constantly renegotiated post-by-post.

This ties into another important communication purpose of blogs related to their property of limited interactivity (Gumbrecht, 2004; Nardi et al., 2004). Gina put it best; "I could say anything or everything and other people don't have to say something about it. I just want them to know. You can do that." She went on to say, "It's your own page. You're the star. You control it. You can't do that in real life," which clearly shows the power that the blogger has over the page and over the types of interactions conducted there. Gary, who had disabled comments, put it this way, " I just got tired of comments. It was my space, you know, it was my place where I wrote what I wanted to, and comments opened it up for other people."

In the process of interviewing it became clear that the original framing of my research question was inappropriate. Many bloggers I spoke with do not conceptualize their blogs as an obligation, in some cases it is written as if each post could be the last. The following is from

Mary, a five-year blogger: "In some ways I just want to keep doing it so I do . . . I would have no problem abandoning it." But for Rachel there was guilt associated with not posting. "I feel obligated to post things. . . . I probably write twice a week, but I haven't posted for a long time and I feel like I should. I feel kind of guilty." This finding in the interviews contrasts with my experience of often coming across "Sorry I haven't written in a while" posts in blogs.

When I asked about the differences between a blog and a paper diary I received a range of responses. Predictably, everyone mentioned that the blog is for an audience. Mary said "I don't want to look like an idiot on the blog either. I'm always aware of how the public perception is. You still have this thing like I shouldn't put that." I also received some indication of a third person effect from participants with comments such as this, also from Mary "I'm amazed at the things some people write, but I'm not like that."

When I began this project I assumed that all bloggers wanted attention and feedback. This was true in some cases. Sara said that her posts are primarily focused on receiving responses from others. "I already know what I think. I want to ask questions." But I also confirmed the findings of Gumbrecht (2004), who found that many diary bloggers view their site as a "protected space" with limited interactivity. Gary said:

When you're putting yourself out there you get people who think that you're talking to them... It's that constant tension between how much self exposure you allow. . . Revealing yourself builds trust and builds friendships, but when you're doing that anonymously and with people you don't know it gets creepy.

This "creepiness" was also described by Langallier (2004) who found that blog readers "may confuse familiarity with a writer's work (a public you) for the familiarity of an interpersonal relationship (a personal you)" (emphasis original, p. 171). Gina said:

When other people read it, it's not all me you're reading about. Some people assume it's everything that is you, but it's just part, just that moment you wrote about. If you wrote an angry poem they assume you're that way, but I'm a happy person.

I found overwhelmingly that the comments received from readers unknown to the blogger on diary posts were construed as positive or supportive. In support of this as well was the strategy described by Isabel when she comments on blogs, "Usually I'll comment if there's something I like about it."

The diary bloggers I spoke with actively employ an anonymizing strategy where they conceal the identity of those they are referring to in their posts by using vague or relational language. Mary said, "It's written with the assumption that there's a context. It would be hard for a stranger to understand it." This strategy, also noted by Nardi et al., excludes readers who do not have enough inside knowledge to decipher the references. In this way bloggers maintain a balance by publicizing a still private interaction. When a diary blogger fails to maintain a proper balance, interpersonal relationships can be damaged. Sara said, "I met this guy ... and I was writing on there I fell in love... My [friend] ... got pissed because it was on there before I had told him. Now everything I say on my blog I feel like I have to [check with] him first. " When balance is maintained relationships can be maintained and strengthened Rachel said, "I used to be really good friends with this person and we had grown apart. He read my post and it really impacted him and we were a lot closer after that."

Blog Abandonment

To my knowledge, blog abandonment has only been studied through content analysis. Many of the bloggers I spoke with had switched services or began new blogs with the same service, leaving a trail of abandoned blogs while remaining an active blogger. I have done so as well. There are also private posting options on many services and the abandonment might be a public abandonment, which may or may not be salient to the analysis objective. Interviewees also told of friends who had deleted their blogs, abandoning blogging and leaving no record.

While a person's blog might meet the technical definition of abandonment at two months, the blogger often sets no such deadline and can resurrect a blog after virtually any length of time. Many of the technically abandoned blogs are, from the author's perspective, paused. Particularly the long-term bloggers I spoke with tended to view time periods without posting as normal. This may account for the number of blogs in the Henning (2003) content analysis that had no posts for at least 2 months after a year or more of maintenance.

Certainly some abandon blogging, but it was difficult to find people who considered themselves former bloggers to interview. This could be due to an intention to restart blogging, or that those who have stopped blogging have done so because of an interpersonal problem engendered by their blogging that they might not want to discuss. One example of the aftermath of such an incident is available on video at http://www.links.net/daze/05/01/14/dark_night_flick.html, where the blogger expresses his need to publish the personal details of his life, and the conflict this has caused with his girlfriend.

Conclusion

I held with me a core question throughout the research process came from my own experience of keeping a personal home page since 1995, when I was a sophomore in high school. What is it about blogs that makes them different from home pages? The answer is deceptively simple; people read them.

There never were enthusiastic home page readers. Even my close friends and family likely only visited my home page once or twice. Because I kept a home page did not mean I visited other home pages regularly, but this is often the case with blogs. The update necessity that defines blogs also has created a regular readership, consisting of browsers, potential bloggers, and other bloggers either known or unknown to the author.

The "bursts" of conversation Kumar documented are clearly a product of both reading and writing. This read/write behavior is a form of community, not a single community but many. The social aspects of blog use created a desire for more features that enabled conversation and community such as comments, trackbacks, and web feeds (also called RSS feeds).

It is difficult at first glance to see the reasons for keeping a blog, particularly one with personal or emotional content, and updating it over time. My research provides evidence for several possible motivating factors. Like new media of the past, blogging re-mediate and transforms familiar genres, and reproduces society's prejudices.

Bloggers have power over their blog and the self they choose to reveal or conceal to their audience. They also gain a "pull" medium where they can post content without directly targeting or imposing upon their audience to read it. In this way blogging is more modest than an email list, for example, because the blogger usually does not impose upon others to read it, and they are often surprised to find that others are reading the blog. If they write about personal subjects they also get overwhelmingly positive comments from people who they do not know outside of the blogging context. This social norm of supporting others emotions may provide positive psychological effects, as people unknown to the individual may be considered independent arbiters. Added benefits include documentation of one's life, and stronger motivation to write regularly.

Blogging is also risky. Although bloggers are well aware that others can read their blogs, sometimes the conception of "others" is limited to people like me, or other young people. Mistaking audience for self is not limited to bloggers. "Because we [professionals and journalists] don't examine our imagined public very often or with very much rigor, we all fall into the habit of equating the people with ourselves" (Barnhurst, 2005). For journalists this may

mean losing a segment of their audience, but for personal journal bloggers misjudging or not knowing the audience (parents, employers, future children, future political constituency) can lead to serious interpersonal and perhaps professional repercussions.

There is still more work to be done in describing and drawing implications from the phenomenon of blogging. These findings constitute a step toward understanding the variety of motivations authors have for blogging at this stage of rapid change in the scale of adoption. More research is needed, particularly on blog abandonment and on the motivations involved in blog reading.

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