

Blogs as “Protected Space”

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ABSTRACT

I report on blogs as a “protected space” within the context of an ethnographic study that examined blogging from a “blogger’s-eye” view. I discuss the ability of bloggers to control the content of what is “broadcast” in their blogs and how this affects audience perception. I examine the use of blogs as a communicative medium as compared to alternative means of immediate social interaction. I discuss the importance of feedback and commenting as it relates to “community-minded” bloggers and “independent” bloggers.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

J.4 [Social and Behavioral Sciences]: Miscellaneous

General Terms

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Keywords

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1. INTRODUCTION

In a phone survey conducted last Spring, 2003, the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that approximately 2 percent of American adults who use the Internet maintain their own blogs [5]. This figure was based upon a sample of 1,555 adults. However, follow-up results from early 2004 showed that the number of blog users increased to 7 percent.

This survey classified Internet users into three groups: Power Creators, Older Creators, and Content Omnivores [10]. Power Creators (mean age = 25) are the youngest group and have the largest percentage of people with broadband Internet access. They participate in many Internet activities, including Instant Messaging (IM), online game playing, downloading music, and blogging. Older Creators (mean age = 58) have the most experience with Internet use and tend to use websites rather than blogs to deliver information. Content Omnivores (mean age = 40) are online frequently and use the Internet for a variety of reasons,

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yet blogging and other “new” activities were not among them. Power Creators composed the majority of bloggers and blog readers: 12% of them maintain a blog, and 29% have visited a blog at least once (compared to less than 3% of other creator groups).

So what are the implications of these results? Because of the small sample size of bloggers, it’s difficult to make strong claims about the “blogging phenomenon” in general. However, they seem to indicate that young Americans are leading the way for blog maintenance, though it seems that blog reading has transcended to older generations.

Herring et al. [6] found that, communicatively, blogs seem to fall in between websites and asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC), e.g. email. Blogs highlight the limited interactivity between communicators—at any time, blog readers may leave comments on a particular post. Herring et al. referred to this behavior as indicative of the “asymmetrical communication rights” between blogger and blog reader. They claimed that this feature appeals more to the blogger than to the readers. Bloggers can essentially “have their cake and eat it too”—they can control the content of their blogs, as well as receive feedback from their audience in a constrained setting.

Herring et al. did not engage these issues more deeply, as they fell outside the scope of their research, which focused on quantitative analysis of 203 randomly selected blogs. The ability for bloggers to control content and receive feedback, as well as the limited interactivity of blogs, are all key elements of blogging.

In this paper I claim that, taken together, these components function as the building blocks that construct a “protected space” for the blogger. They indicate one of the many reasons that people blog, as well as why they may choose blogging as a medium of communication rather than alternative methods. I will be discussing these issues within the framework of an ethnographic study conducted in Spring 2003 that examined blogging through the eyes of bloggers [9,11].

2. METHODS AND SAMPLE

As part of a Computer Science course held in Spring 2003, another graduate student and I conducted a study of bloggers in collaboration with Bonnie Nardi and Diane Schiano. We interviewed bloggers either in person or over the telephone. All interviews were audiotaped with our informants’ permission to use them for future reference. Our interviews included questions

regarding the informants' use of blogs, blogging habits, thoughts on blogging, their uses of other media of communication (e.g. email, Instant Messaging, phone, webpages), and improvements or future directions for blogging software. We interviewed most of our bloggers multiple times; follow-up interviews took place either in person or via another media of communication listed above. Our sample consisted of 23 people (16 men and 7 women) ranging in age from 19-60. Despite a limited sample size, they were a diverse group that included European-Americans, Asian-Americans, Latinos, and one European. Our informants resided in either California or New York. Of our Californian contingent, ten bloggers were currently Stanford undergraduate or graduate students. Other bloggers within our sample were college graduates. The balance of our sample consisted of people involved in academic work, technology work, or creative endeavors. The characteristics of our sample were consistent with Pew survey categorizations. Many of our bloggers were Power Creators, but our sample included Older Creators and Content Omnivores as well.

Our sample was based upon locating blogs hosted in and around Stanford University in order to set up in-person interviews with bloggers. We developed a list of blogs by conducting a search for the words "blog" and "Weblog" on Google's Stanford University portal (<http://www.google.com/univ/stanford/>). We also found bloggers through personal contacts. We then expanded our initial sample by asking bloggers if they knew other bloggers that we could interview for the study. In this paper I use pseudonyms when quoting from our informants.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Controlling Content

Herring et al. claimed that one of blogging's most attractive facets is that bloggers "retain ultimate control over the blog's content" [6]. Despite bloggers' freedom to discuss anything and talk about anyone in their blogs, we found that bloggers imposed constraints on themselves. This inhibition of behavior is elicited seemingly by their consciences as well as social consequences they envisioned. Since the "blogged-about" universe usually consists of the bloggers' friends, family members, or immediate contacts, our informants realized that callous remarks in a blog post might lend themselves to severe repercussions in future interactions.

To circumvent this problem, our informants used ambiguous language and references. This strategy allowed them to protect themselves and to deliver their message well enough to satisfy themselves and their selected audience. Max, a musician in New York, echoed this sentiment:

"[L]ike a lot of the time as I'm writing it [the blog post], I think about who *might* be reading it and if there's anything in there that might offend certain people or like I might not want someone who's gonna be reading it to see? Then, you know, I'll try to find a clever euphemism somehow or just completely take it out...but then, you know, the opposite also happens, like there are times when like I know someone will be reading it and I'll *want* them to see something and...I'll have to find a way to, you know, find a different sort of euphemism that would...highlight as opposed to disguising whatever it is I was wanting to say."

In this way, our informants were able to selectively filter their audience by tailoring their posts to them. This general practice

was applied by many of our informants. Lara, a former Stanford student now employed at Google, had a series of posts in which she referred to an ongoing personal situation that she needed to resolve, but she never detailed the specifics. Here is an excerpt from a recent post:

I'm an idiot sometimes, but I'm coming to terms with it, and I know that everything will work out in the end, because it always does. I may not think that the end is what I want right now, but I will be happy when I get there. The only frustrating thing is that I have a couple of conversations coming up that will probably just suck, and there's no way around them...but I don't know when they will happen yet, so for tonight at least, I am okay with that. Resolution needs to come soon, though--I hate not knowing, and I need some solutions and conclusions as soon as possible.

The sweeping generalizations ("I know that everything will work out in the end, because it always does") and the undefined context of the situation illustrated that Lara believed that her intended audience (probably close friends) knew what she was referring to, she didn't want to bare all of the facts to the entire Internet audience, or both. The manner in which she framed her post is key to manipulating what is termed "common ground"—the way in which people achieve mutual understanding [2]. Common ground is used generally within the confines of immediate social interaction, but the terminology is applicable here as well. Through accumulation—the manner in which common ground is constructed—Lara and her close friends accrued a great deal of shared knowledge through their previous encounters [4]. By virtue of this knowledge, Lara's friends would be able to understand her posts without her going into excruciating detail. On the other hand, acquaintances and strangers are privy only to the surface information presented in the post. Without the benefit of shared knowledge and experiences with Lara, they do not have the inside track on her situation. In a paradoxical manner, Lara managed to maintain privacy within a public medium.

Some informants within our sample adopted the practice of forewarning their audience about the contents of their blog. Jack, a poet and former Stanford graduate student, said he "includes as many disclaimers as possible" when he blogs about someone. He added that bloggers' posts can have "an edge" but you should not "throw a bomb".

One of our informants who participated in a group blog agreed that "throwing bombs" might have long-lasting consequences, especially for hot-button issues. Derek, an undergraduate who wrote for the Stanford political blog the Cardinal Collective, said:

"When you post a blog, it reflects more on you...pressure to make sure you don't send not funny jokes or something offensive...I think there's an editing element...it's free speech: If you're inflammatory, there's sort of a laissez faire thing where you become an orphan—no links to you any more. It's forced political movements...less publicized political things like writing congress. It's a very powerful medium—like a salon, if you will."

Although blogs act as a buffer between blogger and blog readers, bloggers still exercise self-control over how they present their material in order to shield themselves from potentially harmful future interactions. The analogy of blogs to safeguards will lead into my discussion regarding the use of blogs as a favored medium of communication versus other channels.

3.2 Media Selection

In our sample, we found that our informants sometimes preferred communicating through their blogs as opposed to other means. I claim that the limited interactivity of blogs is a crucial reason for the encouragement of this behavior. Blogging is not interactive in the sense by which we perceive other media of communication. For example, in a face-to-face interaction, conversational partners receive instantaneous responses from one another, be it by verbal or non-verbal means. Clark and Brennan deemed this “cotemporality”—if I say something to my friend, he receives that message as I am uttering it [3]. In addition, my friend can tell me a story, and as he is narrating it to me, I can nod my head to demonstrate my understanding and attention. Clark and Brennan termed this “simultaneity” because of the co-occurrence of both parties’ responses. To contrast this with IM, these messages are cotemporal but not simultaneous, i.e. in the case of IM programs which require a carriage return to send a message to a partner [3]. We found that the majority of our informants used IM as a means of communication, yet would sometimes shun it in favor of blogging.

In blogging, grounding occurs neither cotemporally nor simultaneously. This turned out to be part of the allure for some of our informants to selectively communicate through their blogs. Grounding takes place in an indirect way and may encompass more than one channel. A person reads a blog, leaves a comment about a particular post to the blogger, and at some later point, the blogger may reply to the commenter within the blog or via another channel. Feedback will be discussed in greater detail in the subsequent section. It is important to note that this limited interactivity takes place outside of the acts of blog writing or blog reading.

In addition, responses are not expected immediately in this medium. In face-to-face conversation or IM, responses are expected immediately or close to it. As a result, conversational partners may feel ill at ease when trying to broach a sensitive issue in these media. Lara said she would never tell people, “I’m really sad” in IM, yet she would have no qualms about stating it in her blog. Why? In blogs, people can choose to respond to a post or not—it is up to the reader. Over IM, conversational partners might feel obligated to respond—especially when the subject matter is as heavy as a depressed emotional state. In this way, the lack of both cotemporality and simultaneity factor into a blogger’s choice of communicative medium. For other bloggers in our sample, like Max, blogs can act as “protection” from immediate social interaction:

“[T]here’s something that I want, you know, a specific person who’d be reading it to see like, you know, I feel like I can say something in the blog and then have it be sort of be like my safety net, you know? Whereas like in a more immediate and personal like form of impersonal digital communication ...I would sort of have to face their reaction, you know? Metaphorically speaking, anyway...two bad things that blogging for me, anyway, endorses, you know, [are] laziness and cowardice.”

Avoiding the immediate retort of a friend or foe served as one motivation for our informants to blog about an event rather than to talk about it. Max sometimes also found it easier to communicate through his blog rather than through other media: “[Y]ou know, sometimes something will happen and I’ll feel a need to vent about it...I dunno, sometimes it’s just easier to just write down in

a blog than it is to talk to someone about it?” Lara chose to blog about her grandfather’s death because she couldn’t really talk about it but wanted to express her strong feelings—this acted as “therapy” for her emotional state. In addition, bloggers don’t have to deal with interruptions to their flow of storytelling. Jack compared a blog post to a “monologue” in which “other voices don’t intrude”.

Some of our informants reported that blogging gives them a channel to share their feelings when they otherwise would not do so. Lara’s blog allows her to express herself because she is “too closed to tell people in person that she’s having a bad day, but at some level she wants them to know”. Her blog “takes away the pressure” of having to tell people how she’s doing—such as over IM—without overly exposing herself to the world: “I like attention but I don’t like being really personal”.

Instant messaging was not the only form of communication that our informants sometimes avoided. Jack, an avid contributor to listservs, found that he liked blogs better because they are much less “adversarial” and generally more “reflective”. People on listservs tend to have “conflictual” exchanges, defend themselves when attacked, and continually “spew out” responses, which only fan the flames of anger on all sides. In blogs, emotions are assuaged because you are not talking “directly to someone” in a cotemporal setting. Thus, limited interactivity again comes into play in a positive light.

However, when conflicts do arise over blog content, they tend to be transferred to other, more interactive media. In a blog post, Jack “politely questioned” an “Asian-American stereotype” that appeared in the post of another blogger within his poetry community. Rather than responding to Jack in his blog, the source of the post emailed him saying, “OK, I don’t get it. Lay it on me!” Jack replied via email and explained his point of view, and they managed to work out their disagreement through a few more email exchanges. Jack ended up posting a “sanitized form” of the discussion in his blog. This is further evidence of blogs’ resistance to the “flaming” that occurs in listservs, chat rooms, and other highly interactive media [1,7,8].

For some of our informants, blogs were a primary means of delivering information, such as stories and photos. They reported they used IM merely to communicate short bits of information, such as asking/answering questions, exchanging homework—Harriet, one of our informants, tried to teach math to her younger brother over IM—and other “quick stuff”. Harriet, who is a graduate student from Iceland, also found it much easier and cheaper to relay information through her blog to her family and friends back home rather than phone calls or IM.

Thus far, our informants demonstrated that they take advantage of common ground (or the lack thereof) between themselves and their audience in order to maintain a “protected space”. This security also provides motivation for some bloggers to communicate through their blogs rather than face-to-face, IM, email, or the phone. The manner in which bloggers frame their posts can also welcome or discourage comments. In the next section, I turn to the perceived importance of feedback and commenting within both group and individual blogs.

3.3 Importance of Feedback

In preceding sections, I focused primarily on our informants who maintained individual blogs. In this section, I will examine the importance of feedback within both group and individual blogs.

3.3.1 *Blogs in a Community Setting*

Because of limited interactivity, using blogs as community-building tools might seem to be an idea doomed to failure. However, a few of our informants attempted to disprove this view by implementing blogs within educational settings. We found that limited interactivity is a flexible, context-specific notion. In educational, group, and community settings, our bloggers placed a high value on comments and feedback to “create a dialogue”.

Rob, a professor at Stanford, decided to introduce blogs as part of his writing course to “empower [his students] to talk to each other”. One of the aims of his class was for students to learn about the writing process by having students maintain individual blogs, read a few of their classmates’ blogs, and comment on them. Rob said the reasoning behind this was “partly to facilitate the building of the learning community by getting them in conversation with each other electronically”.

In his class syllabus, Rob disagreed with the notion of limited interactivity in blogs:

“Weblogs are like public interactive journals—interactive because they facilitate and encourage comments from readers and other bloggers...It seems to be considered bad form to make comments that rival the original post in either length or depth. In any case, commenting is certainly a form of dialogue, and I encourage you to engage in dialogue with other commenters as well as with the original blogger”.

However, blogs created for educational purposes do not abide by the same rules as personal blogs. Educational blogs aren’t created to share deep, private revelations about oneself. These blogs clearly had a purpose of honing the students’ writing skills.

In our interview, Rob reiterated his viewpoint on the importance of feedback and maintained that the blog post was dominant over the comments: “[T]he comments are allowed and encouraged, but they’re also very clearly rhetorically subservient...to the main comment? So it starts a particular relationship to what you have to say, to what your comments have to say, which is very different than, you know, forms like chat rooms or threaded discussions or Usenet-type discussions”.

Derek, a blogger for the Cardinal Collective, shared this sentiment. He said comments are “the *heart* of the blog medium—others would contest this—but I think a big part of making it publicly available is to have responses”.

However, not all forays into the educational realm were fruitful. Colleen, a computer scientist in the Stanford Archaeology Department, set up a blog for an undergraduate archaeology course. It found success as an easily updated website, as those within and outside the Stanford community accessed it for information. On the other hand, the blog posts didn’t receive many comments. One possibility for this failure of “community-building” is that it wasn’t a course requirement to leave feedback, as was the case for Rob’s class. As I stated earlier, the blog readers decide whether or not to post comments—they are not

obligated to respond! Colleen observed, “[J]ust because the functionality is there doesn’t mean it will be used, if it’s not central to the activity”.

Bloggers who maintain individual blogs can also belong to a community. The idea of community makes feedback an element of importance. Jack belonged to a poetry community that spanned the United States but had a large concentration in the Bay Area. He noted that blogging definitely involved “community-building”. Once he discovered the poetry blogs, he realized that “there is a whole conversation going on”. The bloggers within that community referred to one another frequently in their posts. By virtue of being a community member, Jack felt “peer pressure” to update his blog frequently because there’s a “kind of reciprocity expected”, since he reads others’ blogs and must also “make his contribution”. Interestingly (though he later changed his mind), Jack said he would not post poems on his blog—he termed this practice “egotistical” and “icky”—unless he used one to make some other point. Jack felt a blog was a site for “prose or critical discourse” but was “not serious enough for poems”.

Clearly, our bloggers who participated in a group or community setting found comments and feedback to be vital to the existence of their “online society”. I now turn to the perception of feedback by those who maintain blogs outside of a community setting.

3.3.2 *Blogs on an “island”*

Our informants who blogged outside of a “community” gave differing opinions on the importance of feedback and comments on their blogs. Katie, a graduate student in Electrical Engineering, didn’t like having other people post commentaries on her site because she couldn’t control what they would say. As mentioned in the first section of this paper, bloggers have control over the contents of their posts, yet they do not have control over what their readers might say to them.

On the other hand, Harriet, also a graduate student in Electrical Engineering, believed comments are very important because they “enhance the sense of community that you get...it makes you feel good that people are reading it. You don’t really want too many people reading it, but it’s nice when somebody’s reading it. Especially the people you want to, like your friends. So when you meet up again they don’t have to say “what’s new”...“I can’t remember; I put it on the web!” Once again, this sense of “community” seems to be a key factor in the emphasis that our bloggers place on feedback.

Joey, a financial analyst in New York, said he appreciated receiving comments from people and found them to be “helpful sometimes, like if you understood the situation? Basically they give you comments on what you should do, or how you are about to do it...you can also sometimes I guess look for audience as well sometimes? Like sometimes when you write you want people’s opinion on it and what they feel about it and stuff?” The notions of kinship and “knowing what someone is going through” are elements of community that help “independent” bloggers build bridges between their “islands”.

As I alluded to in the section on media selection, our informants received feedback and comments not only within their blogs but also via other media. Lara believed that many blog comments are “inane” and only valued the “thoughtful ones”. Lara was one of

our informants who blogged mainly for catharsis rather than community, so her opinion is not surprising. However, she did believe that with a blog, there is the “possibility of life-altering exchanges with others”, as opposed to a diary, which has “no interaction”, and “it won’t change my life.” After Lara wrote the emotional post about her grandfather, she received many comments on it via IM, phone calls, and email. Overall, her audience was moved by it, but it caused strange tensions between her and her loved ones. Her family worried that she might be feeling isolated, and some of her friends felt inadequate that they had not helped her more through the experience.

In looking towards blogs of the future, those who enjoyed comments and feedback would like to have blogs become even more interactive. Joey suggested a move toward “community life” by including Instant Messaging software: “What would happen was like, if the person is on, you could actually like AIM the person or leave a message at that time”. As we found with our blogging sample, this would not be a universally popular option; those who valued community would support this idea.

4 SUMMARY

As the Internet world increases our connectedness with one another as a global community, there are those among the blogging world who do not embrace that sentiment. Blogging has created interesting dynamics that uniquely set it apart from other media of communication. Family, friends, and strangers are all potential audience members for bloggers. As such, our research found that bloggers try to maintain a delicate balance between satisfying themselves and their audience with their content. If the equilibrium is disturbed, bloggers find that they are “protected” from immediate retribution because of the limited interactivity of the blog. The blog as “safety net” metaphor—as one of our informants neatly phrased it—can influence a blogger’s decision to present news within the blog versus over the phone, over IM, or even in a face-to-face interaction. The lack of both cotemporality and simultaneity in blogs helps to fuel this decision.

Our research also found that the importance of feedback and commenting hinged upon our bloggers’ sense of “community-mindedness”. Bloggers who used their blogs within educational settings, for open exchanges of ideas, or solicitations for advice greatly valued feedback because it increased interaction and made for lively discussion. However, those who didn’t embrace “community” didn’t place as great an emphasis on feedback. These particular bloggers appreciated the features of protected space and limited interactivity that blogs afforded them.

There is still much work to be done in learning about the blogger mentality, but this research is a step in the direction of understanding the dynamics at work within the phenomenon of blogging.

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