Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)   Libraries at University of Nebraska-Lincoln

October 2006

Blogs as Tools for Online Information Sharing

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Introduction

The term blog or weblog has become popular only recently. The American Merriam Webster Dictionary announced that the most looked up word in 2004 was "blog" [1]. According to Wikipedia (2004), a Weblog is "a Web application that contains periodic, reverse chronologically ordered posts on a common Web page"[2]. The term Weblog was coined by Jorn Barger in December 1997 and the first Weblog was built by Tim Berners-Lee at CERN[3]. This was also the first Website (http://info.cern.ch/. One of the world's first blogs was "Robot Wisdom" owned by Jorn Barger. Peter Scott defines a blog as "a page containing brief, chronologically arranged item of information. A blog can take the form of a diary, journal, What's new page or links to other websites"[4].

Blogs are sites that capture particular views, ideas, or opinions overtime. It is a web application which contains periodic posts on a common web page. These posts are often but not necessarily in reverse chronological order. Each blog tells a story, be it about a person, an organization, an event, or any other subject such as the environment, healthcare, disasters, language, literature, etc. The person who maintains a blog is called a blogger and the act of creating and maintaining a blog is called blogging.

Blogs run from individual diaries to aims of political campaigns, media programmes and corporations, and from one occasional author to large communities of writers. Many weblogs enable visitors to leave comments which can lead to a community of readers centered arround the blog; others are non interactive. The totality of blogs or blog-related activities is called the blogosphere. When a large amount of activity, information, and opinion erupt around a particular subject or controversy in the blogosphere, it may be referred to as a blogstorm or blogswamp.

History

As already mentioned, the first Weblog/blog was the first website, http://info.cern.ch/, the site built by Tim Berners-Lee at CERN. From this page, Berners-Lee pointed to all the new sites as they came online. Winner states that the content of this site has been archived at the World Wide Web (WWW) consortium [5]. From this a community of bloggers sprang up. NCSA's "What's New" page was the major blog on the Net from 1993-96. The World Wide Web exploded and the Weblog grew along with it. Winner did his first Weblog,

"Blogs as Tools for Online Information Sharing," Gurdev Singh , S.M. Shahid, *Library Philosophy and Practice,* Vol. 9, no. 1 (Fall 2006)

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"The Scripting News" in February 1996. It was one of the earliest Weblogs and is currently the longest running blog on the Internet. Among the other early blogs are the Rebecca's Pocket and Cam World, which documented new bloggers and today has a great influence in the blogosphere.

These early Weblogs were link-driven sites with a mix of links, commentary and personal thoughts and essays and could only be created by people who already knew how to make a website. Rebecca Blood states, "Today, however, through the introduction of how-to-manuals, blog IDs and several user friendly web tools, even the least savvy people can create a Weblog"[6]. A fine and useful example of such tools is the Rich Text Editor (RTE) as offered by Printexx, which claims that 'No HTML to Learn' and 'No Software to Download and Install', but with the RTE, how one's entry appears on his screen is how it will be published on the web.

With the constant evolution of Internet as a medium of free expression, the role of Weblogs as a unique mode of online expression has changed dramatically over the past 5-6 years i.e. from complicated link-based sites to personal blogs with a diary -like, user friendly style, to war blogs after the invasion of Iraq by the US, to breaking news stories, and finally to their mainstream role in today's society as tools for outreach and opinion formation by political parties and to promote ideas. The impact of weblogs as a channel of independent publication was evident in the run-up to the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq. The experience set a sociological narrative tradition that presented the fears and suffering of the people in the form of stark diary entries living the moment. The 'Baghdad blogger,' who was subsequently revealed to be Salam Pax, had such an impact globally with his graphic reports that he feared reprisals from the Baathist Censors of Saddam Hussein. The Baghdad blogger came to acquire an iconic status: his postings have become the subject of a book and his history has become a film script. His blog attracted a worldwide readership. Currently Salam's blog has been turned into a best seller book titled "Salam Pax:The Clandestine Diary of an Ordinary Iraqi"[7].

There are an estimated 1.2 million blogs in English and 1.9 million in all languages combined. They promise to have profound influence on political campaigns and mobilizations for various causes[8]. Ivan noble, a science and technology writer for the BBC was diagnosed with a malignant brain tumour in August 2002. Since then he shared his experiences on a blog that helped many others who were also suffering from the same disease. Noble's blog was so popular that each entry in his blog attracted 7,000 to 12,000 visitors.

According to a recent study by Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, and Wright, the most popular blog form is a journal. The role of bloggers in the US presidential election and other political activities, has raised the issue whether bloggers are journalists[9]. During the 2004 election, for the first time press accreditation was issued to bloggers who covered national conventions of Democrats and Republicans.

Blogs proved a great source of local information when the tsunami tragically struck many countries. Blogs constantly reported on what was happening in countries, cities, and islands hit by the tsunami. They played a crucial role as first-hand information providers right from the heart of affected areas and became effective mobolisers for relief efforts. This new tool helped affected and lost persons unite with their families back home.

With thousands of serious bloggers who regularly comment on the latest developments in their respective spheres of expertise or interest, blogs have become a major information channel. They are growing everyday. A recent survey in the US showed that over two million Americans have their own blogs. Most have few readers, but some garner thousands of hits daily. The Indian blog set up for the tsunami tragedy, created a record, registering one million hits within a week of creation[10].

How to Create and Publish a Blog

Since the introduction of blogs, a number of tools have appeared to allow people to create their own blogs without worrying about programming and design issues. They are so user friendly that even people inexperienced in Web designing can create and maintain their blogs. Presently, blog hosting sites and web services to provide editing have proliferated. Examples include Greatest Journal, Pitas, blogger, Live Journal, Xanga, and many others. The technology known as Really Simple Syndication or RSS makes it easier to read blogs. RSS software pulls headlines from news sites and web journals and presents them in e-mail software, web browsers or as a standalone program.

Most blogging software is now as easy to use as a word processor, with the already done programming and HTML formatting such as through the tools like Ecto (http://www.kung-foo.tv/ecto/) and W.bloggar (http://wbloggar.com/) that allow users to see their blog without the need to be online while composing or editing.

Blogging and Libraries

Many librarians publish their own blogs on a wide array of Library and Information Science (LIS) topics. One of the most renowned of these is "The Shifted Librarian" (http://www.theshiftedlibrarian.com), published by Jenny Levine of the Suburban Library System in Illionois. The Peter Scott's Library Weblogs (http://www.libdex.com/weblogs.html) page and the dmoz.org (also known as the Open Directory Project, ODP) have explored issues in librarianship.

Blogging began as a form of personal publishing, but this is no longer exclusively the case. Collaborative blogging allows communities to contribute for their mutual benefit. In the field of Library and Information Science, popular blogs such as LIS News (http://www.lisnews.com/), run by Blake Carver, demonstrate this kind of collaboration.

Librarians are required to be current and to delve into the process of information seeking. There are many blogs which are dedicated to resources for keeping the library professionals current and ultimately in the professional development. Some of the blogs as professional development resources are:

- Library Stuff
- LISNews
- Peter Scott's Library blog
- Resource Shelf
- Handheld Librarian
- Sitelines: Ideas about Web Searching
- Open stacks

In India, blogging have had an impact on information publishing, handling, sharing and disseminating. Prominent and very recently updated blogs from India include:

- Trinetre: The Third Eye by Srijith, K.
- Emerging Thoughts and Trends by Sadagopan
- Scientific Thoughts by Sray
- Techno Freek by Phani Kumar
- Amma's Column: Weblog of a Student of History by Jyotsna Kamat

Blogging Ethics

When selecting a website to create a blog, it is necessary to keep in mind the target community. This ultimately helps to be able to connect with people with similar ideas and interests. It is important to treat the community with respect and sensitivity in your blog. Get permission before revealing information about individuals. Passwords may be required so that a particular blog may be used by only those who have permission.

Blogs tell the world a lot about the blogger, so it becomes imperative to write the blog in correctly, using the correct spelling, etc. Though a blog is an uncensored personal account, controversial topics should be avoided. The informative, interesting, aesthetic, and entertaining, as well as subjective and event-oriented blogs make a blogger prominent and successful with a loyal readership.

Although blogging is a nascent medium, it is the web's potential realized in the present era of information techonology. The very adjuncts of the blogging such as the semi-prominence, the public-private overlap, the interactive nature, the timeliness, the swarm of bloggers in discussion instead of single source broadcasting to the masses, all hold promise of a medium of information sharing and dissemination as radio and television, etc. did in their times.

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