

Reading 5-3

Weblogs: A History and Perspective

Rebecca Blood

EDITOR'S NOTE

From a quiet beginning in the late 1990s, weblogs, or blogs, have become a mass Internet phenomenon, giving voice to over a half million people a day who go online to update their self-published e-mail journals. In this reading, Rebecca Blood, an early blogger herself, offers a history and perspective on the blogging phenomenon. She suggests that blogs do much more than provide a platform for self-obsessed narcissism. Among other things, they enable would-be writers to hone their skills (and thereby gain a certain measure of confidence); they filter the news and serve as platforms for intelligent reaction to current events; and they provide a counter voice to the ubiquitous din of media pundits. Although the content of blogs is varied and raw, some weblogs are now among the hottest places online. "Weblogs," Blood surmises, "are no panacea for the crippling effects of a media-saturated culture, but I believe they are one antidote." For more on media saturation, see Reading 6-1 by Todd Gitlin.

CONSIDER

1. In what ways do weblogs represent "an unprecedented opportunity for individual expression on a worldwide scale," as the author contends?
2. What are the key differences between filter-style weblogs and journal-style blogs, and what different functions do they perform?
3. How does blogging—the simple act of regularly writing down whatever is on your mind and posting it online—empower and provide benefits to those who blog?

In 1998 there were just a handful of sites of the type that are now identified as weblogs (so named by Jorn Barger in December 1997). Jesse James Garrett, editor of Infosift, began compiling a list of "other sites like his" as he found them in his travels around the Web. In November of that year, he sent that list to Cameron Barrett. Cameron published the list on CamWorld, and others maintaining similar sites began sending their URLs to him for inclusion on the list. Jesse's "page of only weblogs" lists the 23 known to be in existence at the beginning of 1999.

Suddenly a community sprang up. It was easy to read all of the weblogs on Cameron's list, and most interested people did. Peter Merholz announced in early 1999 that he was going to pronounce it "wee-blog"

and inevitably this was shortened to "blog" with the weblog editor referred to as a "blogger."

At this point, the bandwagon jumping began. More and more people began publishing their own weblogs. I began mine in April of 1999. Suddenly it became difficult to read every weblog every day, or even to keep track of all the new ones that were appearing. Cameron's list grew so large that he began including only weblogs he actually followed himself. Other bloggers did the same. In early 1999, Brigitte Eaton compiled a list of every weblog she knew about and created the Eatonweb Portal. Brig evaluated all submissions by a simple criterion: that the site consist of dated entries. Webloggers debated what was and what was not a weblog, but since the Eatonweb Portal was the most complete listing of weblogs available, Brig's inclusive definition prevailed.

This rapid growth continued steadily until July 1999 when Pitas, the first free build-your-own-weblog tool launched, and suddenly there were hundreds.

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In August, Pyra released Blogger, and Gropkoup launched, and with the ease that these Web-based tools provided, the bandwagon-jumping turned into an explosion. Late in 1999, software developer Dave Winer introduced Edit This Page, and Jeff A. Campbell launched Velocinews. All of these services are free, and all of them are designed to enable individuals to publish their own weblogs quickly and easily.

The original weblogs were link-driven sites. Each was a mixture in unique proportions of links, commentary, and personal thoughts and essays. Weblogs could only be created by people who already knew how to make a website. A weblog editor had either taught herself to code HTML for fun, or, after working all day creating commercial websites, spent several off-work hours every day surfing the Web and posting to her site. These were Web enthusiasts.

Many current weblogs follow this original style. Their editors present links both to little-known corners of the Web and to current news articles they feel are worthy of note. Such links are nearly always accompanied by the editor's commentary. An editor with some expertise in a field might demonstrate the accuracy or inaccuracy of a highlighted article or certain facts therein; provide additional facts he feels are pertinent to the issue at hand; or simply add an opinion or differing viewpoint from the one in the piece he has linked. Typically this commentary is characterized by an irreverent, sometimes sarcastic tone. More skillful editors manage to convey all of these things in the sentence or two with which they introduce the link (making them, as Halcyon pointed out to me, pioneers in the art and craft of microcontent). Indeed, the format of the typical weblog, providing only a very short space in which to write an entry, encourages pithiness on the part of the writer; longer commentary is often given its own space as a separate essay.

These weblogs provide a valuable filtering function for their readers. The Web has been, in effect, presurfed for them. Out of the myriad web pages slung through cyberspace, weblog editors pick out the most mind-boggling, the most stupid, the most compelling.

But this type of weblog is important for another reason, I think. In Douglas Rushkoff's *Media Virus*, Greg Ruggiero of the Immediast Underground is quoted as saying, "Media is a corporate possession. . . . You cannot participate in the media. Bringing that into the foreground is the first step. The second step is to define the difference between public and audience. An audience is passive; a public is participatory. We need a definition of media that is public in its orientation."

By highlighting articles that may easily be passed over by the typical Web user too busy to do more than scan corporate news sites, by searching out articles from lesser-known sources, and by providing additional facts, alternative views, and thoughtful commentary, weblog editors participate in the dissemination and interpretation of the news that is fed to us every day. Their sarcasm and fearless commentary remind us to question the vested interests of our sources of information and the expertise of individual reporters as they file news stories about subjects they may not fully understand.

Weblog editors sometimes contextualize an article by juxtaposing it with an article on a related subject; each article, considered in the light of the other, may take on additional meaning, or even draw the reader to conclusions contrary to the implicit aim of each. It would be too much to call this type of weblog "independent media," but clearly their editors, engaged in seeking out and evaluating the "facts" that are presented to us each day, resemble the public that Ruggiero speaks of. By writing a few lines each day, weblog editors begin to redefine media as a public, participatory endeavor.

During 1999, something else happened, and I believe it has to do with the introduction of Blogger itself.

While weblogs had always included a mix of links, commentary, and personal notes, in the post-Blogger explosion increasing numbers of weblogs eschewed this focus on the Web-at-large in favor of a sort of short-form journal. These blogs, often updated several times a day, were instead a record of the blogger's thoughts: something noticed on the way to work, notes about the weekend, a quick reflection on some subject or another. Links took the reader to the site of another blogger with whom the first was having a public conversation or had met the previous evening, or to the site of a band he had seen the night before. Full-blown conversations were carried on between three or five blogs, each referencing the other in their agreement or rebuttal of the other's positions. Cults of personality sprung up as new blogs appeared, certain names appearing over and over in daily entries or listed in the obligatory sidebar of "other weblogs" (a holdover from Cam's original list). It was, and is, fascinating to see new bloggers position themselves in this community, referencing and reacting to those blogs they read most, their sidebar an affirmation of the tribe to which they wish to belong.

Why the change? Why so many? I have always suspected that some of the popularity of this form may be a simple desire to emulate the sites of head Pyra kids Ev

and Meg. As the creators of Blogger, their charming, witty blogs are their company's foremost advertisement for its most popular product.

More than that, Blogger itself places no restrictions on the form of content being posted. Its Web interface, accessible from any browser, consists of an empty form box into which the blogger can type . . . anything: a passing thought, an extended essay, or a childhood recollection. With a click, Blogger will post the . . . whatever . . . on the writer's website, archive it in the proper place, and present the writer with another empty box, just waiting to be filled.

Contrast this with the Web interface of MetaFilter, a popular community weblog. Here, the writer is presented with three form boxes: the first for the URL of the referenced site, the second for the title of the entry, and the third for whatever commentary the writer would like to add. The MetaFilter interface instructs the writer to contribute a link and add commentary; Blogger makes no such demands. Blogger makes it so easy to type in a thought or reaction that many people are disinclined to hunt up a link and compose some text around it.

It is this free-form interface combined with absolute ease of use which has, in my opinion, done more to impel the shift from the filter-style weblog to journal-style blog than any other factor. And there has been a shift. Searching for a filter-style weblog by clicking through the thousands of weblogs listed at weblogs.com, the Eatonweb Portal, or Blogger Directory can be a Sisyphean task. Newcomers would appear to be most drawn to the blog—rather than filter—style of weblogging.

Certainly, both styles still exist; certainly the particular mixture of links, commentary, and personal observation unique to each individual site has always given each weblog its distinctive voice and personality; and certainly the weblog has always been an infinitely malleable format. But the influx of blogs has changed the definition of weblog from "a list of links with commentary and personal asides" to "a website that is updated frequently, with new material posted at the top of the page." I really wish there were another term to describe the filter-style weblog, one that would easily distinguish it from the blog. On the principle of truth in advertising, this would make it much easier for the adventuresome reader to find the type of weblog she most enjoys.

So, what of the weblog? Is it of interest or importance to anyone who does not produce one? Well, I think it should be.

A filter-style weblog provides many advantages to its readers. It reveals glimpses of an unimagined Web to those who have no time to surf. An intelligent human being filters through the mass of information packaged daily for our consumption and picks out the interesting, the important, the overlooked, and the unexplored. This human being may provide additional information to that which corporate media provides, expose the fallacy of an argument, perhaps reveal an inaccurate detail. Because the weblog editor can comment freely on what she finds, one week of reading will reveal to you her personal biases, making her a predictable source. This further enables us to turn a critical eye to both the information and comments she provides. Her irreverent attitude challenges the veracity of the "facts" presented each day by authorities.

Shortly after I began producing Rebecca's Pocket, I noticed two side effects I had not expected. First, I discovered my own interests. I thought I knew what I was interested in, but after linking stories for a few months, I could see that I was much more interested in science, archaeology, and issues of injustice than I had realized. More importantly, I began to value more highly my own point of view. In composing my link text every day I carefully considered my own opinions and ideas, and I began to feel that my perspective was unique and important.

This profound experience may be most purely realized in the blog-style weblog. Lacking a focus on the outside world, the blogger is compelled to share her world with whomever is reading. She may engage other bloggers in conversation about the interests they share. She may reflect on a book she is reading, or the behavior of someone on the bus. She might describe a flower that she saw growing between the cracks of a sidewalk on her way to work. Or she may simply jot notes about her life: what work is like, what she had for dinner, what she thought of a recent movie. These fragments, pieced together over months, can provide an unexpectedly intimate view of what it is to be a particular individual in a particular place at a particular time.

The blogger, by virtue of simply writing down whatever is on her mind, will be confronted with her own thoughts and opinions. Blogging every day, she will become a more confident writer. A community of 100 or 20 or 3 people may spring up around the public record of her thoughts. Being met with friendly voices, she may gain more confidence in her view of the world; she may begin to experiment with longer forms of writing, to play with haiku, or to begin a

creative project—one that she would have dismissed as being inconsequential or doubted she could complete only a few months before.

As she enunciates her opinions daily, this new awareness of her inner life may develop into a trust in her own perspective. Her own reactions—to a poem, to other people, and, yes, to the media—will carry more weight with her. Accustomed to expressing her thoughts on her website, she will be able to more fully articulate her opinions to herself and others. She will become impatient with waiting to see what others think before she decides, and will begin to act in accordance with her inner voice instead. Ideally, she will become less reflexive and more reflective, and find her own opinions and ideas worthy of serious consideration.

Her readers will remember an incident from their own childhood when the blogger relates a memory. They might look more closely at the other riders on the train after the blogger describes her impressions of a fellow commuter. They will click back and forth between blogs and analyze each blogger's point of view in a multi-blog conversation, and form their own conclusions on the matter at hand. Reading the views of other ordinary people, they will readily question and evaluate what is being said. Doing this, they may begin a similar journey of self-discovery and intellectual self-reliance.

The promise of the Web was that everyone could publish, that a thousand voices could flourish, communicate, connect. The truth was that only those people who knew how to code a webpage could make their voices heard. Blogger, Pitas, and all the rest have given people with little or no knowledge of HTML the ability to publish on the Web: to pontificate, remember, dream, and argue in public, as easily as they send an instant message. We can't seriously compare the creation of the World Wide Web itself with the availability of free technology that allows anyone with a Web browser to express their unique, irreproducible vision to the rest of the world . . . can we?

There are [now] thousands of weblogs: topic-oriented weblogs, alternative viewpoints, astute examinations of the human condition as reflected by mainstream media, short-form journals, links to the weird, and free-form notebooks of ideas. Traditional weblogs perform a valuable filtering service and provide tools for more critical evaluation of the information available on the Web. Free-style blogs are nothing less than an outbreak of self-expression. Each is evidence of a

staggering shift from an age of carefully controlled information provided by sanctioned authorities (and artists) to an unprecedented opportunity for individual expression on a worldwide scale. Each kind of weblog empowers individuals on many levels.

So why doesn't every bookmark list contain five weblogs? In the beginning of 1999, it really seemed that by now every bookmark list would. There was a bit of media attention and new weblogs were being created every day. It was a small, quick-growing community and it seemed to be on the edge of a wider awareness. Perhaps the tsunami of new weblogs created in the wake of Pitas and Blogger crushed the movement before it could reach critical mass; the sudden exponential growth of the community rendered it un-navigable. Weblogs, once filters of the Web, suddenly became so numerous they were as confusing as the Web itself. A few more articles appeared touting weblogs as the next big thing. But the average reader, hopefully clicking through to the Eatonweb portal, found herself faced with an alphabetical list of a thousand weblogs. Not knowing where to begin, she quickly retreated back to ABCnews.com.

I don't have an answer. In our age, the single-page website of an obscure Turk named Mahir can sweep the Web in days. But the unassailable truth is that corporate media and commercial and governmental entities own most of the real estate. Dell manages more webpages than all of the weblogs put together. Sprite's PR machine can point more man-hours to the promotion of one message—"Obey Your Thirst"—than the combined man-hours of every weblogger alive. Our strength—that each of us speaks in an individual voice of an individual vision—is, in the high-stakes world of carefully orchestrated messages designed to distract and manipulate, a liability. We are, very simply, outnumbered.

And what, really, will change if we get weblogs into every bookmark list? As we are increasingly bombarded with information from our computers, handhelds, in-store kiosks, and now our clothes, the need for reliable filters will become more pressing. As corporate interests exert tighter and tighter control over information and even art, critical evaluation is more essential than ever. As advertisements creep onto banana peels, attach themselves to paper cup sleeves, and interrupt our ATM transactions, we urgently need to cultivate forms of self-expression in order to counteract our self-defensive numbness and remember what it is to be human.

We are being pummeled by a deluge of data and unless we create time and spaces in which to reflect, we will be left with only our reactions. I strongly believe in the power of weblogs to transform both writers and

readers from “audience” to “public” and from “consumer” to “creator.” Weblogs are no panacea for the crippling effects of a media-saturated culture, but I believe they are one antidote.



RELATED LINKS

- Blogger.com (<http://new.blogger.com>)
- Eatonweb Portal (<http://portal.eatonweb.com>)
- MetaFilter.com (<http://www.metafilter.com>)
- Weblogs.com (<http://www.weblogs.com>)



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