

What Makes a Blog a Blog? Exploring User Conceptualizations of an Old “New” Online Medium

Jeffrey William Treem

Northwestern University
2240 Campus Drive
Evanston, IL 60208
jtreem@u.northwestern.edu

Kristin Yates Thomas

Northwestern University
2240 Campus Drive
Evanston, IL 60208
Kristin@northwestern.edu

Abstract

What is a blog? While this may seem like a basic question, it is the subject of dispute among researchers, and hardly settled among users of the medium. We return to this fundamental inquiry by asking 89 blog reading college students how they conceptualize the term and what purpose blogs serve for them. Our findings suggest that perceptions of blogs are varied and ambiguous, and definitions largely fail to distinguish blogs from other online media. We discuss what this means for the study of blogs and other “new” media and argue that more constructionist approaches are necessary to develop ecologically valid theories of media perceptions and use.

Introduction

While opinions vary both as to who invented the medium of blogging and exactly how long it has been in existence (Rosenberg 2009), what is clear is that over the past decade the act of blogging has become a mainstream activity and attracted the interest of scholars (Herring, et al. 2004; Nardi, Schiano and Gumbrecht 2004). The issue of conceptualizing the category of media referred to as blogs becomes salient when researchers choose to use blogs or blog authors as a unit of analysis, as has been common practice (Herring, et al. 2004; boyd 2006). Certainly, studying blogs as a unit of analysis is an attractive proposition, as it presents a population of millions to sample from, access to data regardless of geographic location, a format that readily lends itself to longitudinal study, and the convenience of having nearly instantaneous data (Hookway 2008). However, as demonstrated in a review of blogging studies by Li and Walejko (2008) the blog landscape is ill-suited for common sampling strategies because of the difficulties in creating a valid probability sample.

This is not to say these samples are not justified, but merely that researchers must make decisions regarding how to draw boundary conditions that define what web

content is considered a blog, or what constitutes a blogger. These necessary constraints limit both the generalizability of the studies, and fall short of contributing to theory about the medium of blogs as a whole. This paper presents an alternative way for researchers to conceptualize blogs as online media, by integrating the views of blog users.

Defining blogs. To date researchers have defined blogs from a variety of technical, and normative-functional perspectives. The technical approach suggests that a blog can be defined by a set of design characteristics that differentiate it from other forms of media such as frequent entries, content presented in a reverse-chronology format, and archived posts (Nardi, Schiano and Gumbrecht 2004). However, these same characteristics are also present in other forms of online media, making them a difficult choice for defining the boundary of a sample. Furthermore, this approach often does not distinguish whether features are necessary or sufficient, thus limiting an understanding of the acceptable variability in form. The normative-functional viewpoint characterizes blogs as representing “genres” of communication meaning that they share features and purpose (Yates, Orlikowski, and Rennecker 1997). In applying a genre analysis to a random sample of blogs Herring, et al. (2004) classified blogs as personal journals, filters, knowledge logs, and mixed, noting they exist as a hybrid genre that moves along a continuum between ‘standard web pages’ and ‘asynchronous CMC’ (p. 10). However, this classification was ascribed by the researchers based on a limited sample and may not reflect contemporary views of users. Alternatively, Krishnamurthy (2002) proposed a blog classification typology along two vectors: personal to topical, and individual to community. This captures common blog definitions: the blog as a personal journal (Dibble, 2002), a means of participating in wider contemporary conversations (boyd 2004; Lasica 2001), community blogging efforts such as interest group blogs, and large, collaborative content creation and aggregation blogs like Slashdot or Metafilter (Krishnamurthy 2002).

This study contributes to the literature on blogs by examining the medium from the perspective of users. Much of the extant literature on blogs has examined the

motivations for publishing (Nardi et al. 2004), content and features of the medium (Herring et al. 2004) and the interactivity of sites (Ali-Hasan and Adamic 2007). However, these approaches largely evaluate blogs as a single form of communication, and as such look to develop generalizable conclusions about the medium. By adopting an inductive approach this project does not accept the premise that there is an objective characterization of blogs, and instead treats the medium as socially constructed by users. To that end, our primary research question is as follows: To what extent do blog readers have a consistent conceptualization of blogs as a medium?

Methods

Participants

Participants were undergraduate students at a midsized, private, Midwestern, university. Each was enrolled in an introductory class in Communication Studies. They participated in the study in order to partially fulfill a class requirement. Individuals were eligible to participate if they had viewed at least one blog in the last month.

Sample and Data Collection

We purposely sought a biased sample for this study. Respondents were enrolled at a single university, and drawn from classes of similar level and major. Furthermore, we restricted our focus to active blog users and in doing so eliminated the majority of the U.S. population who do not interact with blogs regularly (Smith 2008). Our intent was to bias the results toward homogeneity of experience and background, creating a conservative test for inconsistency in definitions.

The study employed two different methods of data collection. First, we conducted 27 semi-structured interviews (Kvale 1996) asking questions about participants' perceptions and use of blogs. Interviews ranged from 17 to 40 minutes (mean= 27). In the second part of the study we conducted an online survey asking respondents numerous questions about Internet behaviors. Only the two open-ended questions in the survey are being analyzed in this report: 1) How would you define a blog? And, 2) Imagine a friend who is unfamiliar with blogs asks you "Why do you read blogs?" What would you tell them? A total of 67 individuals started the survey, with 5 individuals failing to provide answers to questions giving us a complete sample of 89 response sets for analysis.

Analysis

Given that both methods produced qualitative data from a limited sample, a constant comparative approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967) was used to analyze the data. For each interview we coded any segments of text related to how participants defined the term 'blog,' or why they read blogs, in order to develop points of comparison with the survey responses. We then developed categories of

attributes mentioned in both definitions and coded responses for the presence of these attributes, with the development of categories continuing until repeated coding produced no new terms. Though crude and limited in its quantitative significance, this approach was designed to provide insight into overall consistency of terms.

Next, the authors rearranged the coded segments based not on the specific terms, but rather based on the concept represented. After this was completed, the researchers discussed the relationship between the exhibited concept and the research question. This process was repeated several times, until the researchers could not think of any additional concepts. Exemplar responses for the emerging concepts were selected to inform the research question.

Findings

Little Agreement in Definition of Blog

Our findings revealed a tremendous amount of variability in the definitions of a blog. As seen in Table 1, no single defining attribute was mentioned by more than half of respondents.

Table 1: Top 10 Mentioned Defining Attributes of Blogs

Attribute	% of Respondents Mentioning
Commentary/Opinion	45%
Single Author	39%
Online/Internet	38%
Thoughts/Beliefs/views	35%
Diary/Journal	34%
Personal	29%
Website/Web	26%
Specific Topic	25%
Shared/Public/Present	24%
Inform/Information/news	20%

n = 89

Many of the characteristics identified appear somewhat in opposition. While a segment of respondents viewed blogs as displaying a variety of opinions and views, others saw them as a source of new information and addressing a specific, focused topic. At the least, this exhibits a level of ambiguity or generality among blog users, as was demonstrated by responses referencing the wide reaching scope of blogs in their definitions.

An informal or formal website where one can share their opinions, thoughts, pictures, music, almost anything they'd like with the general public. Mostly they are updated daily, and are a virtual place where one can have an online journal. *Respondent 47*

A blog is a webpage or set of webpages wherein an individual writes in a free-form way about whatever

topics strike his/her fancy. They may be single-issue or cover a range of topics. *Respondent 82*

Additionally, respondents frequently used qualifiers like “usually,” “some,” and “many” in definitions. This resulted in broad, inclusive definitions that offered few explicit points of differentiation between blogs and any other online presentations of content.

What Blogs Are Not

While respondents found it difficult to express distinct attributes of blogs, many chose to define blogs in relation to what they viewed as more established media sources. For these respondents, blogs were more easily understood not by what they *are*, but by what they *are not*.

Blogs are very personal and to me not as professional as other pages that you may see on the Internet...you may go to CNN and click a blog and that'll just be like it is not as structured as an article is, but it'll just be a run down of ideas somebody has about a certain topic.
Respondent 35

Alternative media organizations were not the only point of comparison for respondents. Individuals also characterized blogs in relation to other popular online communication platforms.

I mean, Facebook and Twitter don't do blogs. They don't they're not the same, they're different, I'd say. But blogs are just pallets that you can do whatever you want with. And you could put whatever you want on it, and in Facebook it's censored, and it's not the same. I don't know how to articulate that but it's not.
Respondent 4

It appears that individuals used their knowledge of and experience with other online media to develop conceptualizations of blogs. Given the inherent variability in online experiences and exposure among individuals, this suggests the development of varying concepts and definitions.

The Changing Blog Landscape

Interview respondents also discussed how their perceptions of blogs had changed over time. All but one individual started reading blogs less than seven years ago and most had been exposed to blogs for four years or less. Yet despite this limited experience with the medium, they noted that current perceptions differed from initial thoughts about blogs.

I think blog is an awful name...I know the people who created it thought it was clever being short for web log, but I still I don't know. For as long as I live, I'll think of Xanga when I think of blogs. *Respondent 71*

...the maturity level has sort of jumped. Well, I never had a Live Journal. I thought it was ridiculous. But people that are having blogs now that are actually interesting to read, - *Respondent 19*

While the infancy of blogs may have been dominated by personal journals or diary forms (Herring, et al., 2004) it appears that blogs have progressed into alternate genres.

It's a Blog if it Says it's a Blog

Given that the definition of blogs themselves did not clearly differentiate them from other Internet content, we asked interview participants how they know if what they are viewing is indeed a blog. The most common response was simply that you can tell because it says that it is a blog.

Well, there's definitely the difference of companies and brands you know that they're not blogs. But I'd say general rule would be that a person or people who specifically state who they are. *Respondent 4*

The most frequently mentioned way that this was indicated was through the URL address of the blog itself. Respondent 10 describes the difficulty in relying on Web addresses when identifying blogs.

There's tons of sites where if you just type in your name and you're like I want my blog to be called this, it would be like, my blog at Blogspot or Blogger dot com or whatever. I guess you can't always really tell because if you did make a blog you could make it look like an actual site. They don't usually have disclaimers, so you can't always really tell.

As he indicates, the reliance on explicit labels provided by the URL, the page layout, a search engine, or the author(s) may not be comprehensive. Labeling a site or page as a blog is neither required nor does it emerge in a standard way. Therefore, both display and recognition of a blog are likely to occur in an ad-hoc or emergent fashion that is dependent both on the author's publishing choices and the reader's perceptions of material. Respondent 23 discusses the implications of the variability one finds with blogs:

If you look at other Internet content, you kind of know what you're getting into based on what you're looking for. Whereas, with a blog, it varies from user-to-user, like, whoever's writing it. Whereas, other formats, like things about a certain subject are usually going to be set up similarly...But there are some websites that I've seen where the line is actually kind of blurry.

Discussion

In her review of trends in Computer-Mediated-Communication (CMC), Herring (2004) urged scholars to question the newness of “new” media technologies and

suggested research should explore the effects of time, familiarity, and mass popularization on CMC use. The findings of this study suggest that all three variables may play a role in shaping blog user perceptions and behaviors. Our findings confirm Herring's prediction that as web publishing becomes easier it threatens traditional distinctions between categories of media and our understanding of those categories. Thus researchers defining blogs in the course of analysis should recognize the potential temporal and social limits of characterizations.

Given the dynamic nature of blogs, our findings suggest the need for more research adopting a constructionist perspective, meaning consensus around a definition is never presumed. Kaplan and Tripsas (2008) advocate a similar type of approach to examining technological change at-large noting that individuals make sense of new offerings based on situated experiences. Instead of pulling from pre-defined samples of blogs we suggest researchers studying the effects of blogs by letting categories emerge from user attributions.

In addressing previous attempts to define blogs, boyd (2006) notes that focusing on the structure and content of blogs "introduced analytic biases that complicated people's ability to follow the evolution of blogging and how the practice and values of bloggers shaped the output." Just as boyd argued that research should aim to capture the situated *practice of blogging*, we urge media effects-oriented research to focus on the *practice of blog reading*. Future research will be able to explore how practices of blog reading emerge, how they are integrated with wider media repertoires, and how these practices change over time.

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