

Bloggging Together: Digital Expression in a Real-Life Community

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents the results of a qualitative study of blogging in a real-life community in which we aimed to understand the process by which an individual becomes involved in this practice. We conducted open-ended interviews with members of a university research center, discussing their experiences and habits reading blogs or maintaining their own. Our sample contained seasoned bloggers, recent ones, active blog readers who didn't blog themselves, "drop-outs," one subject who was contemplating starting to blog, as well as members of the community who neither maintained nor read blogs. Our findings highlight the connections between online and offline interactions, showing how involvement in blogging is dependent on having friends who are actively involved, and we discuss the mechanisms underlying this connection.

Author Keywords

Blogs, computer-mediated communication, WWW, communities of practice

ACM Classification Keywords

J.4 [Social and Behavioral Sciences]: Sociology, H.5.3 [Group and Organization Interfaces]: Web-based interaction

INTRODUCTION

Bloggging is a new phenomenon in personal web authoring that recently received some attention in the academic literature [4, 6]. In a prototypical case, bloggging involves maintaining a regularly updated website – a *blog* – where new *entries* are added on separate pages with excerpts of recent entries shown in reverse chronological order on the blog's "main" page. Compared to personal web page styles that preceded them, blogs make it easier for the reader to see "what's new," which encourages the visitors to come back frequently and helps the author acquire a reader base. Blog software usually allows the readers to add comments to the

entry pages, adding bi-directionality absent in earlier formats. It also requires less work for the author, since many tasks can be automated.

While the factors mentioned above make the overall popularity of blogs hardly surprising, we wanted to understand how *an individual person* comes to engage in this practice. Our intention was not to ask "Why would anyone do this?," but rather to understand the social factors that might make a difference between becoming an active blogger versus trying it once and giving up. This question was to a large extent inspired by the work of Howard Becker [1], who approached marijuana use¹ with the premise that "the motivation and the disposition to engage in the activity is built up in the course of learning to engage in it and does not antedate this learning process," due to the fact that the novice needs to acquire "a conception of the meaning of the behavior, and perceptions and judgments of objects and situations, all of which make the activity possible and desirable" (p. 235). In other words, the issue of *motivation* cannot be separated from the issue of *learning*.

Becker shows that the likelihood of acquiring the necessary skills and attitudes depends on "the degree of individual participation with other [more experienced] users" (p. 241). This notion of learning through participation is further developed by Lave and Wenger [3], who discuss the individual's transition from *peripheral* to *central* participation in a *practice*, which is understood as an activity common to a *community* of mutually supporting practitioners.

Those theoretical perspectives led us to hypothesize that bloggging can be similarly understood as a social practice – social *not just* in the sense that it supports social interactions, but also in the sense that one becomes an active blogger by being embedded in a community of other bloggers, with reading of blogs perhaps serving as an early form of peripheral participation in the practice. Bloggging might thus be better understood not by comparing it to email or newsgroups, but to club sports or quilting groups.

¹We would like to stress that we do *not* intend to compare bloggging to use of marijuana. We take Becker's discussion of marijuana use as simply an illustration of a practice that an individual comes to engage in through participation with other practitioners.

Like Nardi et al. [4], we set out to investigate those issues using open-ended interviews, focusing on “ordinary” bloggers. We tried to talk to people at different stages of involvement in blogging: seasoned bloggers, recent newcomers, readers without their own blogs, “dropouts,” etc.

The study supported most of our hypotheses. We were surprised, however, by the *degree* to which real-life personal ties mattered.

RELATED WORK

The work of Howard Becker [1] and the literature of communities of practice (e.g. [3]) provided the theoretical basis for our work. We attempted to replicate (on a limited scale) some of the ethnographic work conducted in the tradition on communities of practice, such as Orr’s work on shared lore of Xerox technicians [5]. Our study complements prior work in this domain by considering the role of situated learning in a digital practice.

Within the literature of blogging, Bonnie Nardi and her students [4, 6] have investigated the motivation behind blogging through ethnographic interviews with bloggers. Nardi et al. [4] describe five principal motivations for blogging: keeping in touch with distant friends and relatives, expressing ideas to influence others, seeking feedback from an audience, “thinking by writing” and releasing emotional tension. While largely confirming these findings, our study focuses on how those motivations develop.

Gumbrecht [2] discusses the connection between bloggers and their audience, focusing on the role of comments, and argues that blogs constitute a sort of “protected space” for the authors. Our study confirms the importance of managing privacy, but stresses that this is an acquired skill.

METHOD

We started our investigation of blogs with a method that can be compared to participant observation, setting up our own blogs and starting to read other blogs, as we separately became interested in the topic. For one of us, experimentation with blogs preceded academic interest, for the other, the academic interest preceded experimentation. Both of us, however, had *fully public*² personal blogs for six months or more before starting the interviews. Maintaining our own blogs allowed us to experience first hand the excitement and anxiety that comes with presenting oneself in front of an unseen audience and helped us become fluent with blogging concepts before starting the interviews. While our own blogging experiences did not form the conclusions of this study, they were crucial in formulating the questions, and we thus see this as an important aspect of our method.

²The blogs were fully public in the sense that anyone searching for our names would find them. Therefore, we were not only experimenting with blogging tools but were exposing ourselves to the public in the same way as the subjects we later interviewed. Both blogs are still maintained: author2’s blog at <http://university.edu/> user is primarily dedicated to Author2’s academic interests, Author1’s blog at <http://author1.org/> is primarily a photoblog. Author2 reads a wide range of blogs on a daily basis.

Seeing the diversity of blogging practices, we concluded that sampling bloggers across practices and communities may lead to spurious conclusions, e.g. unwarranted comparisons between teenage users of LiveJournal and academic political bloggers. Instead, we decided to pick all of our informants from a particular real-world community that was known to us to have many bloggers and to interview many of its members. In that, our approach was similar to [4] who limited their study to bloggers at Stanford, though we chose a yet *smaller* community, which allowed us to talk to people who actually knew each other. Needless to say, the results of the study cannot be generalized to all bloggers.³

We interviewed nine people, all of whom were graduate students associated (to a various degree) with a research unit of a university, coming from two departments. Two of the participants were not affiliated with the center but were students in one of the participating departments. All participants were between 20 and 30 years old, all were comfortable with technology, all but one were men. Most of the subjects were acquainted with one of the two authors prior to the interviews.

While uniform demographically, our sample contained people with varying degree of engagement in blogging, from active bloggers to those members of the community who did not even read blogs. I.e., it was varied significantly along the dimension we wanted to explore. In that, our sample was different from Becker’s, whose subjects came from a variety of backgrounds and were all active marijuana users [1].

The interviews typically started with a discussion of the participant’s early experiences with blogs, which was usually one or two years back. For participants who had a blog at some point (or still did) we proceeded to a discussion of early experience of setting up the blog, focusing on decisions, motivations and doubts. We then discussed participant’s *recent* blogging practices and some of their recent posts. We usually concluded the interview talking about their recent *reading* practices. Naturally, the actual interview structure varied, given the open-ended approach and the diversity of the participants’ experiences.

Most of the interviews were conducted in April and May 2004. Several additional subjects were interviewed in November, at which point we also conducted follow-up interviews with some of the original participants.

OBSERVATIONS

When asked about their early encounters with blogs, most participants mention Slashdot⁴, albeit with hesitation. Slashdot, which is published in the same format as most blogs but presents links submitted by a large number of members and filtered by a group of editors, is seen as not quite a blog. The

Author1 checks friends’ blogs when he feels a need to procrastinate.

³In fact, we observed some difference between those of our participants who used LiveJournal and the rest of the bloggers. The small number of such participants did not allow us to explore those differences.

⁴<http://slashdot.org/>

participants highlight that Slashdot is not a *personal* blog, as it represents a community rather than an individual's point of view.

While most interviewees report being avid readers of Slashdot or other similar community sites⁵, *none* considered setting up their own site in a similar format as a result of such exposure. Instead, two scenarios were common. Some participants discovered personal blogs when their real-life friends started theirs and at this point at least considered starting a blog of their own. Others started thinking of setting up blogs after being exposed to personal blogs of stranger's on the web or to articles about blogging or blogging tools. At this point, several of them downloaded the software and set up their blogs. What's crucial, however, most of them soon gave up.

Blogging Together

Those who maintained their blogs stress the influence of real-life friends who had blogs before them. When asked why he started blogging, one participant replies emphatically with a single word – a name of one of his housemates. Another interviewee tells us:

When I really started reading blogs on a regular rate is when my friends [names], they started their own blogs. And I thought about it before they started. I played with the tools, posted stuff on my website... I thought about it and got lazy and never did it. But having my friends do it gave me the impetus... I already had been inclined to do it, and having my friends... It was like, oh, that's cool, we can all be bloggers together. It's definitely a community thing. It's like when you walk into some place that's new new to you, it's good to have someone... You don't show up as an island, you show up as a clique, so you don't feel alone... And I already had people who would comment, and we would track back...

The interviewee mentions both specific benefits of having friends among bloggers (e.g., having people who would read his comments and post on them), as well as a more ephemeral benefit of just not "showing up" by himself, but rather being able to rely on the support of his "clique." The role of friends was similarly stressed by most other participants. Of those who didn't blog, several reported thinking about it specifically due to seeing so many of their friends and colleagues engaging in blogging.

Real-life friends continued to play an important role after the initial introduction to blogging. Face-to-face conversations oriented attention to what was happening on the blogs. One participant says about a blogger he doesn't know personally:

The only reason I look at her blog more than once is probably because other people I know talk about her blog – like [fellow student].

⁵E.g. Metafilter (<http://www.metafilter.com/>) or Freshmeat (<http://freshmeat.net/>).

As a more extreme example of this, one participant reports reading his colleagues' blogs in order to be able to keep up with office conversations:

Just in case something flares up again, so that I don't get left out from the conversation that might happen in real time. Like what flared up with the [blog topic] thing, they were going back and forth. So it behooved me to look at it and know where they are, so that I wasn't totally lost when they started talking about it, since we sit in cubicles right across from each other.

Another participant talks about a conversation moving from the blog to face-to-face and back to the blog:

She posted that thing, I commented [on her blog], she responded [again on the blog], I responded. We might have gone another round. But then that night, ... we had a big long talk about it [offline]. And ended up achieving a kind of consensus. Then I went back and posted that last comment on that entry. And I was explicit: in case anyone is following this debate, [the other blogger] and I, we had a long talk about it last night and this is what we ended up with.

Crossovers between different digital spheres are also common: bloggers report getting email with suggestions for things to blog or continuing blog discussions over email.

Bloggers tell us that blogs allowed them to interact *in new ways* with their old friends, by sharing additional facets of their personality:

It revealed aspects of my personality to friends who may not have realized they were there. Though, everyone who knows me knows I am a little bizarre, so they probably weren't shocked too much by any of the bizarreness in the blog.

Since bloggers share their experiences with the world without targeting specific people, the readers are free to read as much or as little as they want, which gives the bloggers an opportunity to share *more* than they might with a captive audience. They can give their readers a chance to become more intimate, without forcing this intimacy on them. This role of the blog is confirmed by the readers.

Some of the participants later started reading blogs from outside their immediate circle of friends. The immediate community continued playing a crucial role, however, since participants encountered most new blogs via blogs of their friends or after hearing about them in face-to-face conversations. They commonly discovered new blogs by following links in their friends' posts, their blogrolls⁶ or in visitors' comments. Some of the participants highlight the importance of the implicit endorsement that their friends provided to those new websites. While our participants also got comments by people from outside their social network and oc-

⁶A list of links to blogs frequently read by the author of a given blog, often shown in a side panel.

asionally commented on blogs they stumbled upon, such encounters rarely led to a long term relationship.

Dealing with Exposure

While most bloggers name their friends when asked who they think reads their blog, most do not always say they write *for* their friends but often report writing either for themselves or for some generalized audience (“the Other”). With hesitation, one participant compares his blog to art when talking about the intended audience.

All interviewed bloggers understand the public exposure provided by the blogs. While some cite potential career benefits of getting their ideas out, most see it as risky, especially when talking about the possibility of their relatives or future employers seeing their blogs. Still, their feelings about this exposure are overall *positive*, even if conflicted. With enthusiasm, one participant tells us:

It shocks me!.. I am totally psyched that they read it... [It gives me] a weird feeling of trespass. I don't want to feel that way. A little tinge of trespass. I welcome them. But, it's such a new medium. It feels weird, my blog feels like my space.

Another participant talks about the blog as “an experiment,” a method of exploring public exposure. The bloggers also mention that the risk that comes with public exposure can be *managed* using a number of techniques.

Such descriptions contrast with the views of non-bloggers, who see wide exposure as an uncomfortable risk rather than an exciting opportunity to explore the boundary.

The non-bloggers in our sample also differ from bloggers in that they are not sure what they could contribute that would be interesting. One of the non-bloggers reports asking himself: “Should I blog? Do I have something to say?” Most bloggers feel confident that they do, citing the fact that other people, remote and near, read their blogs on a regular basis. This confidence appears to be *learned* while practicing blogging in a community. One participant talks about being impressed that people around him had so many interesting things to say on their blogs and deciding to start his own. He says that he doesn't yet know what he could put on it, but is hopeful, observing success of others.

DISCUSSION

The interviews contained endless examples of interdependence between real and digital interactions, as well as between personal and public ones. The real interactions appeared to be quite important in sustaining the digital ones, for both the readers and the bloggers. The readers reported going back to friends' blogs as a result of real-life conversations. Bloggers talked about the role of friends in getting them started and in supplying ideas for their blogs.

We thus see a dimension of sociality that is different from communication. Apart from being a means of communicating *between* friends, blogging can be seen as a creative acti-

vity practiced *together* with friends. In other words, we suggest that blogging is social not only in the same way as email or mailing lists, but also in the same way as quilting groups or club sports.

We also found evidence for the importance of acquiring the right “perceptions and judgments” [1]. In particular, it appears that developing a positive stance toward public exposure and defining oneself as someone who has interesting things to present on the internet are two important factors.

Those views seem to change over time. They appear to be first taken on faith from friends, with much hesitation. As the bloggers gain experience with the practice, they become more confident and eventually start introducing others to it.

Participation in the blogging practice does appear to start with reading friends blogs – a peripheral yet important role, which allows the novices to get involved in the communal practice without having to decide what to post or risking exposure. Starting a “linkblog” (a blog consisting mostly of links to other sites) is the common next step, which allows the novice to blog without the effort and the responsibility associated with publishing original content. Posting original material – the most “central” role in the blogging practice – typically comes at a later point and only for some of the bloggers.

FUTURE WORK

We want to conduct another round of this study with a larger and less technical community. We are also working on a survey instrument that would allow us to test some of those ideas with a larger sample.

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