

Communities of Blogging: Extensions of Our Identities

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Writing through a blog is a way of extending ourselves in a virtual world. Our identity is formed and molded as we unveil our thoughts and have others offer comments and feedback. The online environment has a direct impact in creating active social interactions to assist in defining our identity. Most blogs are a personal journal type of entry that deals with the personal experiences and reflections. Our concept of ourself is derived from a perceived membership in a particular blog through the deeper connectivity of the dialog. Most bloggers are under 30 and influenced by the postmodern philosophies. Some of these are discussed and parallels are made to bring more understanding of this fascination with the public broadcast of thoughts and feelings.

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Blogging is a popular social and cultural collection of thought and communication. It consists of a presence that is an expression of who we are, our identity. Culture attempts to adopt this technology across dimensions of life, such as personal and professional life. Dertouzos (1997) described it as a world of human-centric computing that will insinuate the lives of individuals in societies that have learned to accept technology. Blogging is a way of extending ourselves in a virtual world. We are virtually being broadcast through the ubiquitous platform of the Internet.

Our identity is so much more than one angle and one medium. It is being defined and shaped by the use of the tools that are in our hands. We are also characterized by the ways that others perceive us or categorize us. Some might consider this as a way of packaging ourselves. People today not only use the Internet more to interact to other people, but they also use it to socialize, to generate some lasting relationships, and even to develop a “real” social virtual life. (Nabeth, 2005) This digital identity - that represents how they are perceived in the online environment has a direct impact in enabling or preventing social interactions as well as the types of interaction. Identity can be more explicit (both real and fake) using blogs.

With the growing use of blogs, come complex social issues such as extended use, freedom of expression with no restriction, and the universal connections with others around the world. So then, if the web is the new cultural connecting place, how do we live in such a world? What kinds of people do we “meet” and interact with? What kinds of techniques can we use to relate to the world and communicate with the world effectively and with sincerity? How do we present ourselves differently from how we do face to face? The majority of blogs are of the personal journal type, which deals with the bloggers’ personal experiences and reflections; within this group, female and teenage bloggers are in the majority (Herring, Scheidt, et al., 2005; Schmidt, 2007). Each new technology seems to bring with it great concerns over the “pollution” of that technology or the transformation of our lives. We are infected by a mass process of creating and re-creating ourselves. We are even influenced by what others are saying and thinking and their presentation of themselves. The uniqueness that we express on the blog may be only part of us and a part that is not often “seen” any other place.

Transfer techniques of ideas

The information age has brought about a unique feature or personal publishing on the Internet. In many aspects the Internet speeds the production and dissemination of news and information. It is a transfer technique to share ideas. In the early days, a select few were given access to the ability to publish; now we have a wider audience to experience and reflect on each other’s ideas. People can read a variety of sources and create their own news for others to read. A transfer occurs as one decides to publish their thoughts and another reads them. It is not a total transfer as the receiver may only browse through the selection and not really process what is being read. But, the sender is taking thoughts from their mind and placing them into a wide open network for others to participate.

The idea of self-publishing especially through web pages and the popularity of blogging has put the determination of news and opinions into the hands of anyone with an Internet connection. Individuals are no longer limited or restricted by editor filters or time. The web brings a door that is open twenty four hours every day.

Some differences about blogging compared to the use of print include: no editors; large unrestricted audiences; ability to respond; type of media; ability to modify or delete words; timeless access. Blogging creates immediate access to thoughts and events.

Along with the interest in knowledge and information, groups are formed based on common interest and social need. Social communities are being formed daily. Rheingold (1993) defines online community as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on public discussion long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace”. These communities form over some very personal diaries posted on the web. This correlates with Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the need for love, belonging and social needs. People have a need to connect with others and share their lives. In a study about online communities (Ridings and Gefen, 2004) most people join online because they are searching for friendship as motivational forces.

Social identity is the individual's self-concept derived from perceived membership of social groups (Hogg & Vaughan, 2002). According to this theory, people form a social identity of values, attitudes and behavioral intentions from the ways they perceive and interpret other's thoughts. These can be both a real or predicted interpretation of events and interactions. The social identity becomes more pronounced as the membership and inclusiveness increases. Motivations for joining traditional or face-to-face groups can be applied toward a similar motivation in a virtual community.

A study presented at ACM by Backstrom et al. (2006), found that the propensity of individuals to join communities. The way communities grow rapidly depends in subtle ways of the underlying network structure. For example, the tendency of an individual to join a community is influenced not just by the number of friends he or she has within the community, but also crucially by how those friends are connected to one another.

Individuals are linked in an underlying social network, the groups and communities that they identify with can be thought of as corresponding to subplot of a story, growing and overlapping one another in a potentially complex fashion. A group that grows mainly through the aggressive recruitment of friends by other friends would appear as a subplot branches out rapidly over time along links in the network; a group in which the decision to join depends relatively little on the influence of friends might appear instead as a collection of small disconnected story lines that grows in a “sparsed” fashion. Motivation to be a part is to find a way into the lives of the participants and actually be part of the story.

What is a blog?

There are many ways to consider the term blog. Merriam-Webster's Dictionary declared "blog" as the word of the year in 2004. Most places describe a blog simply as a weblog. But, that also may be a bit confusing. Basically, it is a journal that is written and maintained online, over the Internet. The one characteristic about it is that it is frequently updated and open for the public to read. Individuals can easily make a blog and post entries without much difficulty. A person who does write on a blog is labeled a blogger. There are many terms that are associated with this whole concept and a vast array of topics.

Blogs are running conversations with threads that are topical connections between messages on a metaphorical bulletin board. They develop from a word or two with some semantic meaning to a portmanteau providing deeper more complex meaning. Each entry is crafted by an escriptionist who desires to share journal type entries.

A blog entry usually has some sort of title and date associated with it as well as a body of text. This text can be random thoughts, intense discussions, or just news. Those that read the blog can usually post a response to the blog and attempt to engage in further discourse. A blog can also have links included to direct others to sites or pictures to bring out points or share information.

Blogging background

Prior to blogs, people used such things as bulletin board systems (BBS) similar to chat rooms to have some closer to real-time discussions and share opinions. These were popular because of the ability to have a threaded discussion. One could read a comment and follow the responses. The topics were connected and easy to follow before moving on to the next subject matter. These are still used today.

Most blog sites have simple ads running on them, but most are free. By the year 2000, LiveJournal, Blogspot and Blogger were launched with great success. Many issues are brought to light or even just more deeply expressed through the blog. In some cases, blogs are used to communicate in the midst of tragedies such as Katrina hurricane and the tragic wild fires in southern California. The shaping of these stories give greater credibility to blogs as a medium of news dissemination. Though often seen as partisan gossips, bloggers sometimes lead the way in bringing key information to public light. This puts the mainstream media in the unusual position of reacting to news that bloggers generate.

Bloggers began to provide nearly-instant commentary on televised events, creating a secondary meaning of the word "blogging": to simultaneously transcribe and editorialize speeches and events shown on television. Real-time commentary is sometimes referred to as "liveblogging." In 2004, the role of blogs became increasingly mainstream. Anthologies of blog pieces reached print, and blogging personalities began appearing on radio and television. Some blogs were an important source of news in such instances as national emergencies and tragedies.

By the end of 2006, Technorati (technorati.com) states that there are over 70 million weblogs worldwide. The blogosphere has just about doubled in the past 6 months. Blog use grew from 35 to 75 million blogs in only 320 days. About 120,000 new weblogs are created each day. 17 posts are made every second. Even during the time you are reading this, much news has been posted. The question that remains is to what end is all this being presented? Or, even more perplexing is who has time to read and comment on expanding blog sprawl? It is estimated (Lenhart and Fox, 2006) that eight percent of Internet users keep a blog and thirty-nine percent of Internet users read blogs. Blogs are most popular (54%) with the youth that are under 30. The most popular reasons to blog are to express creativity and share personal experiences.

Types of Blogs and dynamics

There are some possible dynamics on the issue of how blogs become popular. Two measures consist of: popularity through citations as well as popularity through affiliation. The basic conclusion from studies of the structure of blogs is that while in order for a blog to become popular through blogrolls takes a fair amount of time, permalinks (a unique URL of a single post.) can accumulate more quickly, and are perhaps more indicative of popularity and authority than blogrolls, since they denote that people are actually reading the blog's content and deem it valuable or noteworthy in specific cases. A blogger will feature a list of their favorite blogs in the sidebar of their blog. Some types of blogs and uses of blogs have rapidly grown. Most blogs are subject oriented and rise in their use during top issues in the world or just interesting topics.

Postmodern and generational characteristics related to blogging

In the past two generations, X and Y, we have seen a greater use of the Internet and a comfort level with it. Generation X (1965-1976) and Y, the Millennials, (1977-1998) grew up with computers, but the Y'ers assume the use of technology. Technology has always been part of their lives, whether it's computers and the Internet or cell phones and text pagers. The popularity of Facebook and MySpace reveals the nature of this generation to openly share information about them to the world. They carefully construct themselves using the technologies. Millennials grew up seeing things as global, connected, and open for business 24/7.

Considering the generation that most uses the blogging world is under 30 and often labeled the postmodern generation, it is important to take note of some of the philosophical influences upon them. One is that they literally "construct" what they are thinking of as "real" in their everyday existence. Blogs provide a forum for creation of ideas. This is probably the most notable characteristic in a blog. Worlds are constructed and used to express opinions and way of life. The post-self world envisioned by postmodernists is being built one weblog at a time, eroding concepts of self and identity that have served many people well (Petric, 2004). Blogs are stories that are being constructed with many contributors creating new identities. The more who engage in the topic, the more robust the post on the blog. Each person can make up their own world full

of their own ideas and symbols. Even avatars are sometimes used to represent themselves.

Another point in this philosophy is that the sense of identity is a composite constructed by the forces of the surrounding culture. It is a "decentered" collection of unconscious and conscious beliefs, knowledge, and intuitions about oneself and the world. Most blogs are centered on a particular topic or genre. There is a sense of power given to the writer. Each owner of the blog has the "power" to create and to become the official owner and ruler of their domain.

Perhaps the most general characteristics of postmodernism are fragmentation and pluralism. In the postmodern worldview, transience, flux, and fragmentation describe the growing sense of how things really are. We see this played out in the blogs as they attempt to break down the parts and create new forms of expression. Individuals seek out community and cultural experiences that reaffirm their identity and bring focus. The lack of concrete answers causes us to reconsider and rebuild our network of thoughts and re-create our world.

Other cultural factors

At the level of the individual, there abides a sense of uncertainty about how to understand oneself; most people consciously search for a sense of identity--for who and what they are and for what significance and worth they have. Our media-generated, consumer culture daily offers us a thousand choices for who we should be like, what we should value, and how we can attain worth and significance. And, we take these images as a sense of individual reality.

Our social interactions shape and validate categories of our identity (Hecht, Jackson & Pitt, 2005). Specific identity is externalized through our interactions. In one layer of our identity, we store thoughts of our image and cognitions. In relationships, we allow other people to influence us. Memories are formed and lives intersect for new relational directions. The way we look and think is often transformed by the atmosphere we surround ourselves in. Those with influence and power bring their perspectives to the table for all to observe and taste. Once it is consumed others are able to reflect on the new flavor and embrace it or push it away. A blog opens doors for such dialog and identity forming.

Open doors of blogging

Our current technologies involve letting us communicate with much more ease and speed. Communities are being formed online at very rapid speeds and seem to be more defined than even our face-to-face communities because of the ubiquitous nature of the Web. Sociologist David Lyon(2001) notes that the rise of technologies like email, chat rooms and the world wide web has lead to the development of "excarnational" living. This is where our encounters with others become "mediated" through technology with the result that something of our humanity, be it body language or physical presence, is lost.

Yet at the same time technology poses the opportunity for people to build communities (or at least communicate) with others from many different locations. The consistent rise in the popularity of “blogging” would be an example of this. Both creative expression and the documentation of personal experiences are the predominant motivations for keeping a blog (Gumbrecht, 2004). It is a type of protected space that is open for others to view. In many ways, it is like the “open door” policy of letting others see inside our home or office without actually entering. Using online tools causes some people to self-disclose or act out more frequently or intensely than they would in person (Suler, 2004). There is a freedom that comes from being behind the computer and a connection. A sense of space is created that separates them from others and still enables them to reveal their inner thoughts.

Blogging future

With the boom in blogging of the past few years, tools have emerged to aggregate, analyze and manage information from the thousands of weblogs being updated every day. Sites such as bartleby.com and newsjunkie.info track which blogs are linking to which, and which links are being linked the most across all the blogs they track. Blog tools now come with built-in RSS feeds that allow readers to view blog posts how they want – stripped of all design, back to raw text, and aggregated with the latest posts from other blogs in a uniform newsreader format, creating in effect a personal daily newspaper of personal daily postings.

Collective blogs such as metafilter.com and tools such as del.icio.us allow readers to bypass personal idiosyncrasies and tap into the group-mind of the blogging community. The site flickr.com allows users to upload digital photos and share them with the world – and, more significantly, for readers to tag and recombine those photos in ways that neither the author nor anyone else can predict. A tool originally taken up by bloggers as a place to store photos for individual blogs has taken on a collective life of its own. "Tagging" is a term used to describe human indexing of material on the Web, which in theory makes content more intuitively found and shared. The idea behind tagging may be irresistibly simple, but its ramifications are enormous and complex. For more than a decade, the primary way to categorize and find information on the Internet was through the automated algorithms of search engines, a process at once laborious and highly imprecise. Tagging has quickly gained popularity because it allows human beings to bring intuitive organization to what otherwise would be largely anonymous entries in an endless sea of data. The practice brings a social context to such resources as blogs, shared bookmarking, photography and even books.

The folksonomic tagging is intended to make a body of information increasingly easy to search, discover, and navigate over time. This term coined by Thomas Vander Wal describes people who enjoy the social aspects of the system will gravitate to popular categories while still having the freedom to keep their own lists of tags.

Mashable is the world's largest blog focused exclusively on social networks. Mashable, a blog that tags itself with the line "social networking 2.0," has emerged as a leading source

for news and analysis of the hyperactively growing nebula of web products and services that fall loosely under the handle of "social media" or "web 2.0" (social networks to widgets to newly designed web communities to analysis of web start-ups and everything in between).

Shifts in Blogging

There are certain shifts in the engagement of people in the blog worlds. A blogger will step through these phases (joining, employing, transforming, settling, expanding) based on their interest in the topic or the person writing.

Joining: Applying to become a member either by responding to a blog or asking permission to post. What are the structural features that influence whether a given individual will join a particular group? In this case identity is a common decision for others to self organize and cluster together. Many blogs are very personal and discuss issues of the heart and personal concerns. Some people just create a blog to discuss what is going on in their lives and others read it as a story only occasionally commenting. Eventually, if enough content is of interest, they will join in on a regular basis and become part of this new community.

Employing: Over time individuals begin to develop in their comfort levels and involvement. Identity is developing. Each post represents a new aspect of thought and collectively the blog becomes a deposit of related topics. It is also important to look at the evolution of social networks based on intentional activity within a network. Backstrom, Huttenlocher and Kleinberg (2006) analyze group formation in large social networks. They used LiveJournal data from its ten million users and DBLP, a database of co-authorship in conference publications to study how the communities grew based on the underlying social networks. These networks are new and developing. People are more likely to join a social network if friends of the person were already closely linked together on it. The integration of networks from posts and announcements quickly alerts people to what is going on. Trust in a blogger is established over time with the accumulation of common friends.

In this corner of the blogging world people are becoming more of an established part of that blog and it just wouldn't have the same character without the input from others. This becomes a type of social network for the members where they can find weekly chats and discussions that are formed.

Transforming: Changes are processed and new patterns are established. A given group generally exists for one or more purposes at any point in time; in our datasets, for example, groups are focused on particular "topics of interest." How do such foci change over time, and how are these changes correlated with changes in the underlying set of group members? Identity is changing.

With enough time, the members actually feel it is important to contribute and be a part of the others' blogs who are logging in regularly. As users contribute they add value to the

post. Engagement is stimulated through the collaborative process (Rashid, 2006). The topics are driven by comments and transformed as people continue to contribute.

Settling: After time, members begin to form some level of community and settle on the “rules” and ways to contribute to what is going on. What are the structural and topical features that influence whether a given group will grow significantly (i.e. have regular contributors to the blog) over time? Identity is in habitation mode. People begin to find a type of home with this blog and a level of comfort.

Character is developed and trust is formed in the times of sharing. Others are let in to the discussion and a vital part. There is a building process going on that establishes the flavor of the blogs. It is no longer just the one who posts who is important, but the ones who add to the post. Bloggers who started their own blogs reported that they gained momentum when they realized others were actually reading their posts (Nardi et al. 2004).

Expanding: Moving beyond the one blog to others that are either listed or referenced in the blog. Identity is beyond the borders. The list of other blogs and links to other blogs lures the reader to find others in this community.

In this last mode, people not only regularly check the post of the one blog, but move on to the others who regularly post. The community has grown and the building is expanded to accommodate new thoughts.

Each of these provides examples of people shifting out of their local communities to find others via the blogs to engage in thoughts and share lives. It has become so popular that it becomes surreal at times when a face-to-face encounter is made with the people.

Conclusion

Blogs are here to bring individuals together and to form communities. System designers have attempted to modify construction and design so that the net is a social as well as informational technology resource. Today's technologies allow us to express a sense of belonging that all generations have always desired. The changing ways that members of this generation can learn, communicate and entertain themselves are a primary reason behind the viral popularity of socially oriented technologies such as blogs, wikis, tagging and instant messaging. Our identity becomes multiple communication productions with varied perspectives and integration of techniques.

The idea of the personal journal encourages individual to reveal themselves to a world of interested parties. Some may merely be stalkers who stumbled upon their blog while others may be interested in joining with the on their journey of revelation and ponderings. There is a certain sense of empowerment in revealing thoughts and feelings. It assumes that others are interested and that what they have to say is worthwhile to post. On the other hand, if the content of a blog is personal, candid, or intimate, it will bring people into a world that would have been unknown except to a few. We are able to create an expression of our self, our thoughts, and our desired image.

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