

The Blogosphere

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Introduction

I have introduced most of my lectures in recent years by claiming that I choose the subject for the current year by simply holding up my finger to the wind to sense what is new, and then talking about that. But this time it isn't the case. The truth is that I have been thinking about lecturing on blogging for several years. But for some reason, I couldn't ever think of a compelling way to talk about it; I couldn't think of any visually appealing way to present it – a fatal problem when you're giving a lecture; and finally, its overall significance wasn't very clear to me anyway. So every year I skipped over it and turned to some other hot topic.

But this year it finally caught up with me. A combination of events, sometimes well documented and understood, and sometimes much less so, has brought blogging to center stage in the world this year. And it has created one very big story that I will discuss later in this lecture.

Whatever the reasons, to put it bluntly: this year, blogging became too important for me to ignore.

The Origins of Blogging

Blogging as the concept of a kind of “electronic diary” existed well before the term was coined. You can read about the history of blogging in many places now and find out about the many pioneers, but I'll restrict myself to one whom I really did follow in the old days, and who was (and remains) quite a personality. The most famous trade journal in the early days of the personal computer was *Byte Magazine*. It started in 1975, truly at the dawn of the age of personal computing. I first became aware of it in the early 1980s when I began owning personal computers. In the beginning it seemed to be not much more than a catalog of advertisements for the many suppliers of micro-computing hardware and software. But somehow, it managed to grow into a respected trade journal that reached out beyond the hobbyist realm, and by the 1990s it was considered quite a coup to have an article published in *Byte*. I remember the fanfare surrounding the publication of an article by Unix pioneer Brian Kernighan, and I remember the pride with which a colleague in the European Space Agency published an article on software engineering standards there.

Along with all that, there was a monthly column written by a fellow named Jerry Pournelle, which was mostly about testing new products for personal computers, but which also included a bit of personal philosophy here and there. The odd thing was that Pournelle was not a computer scientist at all, but rather a writer – a science fiction

writer, and a well-known one to boot. His column was entitled “Chaos Manor,” and was a regular fixture in the magazine. In retrospect, Pournelle’s column has been acknowledged to be one of the first blogs ever.

The first blog to actually call itself a blog was started in 1994, by (of all things) a professor of forestry. That blog still exists today, by the way.

Why journalists blog

We are all sufficiently aware of blogs by now that I won’t waste much time explaining *what* they are in this lecture. Rather, I’ll spend some time trying to make sense of *why* people blog.

Let’s start with journalists. Journalists write serious things, thoughtful things, authoritative things. What could possibly interest them about blogging, which seems to be the exact opposite of serious, thoughtful, and authoritative writing?

Andrew Sullivan is both a blogger and a journalist. In an article in the *Atlantic Monthly* last November, he observed:

Blogging is ... to writing what extreme sports are to athletics: more free-form, more accident-prone, less formal, more alive. It is, in many ways, writing out loud.

So somehow blogging is exciting for serious journalists, too. But certainly it is less authoritative – or is it? Print journalism may *seem* more authoritative than blogging – after all, you assume that the sources have thoroughly been checked and screened and vetted by the writers, editors, and everyone else up the hierarchy. But in the end, you don’t really have access to the original source, and you have to take the author’s word for it. A blogger, however, can provide a link directly to his source, and that changes everything. The reader himself is invited into the editing process, checking the blogger’s sources together with him, and providing direct feedback through comments. As Sullivan notes:

[A blogger] is—more than any writer of the past—a node among other nodes, connected but unfinished without the links and the comments and the track-backs that make the blogosphere, at its best, a **conversation**, rather than a production.

It is inevitable that a blogger will be challenged by his readers, who often will know more about the subject he happens to be writing about than he does (more on that later). The way the ensuing conversation goes is crucial to the success of the blog.

[The blogger] is similar ... to the host of a dinner party. He can provoke discussion or take a position, even passionately, but he also must create an atmosphere in which others want to participate.

In other words, the success of the blog will depend primarily on the personality of the blogger himself. If he is expansive, inclusive, stimulating, the blog will flourish; if he takes offense easily or cannot bear being contradicted, things will finish quickly.

That means that, like it or not, you are going to reveal a lot about yourself as a blogger. The immediacy of blogging means that you simply don’t have the time, nor the backup editorial process at a journalistic operation, to guard against saying something too intimate or personal. You are caught up in the emotion of the moment, and off goes that emotion into cyberspace. This creates a feeling of intimacy with the readers of the blog, who feel they know you – and in a sense, they do, if they follow the blog regularly.

Sullivan quips that when readers of his blog meet him, they address him by his first name; but when readers of his printed journalism meet him, they address him formally as “Mr. Sullivan.”

Sullivan relates all this to the universe of blogs that is now known as the **blogosphere**.

Eight years ago, the blogosphere felt like a handful of individual cranks fighting with one another. Today, it feels like a universe of cranks, with vast, pulsating readerships, fighting with one another.

As the blogosphere grows, bloggers are linking to each other, in a rich mesh of interaction. They comment on each other’s commentary and vice versa, so that

There are times ... when a blogger feels less like a writer than an online disc jockey, mixing samples of tunes and generating new melodies through mashups while also making his own music. He is both artist and producer—and the beat always goes on.

Why Normal People Blog

After reading Sullivan’s essay, I can almost understand why a journalist would blog. But Sullivan is a professional. What about us normal folks? Why would any of *us* want to blog? Blogger Frank Paynter broadcast this question a few years ago to his circle of acquaintances in the blogging community and got back a lot of answers.

One of the answers, from “My Mother’s Kitchen Blog,” was reminiscent of something Andrew Sullivan had observed:

I see the blogging experience in a way that many women view the world. I remember sitting in the hallway floor as a kid, listening to my mother and her friends talk in this 1940’s kitchen. They would connect about everything over tea and sometimes a martini – their children, their husbands, Vietnam, politics, whether they should get a part-time job. They would chat about the neighbors, community support programs, family get-togethers, the church where they volunteered or the annoying woman in town who just joined their Bridge Club ... I think of my blog like I do my mother’s kitchen, which was warm and inviting.

Here, too, it is the blogger who creates the atmosphere that invites participation.

One blogger named Theo responded that he started blogging to help himself come out of drug addiction:

My purpose was to journal about my feelings and thoughts on a daily basis in order to aid in my recovery from drug addiction. Being an extrovert, having the possibility of someone else reading my ‘stuff’ helped me keep at it. ... It is sorta like having a conversation with others where my part is spoken and then “hangs around” for others to come, respond to, and move on. It is both timeless and personal in that way.

Once again, the idea of the blog as a conversation recurs. Phil Windley:

I blog to be part of a community of people whom I respect; I want to understand their thinking and I want them to understand mine. I blog to be part of the conversation.

Ray Sweatman had what was probably the most honest answer of all: “Jeez Frank, I don’t know why I get out of bed, much less blog.”

Microblogging

If you still find it rather incomprehensible why somebody would want to blog, I’ll go one step further and introduce you to something you are likely to find truly

incomprehensible: *microblogging*, also known as *moblogging* (as in “mobile blogging”). Microblogging is generally associated with the service called **Twitter** (as in birds). Twitter allows you to send messages to others on your social network. But here is the catch: no message may be longer than 140 letters. That’s not much. In fact, you might ask yourself, “What could I possibly tell anybody in only 140 letters.” It turns out that invariably what you’re telling somebody is simply what you are doing right now. That’s it. And so inevitably you are likely indeed to find yourself asking, “Why?” Why do I want to tell anybody what I’m doing right now? And who would want to know?

Let’s start with the first question. For most of us, the answer is usually simple: “I haven’t the slightest idea.” But for the younger set, there are apparently plenty of reasons. Last year a reporter from TIME Magazine asked a group in the 18 to 24 year old category and the responses he received included “It’s a great way to broadcast your stream of consciousness” and “It’s a more effective way of communicating with several people at once.”

And get this: although it used to be the younger set, now the largest demographic group of Twitter users is in the 35 to 44 year age range. Some more statistics: 63% of users are male. Well over half are from California alone (somehow that doesn’t surprise me). And many of these users are quite affluent, and tend to have left-leaning politics.

So is Twitter just a vehicle for a bunch of bored youngsters or idle rich to over-share their lives with others of a similar bent? It turns out that this too simplistic an analysis, and some very unexpected users are popping up in the Twitter landscape. Nicholas Kristof, the peripatetic *New York Times* reporter who spends a lot of time reporting from many of the poorest places on earth, is a Twitter user who allows readers to track his movements nearly live (“packing my suitcases frantically getting the family ready to go to Asia”), giving them a feeling of immediacy and participation.

If that isn’t surprising enough, consider this unlikely Twitter user: the U.S. Department of State. In an article entitled “A Tweet in Foggy Bottom” in the *Washington Post* last December, United States Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy Colleen Graffy observed:

Simply put, Twitter is just one more tool through which we can connect, and by linking my messages to video and photos, I can inform whole new audiences about U.S. views and ideas in a format with which they feel comfortable.

This is all part of a kind of Web 2.0 outreach program at the State Department called

... “Public Diplomacy 2.0,” social networking for State alumni, enhanced Web sites, blogs and Facebook pages for embassies ...

She illustrated the way this outreach program works by recounting her recent trips to Romania, Moldova, Iceland, Croatia and Armenia, which she twittered.

Communicating in this peppy, informal medium helped to personalize my visit and enhance my impact as a U.S. official. When I met with students at the University of Bucharest, and later with Moldovan bloggers, we were connected before I even arrived. One young Romanian student said: “We feel like we already know you – you are not some intimidating government official. We feel comfortable talking with you.”

Twitter is growing by leaps and bounds. In my profession of software engineering, members of the community (including me – yes, I twitter, too) are twittering with each

other about what they're up to each day, including complaining about computers breaking down, badly written software, interesting articles they have seen, etc. It's a constant hum of background conversation – and I suppose it really is like the incessant twittering of birds in the trees.

The End of Mainstream Media?

So where is all this leading to? Well, it's leading me, at least, to the *real* story now – the story that finally convinced me that I had to talk about the blogosphere this year: it is the story of the death of mainstream printed journalism.

But I'd like first to go back a couple of years to where many people say it all started. Dan Rather is a legendary American television reporter in the United States who also has a reputation as a rather macho, aggressive pursuer of journalistic scoops. Alongside his reporter duties on CBS news, he also spent a number of years on the show *60 Minutes*, which was famous for its scoops.

In 2004, during the presidential elections featuring candidates George Bush and John Kerry, Rather reported on *60 Minutes Wednesday* about Bush's military service back in the early 1970s. He displayed some documents in which Bush's commander, a certain Killian, in the Texas Air National Guard said some not-very-nice things about him. This caused an uproar, of course – but not in the way Rather expected. Within hours, bloggers all over the Internet began loudly challenging the authenticity of the documents.

Do you know what it was about the documents that made the bloggers suspicious? It was the fonts! That's right, the fonts: the character styles you choose on your word processors. *The fonts were too modern.* They weren't available to normal people like us in the early 1970s, with our clunky typewriters. They only became widely available in later years with the advent of personal computers and their word processing systems.

In the end, CBS was forced to retract the story, and Rather sued CBS for the humiliation he had suffered (I said he was a bit macho). In fairness, it was never formally proven that the documents were fakes, but CBS still had to admit that it had done a lousy job of vetting the documents and George Bush ended up winning the election.

This so-called “Killian Documents” episode is considered by many to be the big turning point for blogging – the moment in which blogging began to compete head-on with serious printed journalism.

The Citizen Journalist

For another example, consider the terrorist massacres in Mumbai last November as reported in the *New York Times*:

From his terrace on Colaba Causeway in south Mumbai, Arun Shanbhag saw the Taj Mahal Palace & Tower Hotel burn. He saw ambulances leave the Nariman House. **And he recorded every move on the Internet.** Mr. Shanbhag, who lives in Boston but happened to be in Mumbai when the attacks began on Wednesday, described the gunfire on his **Twitter** feed — the “thud, thud, thud” of shotguns and the short bursts of automatic weapons — and uploaded photos to his personal **blog**. “Mr. Shanbhag, an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School, said he had not heard the term **citizen journalism** until Thursday, but now he knows that is exactly what he was doing. “I felt I had a responsibility to share my view with the outside world,” Mr. Shanbhag said in an e-mail message on Saturday morning.

The idea of the blogger as a “citizen journalist” has transformed the way we see the news. As Kathleen Parker commented in the *Washington Post* on 2 January of this year,

One-fifth of the world's nearly 7 billion people are now Web-capable – all reporting, opining, interacting, twittering, digging and blogging.

Into this Web-powered brew of activity all over the world was stirred a series of events in 2008 – the American presidential elections, the above-mentioned terrorist attacks in Mumbai, and the economic meltdown – that conspired to create a kind of perfect storm, which enveloped mainstream printed media so violently that warnings of its imminent demise began to be sounded not only from the outside, but even from within its own ranks. The numbers are scary enough, alright. Writing in *The American*, James DeLong surveyed the situation at the beginning of this month (March 2009):

The New York Sun just folded, the Minneapolis Star-Tribune is in bankruptcy, the McClatchy chain has \$40 million in operating income per quarter and debt service of \$34 million, and the Seattle Post-Intelligencer is about to shut down or go online-only. For the first nine months of 2008, the Washington Post newspaper business lost \$178 million on \$600 million of revenue; the company is bailed out by its educational subsidiary and cable television. The rot has spread to the magazine business, too; a dozen big ones had ad page decreases of 20 percent or more last year.

What Business are Newspapers in, Anyway?

Can it really be true that “citizen journalists” are responsible for all this carnage? Is the blogosphere single-handedly killing off the printed journalism we have known and loved for all these hundreds of years? Certainly the blogosphere plays a role, but it’s not that simple. Much of the problem has to do with changing business models. DeLong writes entertainingly:

Speculation about the future of the newspaper or its equivalents should start with a review of the newspaper of the past. It was a brilliant blend of three things:

- Technological innovations—Cheap paper from wood pulp; the high speed rotary press that turned rolls of newsprint into 30,000 two-sided pages an hour; the linotype; a long-distance telecommunications system that was fast but too expensive for individuals to use.
- The nature of the newspaper itself—a cheap, portable, disposable, random access device that could serve as a platform for content of all kinds. **Think of it as 19th-century broadband.**
- The moat around content created partly by copyright law, but even more by the difficulty and cost of stealing it. No one could economically take and resell the product without a large-scale operation, which made any taker easily visible. Even after the invention of the copy machine it cost almost as much to copy a single article as to buy a whole paper. Copyright was important, but protection-via-technological impossibility was crucial.

But the advent of the Internet seems to have upended that business model. James Surowiecki observed in the *New Yorker* last December:

Papers now seem to be the equivalent of the railroads at the start of the twentieth century—a once-great business eclipsed by a new technology. In a famous 1960 article called “Marketing Myopia,” Theodore Levitt held up the railroads as a quintessential example of companies’ inability to adapt to changing circumstances. Levitt argued that a focus on products rather than on customers led the companies to misunderstand their core business. Had the bosses realized that they were in the transportation business, rather than the railroad business, they could have moved into trucking and air transport, rather than letting other companies dominate. By extension, many argue that if newspapers had understood they were in the information business, rather than the print business,

they would have adapted more quickly and more successfully to the Net.

That Levitt article is indeed famous. It's required reading in business schools, and is cited a lot in the computing industry – I first came upon a citation of that article in Andrew Tanenbaum's standard textbook on communications networks. It is also cited continually in other contexts where a new technology ushers in an entire new way of doing things – consider the Apple iPod and how, together with its iTunes music downloading service, it has revolutionized the way the music industry works.

But Surowiecki doesn't entirely accept the premise of the Levitt article as applied to newspapers. On the contrary, he argues that newspapers have become *more* popular than before due to the Internet. The real problem lies elsewhere, he thinks:

The peculiar fact about the current crisis is that even as big papers have become less profitable they've arguably become more popular. The blogosphere, much of which piggybacks on traditional journalism's content, has magnified the reach of newspapers, and although papers now face far more scrutiny, this is a kind of backhanded compliment to their continued relevance. Usually, when an industry runs into the kind of trouble that Levitt was talking about, it's because people are abandoning its products. But people don't use the *Times* less than they did a decade ago. They use it more. The difference is that today they don't have to pay for it. The real problem for newspapers, in other words, isn't the Internet; it's us. We want access to everything, we want it now, **and we want it for free**. That's a consumer's dream, but eventually it's going to collide with reality: if newspapers' profits vanish, so will their product.

He's right: we are reading the newspapers *more* than before – but we're reading them online. I read the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *San Francisco Chronicle* every single day – from the comfort of my home in Pisa, Italy. And I do it for free. When the *New York Times* attempted to launch a kind of premium service a couple of years ago where subscribers had to pay to read certain content (in particular, the columnists), nobody (including me) wanted to pay. They finally gave up, discontinuing the service and making its content free again.

Surowiecki ends his discussion on a relatively pessimistic note. He suggests that although printed newspapers may have a future, it's not likely to be a great one. If you can't pay the bills (e.g. with advertising), then you just can't go on, period – at least, not like before. He hypothesizes a day in the not so distant future in which even large American cities won't have their own daily newspapers, and those that remain are unlikely to be able to keep up the high quality, edited journalism of earlier times. After all, you get what you pay for.

Blogging and all that Jazz

But Surowiecki's bleak outlook is not shared by all. Oddly enough, one person who sees a bright future for printed newspapers is one of the most famous bloggers, to whom we were introduced at the beginning of this talk: Andrew Sullivan.

Sullivan compares the roles of printed media and blogging in journalism to the respective roles that formal composition and jazz have in music.

To use an obvious analogy, jazz entered our civilization much later than composed, formal music. But it hasn't replaced it; and no jazz musician would ever claim that it could. Jazz merely demands a different way of playing and listening, just as blogging requires a different mode of writing and reading. Jazz and blogging are intimate, improvisational, and individual—but also inherently collective. And the audience talks over both.

Why does the audience “talk over” both jazz and blogging? Because they’re irrelevant? No,

The reason they talk while listening, and comment or link while reading, is that they understand that this is a kind of music that needs to be engaged rather than merely absorbed. To listen to jazz as one would listen to an aria is to miss the point.

In other words, we are back to the idea of the **conversation**. Have you noticed the way that jazz musicians “converse” with each other during performance? They trade riffs, exchange roles, go off in new directions, etc. And that’s how blogging works – an ongoing conversation, dynamic, always evolving, never predictable. But that’s fundamentally different from the way you read carefully composed, edited journalism. And so Sullivan sees no reason to believe that printed journalism needs to disappear.

In fact, for all the intense gloom surrounding the newspaper and magazine business, this is actually a golden era for journalism. The blogosphere has added a whole new idiom to the act of writing and has introduced an entirely new generation to nonfiction. It has enabled writers to write out loud in ways never seen or understood before. And yet it has exposed a hunger and need for traditional writing that, in the age of television’s dominance, had seemed on the wane.

But we’ll always have Books ...

Then what is the final verdict on print versus online journalism? Will printed newspapers cease to exist in a decade or two like the pessimists think? As usual in my lectures, the best response I can trot out is the lame cliché, “Time will tell.”

Whatever the ultimate fate of printed journalism, however, we can rest easy in knowing that printed *books*, at least, will always be with us. As Sullivan notes,

Reading at a monitor, at a desk, or on an iPhone provokes a querulous, impatient, distracted attitude, a demand for instant, usable information, that is simply not conducive to opening a novel or a favorite magazine on the couch. **Reading on paper evokes a more relaxed and meditative response.** The message dictates the medium. And each medium has its place—as long as one is not mistaken for the other.

There’s something unique about reading a book on paper that simply cannot be replaced by electronic media, and never will be. Sure, you might be able to imagine reading the *San Francisco Chronicle* on a computer monitor (although it’s still not the same as curling up in bed with the paper version on a Sunday morning like my mother used to do); but could you possibly imagine reading one of those classic, epic novels like, say, *Anna Karenina* on an electronic screen? Unthinkable!

Except that last Christmas I received from a brother an Amazon Kindle – a device for reading books in electronic form. Its screen uses a technology known as “electronic paper,” which employs real ink in order to replicate the paper-reading experience. With this device (which has just appeared in a new version on the marketplace), Amazon hopes to replace all those printed books taking up space on your shelves.

As a matter of fact, over the past several days I have been curling up in bed every evening with my Kindle to read a novel. Its title: *Anna Karenina*.