

Webbloging: who, what and why

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Ioana Cărtărescu

Rezumat:

Trăim într-o lume modernă, care se schimbă repede și fiecare sector al vieții s-a modificat pentru a se adapta mai bine la această situație. Interacțiunea socială nu face distincție. O dată cu nașterea internetului, sute de milioane de oameni au început să formeze comunități online și să interacționeze prin intermediul noilor media. Una dintre cele mai populare mijloace de interacțiune este blog-ul. Acest articol caută să explice acest cuvânt care pare a fi pe buzele tuturor, "blog", caracteristicile celor care îl folosesc, motivele pe care le au pentru a întreprinde această activitate, precum și beneficiile pe care le obțin în urma acesteia. Ca multe fenomene noi, blogging-ul este un subiect controversat. În timp ce unii cred că este "a cincea stare", alții nu cred că este mai mult decât un jurnal public, un loc de discuții fără rost. Oriunde ar fi adevărul, nu putem ignora creșterea rapidă a blogosferei internaționale și numărul mare de oameni care se implică în această activitate. Din acest motiv, lucrarea de față pledează pentru ca cercetătorii sociali să nu ofere o importanță mică (așa cum au făcut până acum) unui fenomen în creștere care a devenit o parte a multor vieți și care, prin simplul acces la informație, ar putea în ultimă instanță să scrie un capitol important în domeniul interacțiunii sociale.

Cuvinte cheie: Comunitate online, comunicare online, blog, blogosferă, modernitate

Abstract:

We live in a modern fast-changing world and every sector of life has modified in order to better adapt to this situation. Social interaction is no exception. With the birth of the internet, hundreds of millions of people have begun to form online communities and to interact by means of this new media. One of the most popular form of online means of interaction is blogging. This paper seeks to shed some light upon this word that seems to be on everybody's lips nowadays, "blog", upon the characteristics of the ones who use it and the motives they have for doing so, the benefits they can obtain from this activity. Like many new phenomena, blogging is a controversial subject. While some believe it to be "the fifth estate", others don't think of it as being much more than a public journal, a place of pointless chit-chat. Wherever the truth may lie, one can not ignore the rapid growth of the international blogosphere and the massive numbers of people involved in it. That is why this paper is a plea for social scientists not to overlook or take lightly (as they have done so far) a growing phenomenon that has become a part of so many lives and which, by sheer accessibility, might ultimately write an important chapter in social interaction as we know it..

Keywords: online community, online communication, blog, blogosphere, modernity

When first created, the internet was meant to be a simple tool for rapidly exchanging information between remote locations. But it seems like just a few seconds later, people all over the world looked at this new invention and saw possibility well beyond its formal use. They quickly learned to operate it, made it user-friendly and started employing it on a world-wide scale for meeting new people whom they would never get a chance to meet face to face, for making new friends and for keeping in touch with the old ones, in short, for remote socializing. In the blink of an eye, a new type of community was born: the online community. Coming in many various shapes and sizes (discussion forums, blogs, role play sites, massive multiplayer online games and many more), this new form of community seems to have a few advantages over the offline kind. As a direct product of the Modern Age², it seems more fit to survive the blurry, ever-changing, fast-paced modern times. Where the old kind of community has shortcomings, since people became increasingly mobile, highly diverse and territorial proximity no longer connects them the way it used to, the online version provides a sense of stability and integration (it doesn't matter how much one travels, all he needs is an internet connection to take his friends with him everywhere). Also, online, one doesn't have to search very far for others with the same interests as his, there are millions of people who share them at the click of a button. If one fears that he may be rejected on account of his appearance, gender, race, social status or anything else that people can notice just by looking at him, he needn't worry about that on the internet. There, everyone starts out the same, with no gender, no appearance, no skin color, all that matters is what lies inside a person's mind. And this is no trivial matter, as prejudice is real and it can really hinder one's chances of getting into certain face-to-face communities (just imagine, for example, the chances of a poor gypsy woman of equally sharing a discussion table with rich and powerful Romanian men, even if she might have more insight on the matter at hand; if this doesn't seem enough, imagine a Muslim woman from a fundamentalist country exchanging her own political or religious views with the men).

Online communities may not provide the chance to look the others in the eye, like offline ones do, but they provide the rare opportunity of getting past the eyes and looking directly into one's mind and granting him respect and affection for who he truly is, not for who the others judge him by appearance to be. They give everyone the equal possibility of being part of them, their success depending only on the thoughts they share and the manner in which they decide to share them. When protected by anonymity, people tend to be more open about their views and reveal more about their inner selves than they might face to face, even if they might choose to embellish their appearance or their yearly income. And this type of honesty creates powerful bonds. Like Howard Rheingold says in his book, "The Virtual Community Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier", "*People in virtual communities use words on screens to exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games, flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk. People in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind. You can't kiss anybody and nobody can punch you in the nose, but a lot can happen between those boundaries.*" (Rheingold, 1993, p xvii)

Surely, I am not at all advocating replacing offline communities with online ones, but I believe the two can complete each other in offering the modern man a more active social life and

² As defined by Ulrich Beck - Beck, Ulrich and Beck-Gernsheim, Elisabeth, 2002. *Individualization – Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences*, London: SAGE

giving him the sense of integration he needs in a fast-changing world. After all, where traditional communities supply the warmth of touch and the comfort of physical closure, the online ones provide freedom from the constraints of space and time and an escape from one's skin-deep self.

Since analyzing online communities as a whole would be difficult, as they are so many and diverse, I will further talk about a particular, representative phenomenon, that currently has the whole world in a fever and presents a series of notable functions for the people involved in it: blogging. In order to better understand this, the paper will begin by providing a couple of definitions and a short history of this kind of site. Then I will present the profile of the blogger on a world-wide scale, which will later be compared with that of the Romanian one. In the end, I will attempt to reveal some of the functions this activity has for those who practice it and the benefits that can be obtained from it, in order to shed light upon their potential motivations.

We Blog

-Definition and short history of blogging-

The term "blog" is familiar today to most computer-literate persons. However, in the beginning, the term defining this sort of site was "weblog". As Dorina Guțu tells in her book, *New Media*, in 1999, Peter Manholz separated the word in „we blog”, due to its comical sound. Soon after, internet users renounced the „we” and simply started calling it „blog” (Merriam Webster's word of the year in 2004). But what is it that we **do** when we blog? According to Professor Guțu, a blog is „A web page with a constant, regulated and chronological series of posts or entries about a subject or a multitude of subjects.” (Guțu, 2007, p. 30). By James E. Katz's definition in the Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology, it is „a novel blending of diary and self-expression that erase the lines of public and private spheres” (Katz, Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology, 2006, p. 298). Although the most popular is the personal blog (where ordinary people write their day-to-day thoughts, opinions and activities), there are also professional blogs (for example, blogs made by journalists or politicians, to state their professional views) corporatist blogs (blogs created by companies in order to advertise their products, offer customer support and receive feedback) and more. However, this paper will mainly focus on the personal blog.

People have always written things for others to read, but what gives the blog its profoundly social character and the ability to create communities around it? Besides the ideas and thoughts of the actual blogger, this type of site allows the readers to respond to what they have read through comments they post below each of the author's entries, and he can start a dialogue with them. People will talk to each other and to the blogger, sometimes over thousands of posts, they will argue, take sides, explain, tell their own stories, get to know each other (most blogs have a stable number of „core” commentators). Furthermore, most blogs have links to other blogs that the author likes (a blogroll), so writers read each other, comment on each other's sites and refer each other to their readers, gaining popularity for their own site in the process, which leads to blogger communities (some of which even meet offline, hold blogging conventions etc). There is even a name for the totality of blogs in the world or a certain location: the bloggosphere.

Who is „We”?

-A blogger's portrait-

It is very true that indeed, *we blog*, or have started doing so in the past few years. According to Technorati's *State of the Bloggosphere* research, the number of such sites multiplied dramatically every year, going from a mere 2.000.000 in the whole world in 2003, to 35.000.000 in 2006 and 135.000.000 in 2008. That means we can estimate there are about 270.000.000 blogs out there as we speak. That is a very impressive number (it represents 12,5 times the population of Romania). In fact, it is so impressive that we can no longer postpone asking ourselves the question: "who are the bloggers? What are the characteristics of these people who could easily populate a country of their own?".

According to the research conducted by Technorati in 2008, on a sample of over 1000 bloggers, it turns out that this group is not a very homogenous one. However, the average blogger would most likely be a young male, with medium to high levels of income and a good level of education. The big surprise is that he would not necessarily be an English speaker, since in 2008, blogs written in Japanese were one percent more than those in English.

Worldwide, two thirds of the bloggers are male, to only a third female, the percent increasing in the case of Asian countries (73% male).

Where age is concerned, the writers of these sites are mainly young, but not teenagers, as some might have expected. The predominant age segment is 25-34 (36%), followed by 35-44 year olds (27%). The 18-24 segment, which are generally considered to be the computer wiz-kids, scored a mere 13%, only coming before the more technologically challenged 55+ age group, which is, as expected, the lowest represented segment (only 8% of the total).

Out of all the respondents, 51% have declared that the current one was not their first attempt at blogging, as each of them contributed, on average, to 4 blogs, with an average life span of 3 years each. Most of the people questioned write on personal blogs (79%), followed by professional (46%) and corporatist ones (12%). The reasons these percents don't add up to 100 is that many of the bloggers write on more than one kind of such site.

Despite the conception of some that on the internet, everyone chooses to hide or lie about their identity, most bloggers are open about this subject and even claim to have had to gain from confessing to who they are (1 out of 5 respondents says that he had at some point been interviewed on the radio or TV about his blog, fact which brought the writer publicity and exposure).

Although this phenomenon can be encountered everywhere where there is public access to computers and internet, the most popular language used for blogging has become, as of 2008, Japanese (37%), followed by English (36%) and Chinese (8%). The great surprise of 2008 was, however, the entering the top 10 of blogging languages of farsi, with an amazing 1%, considering the fact that this activity is considered subversive and frowned upon by the Iranian government.

Who are the Romanian bloggers?

Although Romanian blogging is not as prolific as in other parts of the world, we can encounter here as well a blooming bloggosphere, with certain similarities and particularities from the worldwide model. IT experts Carmen Holotescu and Cristian Manafu have concerned themselves with just that and made an analysis of the data obtained from the RoBloggers Survey, conducted in 2006 and in 2007, in order to identify the characteristics and trends of the phenomenon in our country.

It appears that Romanian blogging took off at about the same time when it boomed in most parts of the world, between 2005 and 2007. According to the research report, 18,5% of the subjects started their site in 2005 and 65,8% of them between 2006 and 2007. If in the beginning, in 2005, there were a mere 5000 blogs, the number rapidly grew to 100 000 in 2007. This seems like a rather small number in comparison with the world-wide 70.000.000 such sites that year, but it must be taken into consideration that Romanians do not have the same kind of access to computers and internet connections as other, more technologically developed countries do. A research conducted by the Institute for Quality of Life Research shows that in 2007, only 35.6 of large urban households had an internet connection, while an almost non-existing 2% of rural ones had access to the internet. Also, The tradition of online communities is still weak here in comparison with other countries (if Romanians only started forming online communities during the past few years, in the U.S.A there were already books and studies written on that subject as early as 1993, which means the reality had begun even earlier).

The first discrepancy between world-wide and Romanian bloggers is the main age segment. If for the former, the predominant age group is 25-34, for the latter, it is the 16-25 (may I remind you that the 18-24 segment was almost last in the world-wide statistics). That can be explained by the fact that computer and internet technology came later to this country and those who learned to master it the fastest and the best are those who were young enough to grow up with it.

Women are just as poorly represented in the Romanian bloggosphere as in the international one, but progress is being made in that direction: if in 2006, only a quarter of bloggers were female, the number grew to one third by 2007. Coincidentally or not, there is also movement initiated by the Hotcity magazine to promote these ladies and their sites. It consists of a banner that says "I support the feminine bloggosphere", which is displayed by interested writers on their sites.

Another important trend in local blogging is the growing in numbers and importance of province writers. If in 2006, they represented a minority (45%), by 2007 they have become the majority (52%), outnumbering the capital city bloggers. This is a good sign, as it shows that more and more people have access to internet and the new media each day, people from all over the country, not only privileged ones from the Capital.

A very important statement made by those interviewed by Holotescu and Manafu was, as 80.63% of them believed, that blogs can be as credible or even more credible than traditional media. That is very important, as the more credibility this form of communication gains, the more power its writers are going to have, at some point maybe becoming important voices in shaping the world around us. But credibility in Romania is tightly linked with the blogger's person, with what he does, what people know about him and how integer he is supposed to be and less with his actual competence to analyze certain situations (an "honorable" person, like a novel writer for example, will be more credible than a politician, who even though might be more informed in regards to certain events, he is thought to have more to gain by lying than the less informed writer). People with nothing particular to gain from taking a stand or another will be believed over those who are thought to stand to gain something and in the world of blogging, reputations are created hard and shattered easily.

Why do we blog?

-Potential functions of blogging-

As one could see, many people blog and now, some information has been revealed about their socio-demographic characteristics. So we know who they are and we know what it is they do, but one question still remains unanswered: why do they do it? What drives hundreds of millions of people to get behind their computers and create these sites, then invest time and energy in their upkeep and constant adding of new posts, on a daily or almost daily basis? This is the point where one must take a closer look at what it is that blogging can be used for by people, at those incentives it can bring that can get them addicted and make them want to continue their activity. It is time to take into consideration several potential functions of blogging.

⇒ *Blogging empowers and provides a certain status for its author*

The benefit I find the most important in what this activity is concerned is the fact that it gives every man, the power of the written word. Up to now, this power belonged to a select few, like writers, scientists or journalists, people with special studies. But through blogging, anyone who has something to say that is interesting enough to gain an audience can feel free to start communicating with this audience through his site and if the people respond to it, this audience will grow. The blogger's ideas and views on life have now a chance to be spread outside his own living room and close circle of friends and make themselves available to anyone interested in reading them. It is a little like having your own newspaper, minus the costs of production and distribution. People who have always felt they had something to say, but never quite had the means to reach others can now share their knowledge, their opinions, even their art and yesterday a nobody, one can today become famous, well-reputed, and loved on the internet and outside of it (many bloggers have been interviewed on TV or the radio and have been made part of public events because of the influence their site managed to gain).

⇒ *Blogging enriches one's social life and makes him part of a community*

When asked what is the greatest change that blogging, has brought to their lives, 67% of the respondents in the Technorati Research stated that they got to make new friends and communicate with many people which they did not know offline and 47% of them claim to have made friends which they later got to meet face to face. In fact, this seems to be the main reason they are doing this in the first place: to meet people, to help people, to move people. People are at the very center of blogging, they are the means and ends of this profoundly social activity, in more than just one way. After all, the first three reasons provided by the subjects for their activity are sharing their opinions on matters of interest (79%), sharing their expertise with others (73%) and meeting new

people and making new connections (62%). The blog is thus mostly used as a social tool which brings people together, according to their points of interests, lets them help each other and know each other, provide each other with much needed feedback, support and entertainment. People who think alike can find each other here and forge lasting friendships which can be then transported to the offline environment and people who disagree can exchange opinions, see problems in a different light, have good intellectual exercise by showing their arguments to one another. The blogger is the center of the action, but there is a whole world out there of readers who comment and argue, sometimes passionately, who develop true affection and admiration for the writer and for some of the people who comment on his posts. Blogs are a good place for mentalities, character and views on life to be revealed (even the most harmless of posts can sometimes stir a battle of wits) and thus, a very good place to find true and lasting friendships.

⇒ *Blogging provides assistance in education for the young and the old alike*

There are so many educational blogs on so many topics that it is quite useless to stress on the role these could play in the education of children. It is understood that children can indeed benefit from reading a science blog, for example, and having the opportunity to ask the writer questions or post ideas or thoughts on the subject in comments. It is truly valuable that students have the chance to communicate with experts via blogs and take an active part in their expertise (it is not the same for one to read a text and draw whatever conclusions he can, as it is to be able to communicate with the author directly and get feedback from him).

However, instructing young students is not where the blog's aid in education ends. In fact, doctor Nicole Hoffman, lector in adult education and vocational training at the Koblenz-Landau and Flensburg Universities in Germany, shows the importance of this form of communication in educating grown people in her article, "*1% technology – 99% communication*" *Blogs in the Adult Education Domain* (2007). In this study, she talks about four categories of such sites: 1. blogs as forums for acquiring information or discussing about adult education or the continuation of one's studies; 2. teaching blogs for adult education instructors; 3. blogs for sharing personal experience on learning at a mature age; 4. blogs as forums for considerations upon the use of knowledge and media in society. The advantages of these sites are that they offer, in a free and easy to use manner, information about what, where and under what circumstances one can study as an adult, the impressions and experience of other users on this kind of learning or on certain institutions which offer such courses, and not least, the feeling of being part of a group of adults who have decided to continue their studies. The feeling of not being alone in the process of adult education is quite important, as many mature people feel embarrassed to become students again, at an older age.

⇒ *Blogging can provide financial gain*

Although most bloggers are not purposely looking to make a profit out of their activity, it can bring them some economical advantages, beside the earlier mentioned social ones. If a blog has enough readers, companies may contact the writer for permission to place their advertisements on his site, in the form of banners, links etc and for this, they will pay a certain amount, proportional to the number of times the site is being accessed daily. Also, if the writer has his own products or services to sell, he can use his blog to advertise them directly.

According to the Technorati 2008 research, a blogger interested in making a profit makes, on average, \$ 6000 a year out of publicity, but top bloggers can make as much as \$200 000. On an average, Europe is the leader in advertising income (writers making \$9000 a year), followed by Asia (\$7500 a year) and on the last place, the U.S.A, with a mere \$5000 a year. However, the U.S.A. compensates by being the country where one can find the highest level of income earned from blogging (\$350 000 per year).

No matter how large or small the income from blogging is, it is some welcome extra cash that can be made from an enjoyable activity that would be practiced anyway in most cases, as leisure.

Limitations

The first notable limitation that comes to mind at a glance is the rather small, non-representative sample of people used in the Technorati State of the Bloggosphere research. When talking about some tens of millions of bloggers or more, a sample of over a thousand is almost insignificant, especially taking into consideration that these people volunteered to answer the questions and were not methodically selected. The same can be said about the RoBloggers Survey analyzed by Holotescu and Manafu. Only a small portion of volunteer Romanian bloggers were included in the data base. However, limited as this information might be, it gives some notion of what the blogging world might look like and it also stresses the need for a more ample, more thorough research to be conducted on the subject, both on a world-wide and on a national scale.

There are, of course, other characteristics and functions of blogging which I have left out, but I chose to avoid getting lost in the details and only followed the most important, most visible ones, especially since secondary functions can usually be subordinated to one of the previously mentioned categories.

Conclusion

Blogging is a new tool for serving age-old needs. It can comprise within itself, at the same time, a means of making a name for one's self, a power of forming connections, a cure for loneliness and boredom, a way of becoming socially involved, access to information and a way of making some extra money. It is no surprise tens, maybe hundreds of millions of people were eager to be a part of it. And when it comes to a phenomenon of these proportions, one that is quickly gaining the power to reshape the world, it cannot, it must not be left unstudied. Were it any other activity practiced by this many people, as trivial as attending a sports game or as dramatic as committing suicide, there would now be volumes written about it. However, it is difficult to come across reliable information and statistics about blogging and Romanian researchers have only very recently discovered this subject. Little is known in Romania about the online society, about those who are a part of it, about what drives them and how they benefit from it.

There are, of course, many who don't believe blogging is anything more than a waste of time and a means for egocentric personalities to exhibit themselves. And that may, in some cases be true. However, bloggers seem to believe that their sites bring them some real benefits and satisfactions, and these are even quantifiable sometimes (e.g. financial gain, receiving a job on account of online popularity etc). The fact that they believe that, be it true or not, makes further investigations in the matter justifiable and their large and growing numbers makes it even necessary. Blogging may prove itself to be a lasting, powerful form of expression or a fleeting fad, but the fact of the matter is that it is here right now, it is a product of our times and no matter what the conclusions of studying it might be, it has earned its place in the history of modern communication and should be granted the attention of modern research.

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