
From the Personal to the Profound: Understanding the Blog Life Cycle

David Gurzick

UMBC
Dept. of Information Systems
1000 Hilltop Circle, ITE 404
Baltimore, MD 21250 USA
gurzick1@umbc.edu

Wayne G. Lutters

UMBC
Dept. of Information Systems
1000 Hilltop Circle, ITE 404
Baltimore, MD 21250 USA
lutters@umbc.edu

Abstract

This ongoing research project investigates the changes that occur to weblogs (blogs) throughout their lifespan. It examines both the markers that indicate a particular phase of its existence in our emerging life cycle model and the drivers that move the community through those cycles. Emphasis is placed on identifying likely causes for abandonment at each phase. Implications of this research are both social, promoting the health of the blogosphere in general, and technical, appropriately mapping tools to correct life cycle stages.

Keywords

Computer mediated communication (CMC), weblogs, blogs, life cycle models

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction

A weblog (blog) is a simplified form of web publishing that allows anyone with a computer and Internet connection to post content online. Spurred on by attention from the media and popular press, the phenomenon of blogging is rapidly growing in popularity.

Copyright is held by the author/owner(s).

CHI 2006, April 22–27, 2006, Montreal, Québec, Canada

ACM 1-59593-298-4/06/0004.

A 2004 interview with Joichi Ito, General Manager of International Operations for Technorati (a blog aggregation and search engine), provides insight into the dramatic proliferation of blogs [16]. In the interview he notes that, “our statistics show that there is a new Web log created every 5.8 seconds and that the rate of increase is accelerating”. As of January 2006, Technorati is cataloging approximately 24.5 million blogs [15].

Recently, researchers with the Pew Internet and American Life Project stated that some 16% of U.S. adults read blogs [13]. Most likely the actual number of blog readers is even higher as the same study admits that, “only 38% of all internet users know what a blog is”. The majority of blog readers probably do not realize that they are reading blogs. And why should they? To the untrained eye, a blog appears just like any other website. It presents content with links, pictures, and stories.

But blogs are unlike traditional websites. As noted by Rebecca Blood, “almost all weblogs are non-commercial ventures: they don’t make money for their maintainers, and in fact probably even cost them a little” [2]. Most blogs contain personal stories or other elements of the author’s life. Even when these features are missing, the author’s personality manifests itself through their choice of content and style of its presentation. There are those who use blogging software only to simplify the creation of a site for a business. However, this static use breaks from the traditional reverse-chronological posting format found in the typical blog.

These differences, coupled with the runaway growth of the blogosphere, have drawn the attention of the

research community and much work is being done to understand blogs both from a technical (systems) and social (behavior) perspective. Large samples of blogs have been analyzed to explore the ways blogs connect with each other [6, 7] and to examine how information travels through the blogosphere [3]. Further work has provided descriptive statistics of blogger demographics and of the types of content prevalent in blogs [5].

On the social side, research has yielded insight into the reasons that people blog [4, 10, 11], the nuances of conversations occurring within the blogosphere [8], and the nature and content of blog posts [1].

Yet in as much as we understand the changing dynamics of the blogosphere as a whole, little is known about the progression an individual blog makes from its inception to its eventual demise. Curiously, two thirds of blogs are reported to have been abandoned in as little as two months after their creation [12] (a related study of the blogs in the livejournal blogging engine estimates this at closer to one half of all blogs[17]).

More interesting still is that these blogs were abandoned across a wide range of timeframes. Though the majority of blogs were abandoned within a few days of being established, the blogs that received posts beyond their start date averaged a lifespan of 126 days. A large number of blogs survived over a year with, “the oldest abandoned blog surveyed [having] been maintained for 923 days” [12].

Study and Design

Why do blogs die? Could a more thorough understanding of the circumstances under which a blog

might die offer insight into potential social or technical interventions?

A maximally diverse sample of bloggers was recruited to help uncover the conditions that might affect a blog's health. The bloggers were discovered by following the random blog links at Blogger.com, Blogarama.com, and BlogExplosion.com. Blogger is a blogging engine and includes its users in the pool of random blogs unless they opt out by modifying their settings after creation. Blogarama and BlogExplosion are directory services where owners can list the web URL to their blogs, regardless of the blogging engine they use.

Those bloggers that provided an email address within their blog were sent an initial email asking for their participation and to ensure that they were 18 or older, an Institutional Review Board stipulation. From those responding, we sampled 15 bloggers, representing 14 separate blogs. (Two of the participants shared coauthorship of a single blog and were interviewed at the same time.)

Individual diversity within the sample was high. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 54 and were located throughout the US (with locations mirroring the states with large blogging communities [7]). Nine females and six males were included in the study.

The majority of participant blogs were used as personal journals and as platforms for commentary and opinions [11]. One blog in the study was used as a community forum and two bloggers described marketing their business as the principle reason for maintaining their blogs. The blogs varied in age from two months to over four years.

The interviews were semi-structured, allowing the study participants a more open, conversational style while addressing a fixed set of questions. All interviews were conducted over the telephone and were audio recorded with permission from the interviewee.

During the interviews, the participants were asked a series of open ended questions to ascertain their motivation for blogging, to learn about the blogging experiences they have had, and to understand their perceptions and expectations of three common blogging activities: posting on their own blog, receiving feedback on these posts, and commenting on blogs under different ownership. We also inquired into the changes that have occurred over time to their own blogs and what they have witnessed in other blogs that they read. Finally, each participant was asked about other areas of personal presence they maintain online. Basic demographic information was collected last.

The interviews were analyzed using standard qualitative open coding techniques [14]. Further analysis was conducted on the blogs the participants maintained; this served the dual purpose of corroborating the interviews through data triangulation and for substantiating the themes that emerged during interview coding.

A Blog Life Cycle

Interviews with bloggers and textual analysis of their blogs indicate that over time, a typical blog undergoes significant changes. Alterations to the frequency and content of posts, along with changes in the readership of a site provide evidence of this metamorphosis.

An instant messaging maturity model, presented by Muller et al., described multiple stages of business IM adoption typified by changes in user behavior, attitude, and patterns of usage [9]. Our investigation follows a similar course and offers an emergent framework for classifying the stages of the blog life cycle. We sought to identify the markers that would indicate a blog was at a particular stage and the drivers that would cause a blog to move from one stage to another.

Four main stages in the blog life cycle are identified in this preliminary research. The individualistic nature of blogging makes it likely that other stages exist and that no single model could adequately represent the entirety of the blogosphere.

Stage 1 – Non-directed, Personal Storage

A blog provides a quick and simple way to post content online that is available anywhere there is access to the Internet. Often, when it has just been created, the ease of posting leads it to be used simply as a mechanism for storing items of interest found online. This can include images, files, links to other sites, and whole sections of web pages that are copied and saved to the blog.

Blogs in the first stage seldom have blogrolls, profiles, or other hallmarks of a traditional weblog. Visual customization ranges from minimal to non-existent with the look of the blog normally following a standard template option. Formatting of individual posts is also limited and likely results from a lack of experience with the tool. The use of the blog primarily for self reference may contribute to this lack of formatting as well.

Stage 2 – Growth and Aggregation

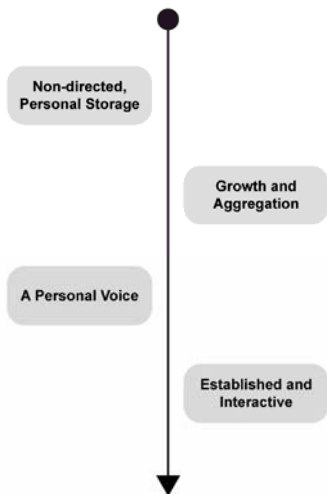
During the second stage the blogger either has yet to attract readers to the site or has no mechanism by which to monitor their readership. Often this is from an inability to monitor site traffic or receive interaction from readers (such as a commenting system or a listed email or instant messaging address). “For the most part I don't really know who I'm writing for,” as told by a participant in our study.

Without knowing the makeup or desires of their audience, these bloggers place high importance on the frequency of posting, often assuming that their readership is motivated by the number of posts they create. This need to post frequently leads to the use of easy to create material such as online quiz results, movie reviews, or what one blogger called, “prefabricated content.” An abundance of, “what I had for lunch today,” posts are typical.

Stage 3 – A Personal Voice

Several transitions occur as more experience is gained in the art of blogging. The content of a blog begins to take on more of its author's personality. Content that is original to the blogger begins to take precedence over content from a third party. According to a participant in the study:

“For the first year so I was posting a lot of quiz results. I'm sure you've seen them, like ‘what kind of cereal flavor are you?’ ... silly things like that that have really no fundamental value ... and then I would also answer writing prompts which were similar but you kind of had to think a little more than just clicking buttons and then I have pretty much shifted away from this



Preliminary Blog Life Cycle Model

completely so now any content I write is on a subject I thought up rather than a writing prompt”

At this stage the blogger is beginning to learn about the nature of their audience. This newfound understanding promotes the posting of content deemed more applicable to their readers. One blogger commented on this choice of content by saying,

“On the other hand, people do read me on a daily basis so I should try and write something that’s more palatable to them.”

Another participant expressed similar feelings, as the content of her blog morphed to cater to her audience.

“If my audience were strictly my friends I might be more conversational and more chatty, but I try to keep it at a reasonably intelligent level because I know that there are there people that are out there that are reading it and not saying anything.”

From a technical perspective, commenting systems are widespread, with most bloggers using a form of authentication to prevent their misuse. Equally prevalent are Blogrolls (lists of links to other blogs) and the use of programs that provide statistics on the site’s visitors.

Stage 4 – Established and Interactive

The change from posting content for a particular audience to the direct engagement of its readers classifies the final stage in the blog life cycle. Content is posted to interact with readers, to elicit responses, and

to form relationships in, “the give and take” that occurs when the blogger is communicating directly with their audience. Likewise, blogs at this level are more often known to their readers by the persona of the blogger as opposed to specific content they have posted.

A considerable amount of attention is given to the way the blog is presented. Efforts are made to customize its appearance and may even necessitate the transfer of the site from one blog engine to another. A participant described this importance of design:

“I think that actually the design is the key, not that the design makes the blog better by itself in that respect, but once you settle on the way the blog looks, then you are more comfortable with it and you can start being more yourself.”

Death

Though a blog can die at any point, there is indication that the reasons for abandonment differ according to their life cycle stage. In the early stages, the discovery of other tools that mirror common functions performed through blogs, such as photo-sharing and social book-marking sites, is a common reason for blog desertion. External events, including changes in the blogger’s employment or family, correspond more to the reasons for abandonment during later life cycle stages.

Implications

A better understanding of the markers and drivers in the life of a blog can inform both technical and social interventions which may lead a reduction in the number of blogs abandoned by directing the efforts of the blog tool providers to create better and more appropriate tools. For example.

- For the designers and developers of blogging software, an understanding of the issues faced by blogs at the different stages in their life cycle will allow them to develop tools that cater to the specific needs of bloggers in particular stages.
- The owners of blogging platforms will be able to more effectively monitor blogs for their health, offer assistance to help with their growth, and provide triage to prevent abandonment.
- Knowledge of the events and changes that occur to a blog throughout its life cycle will help researchers to anticipate the future ways that blogs will develop and proactively support these changes.

Future Research

This current model for a blog life cycle is based on our preliminary investigation of bloggers through interviews and analysis of the blogs they maintain. Future work looks to expand on these observations by conducting a similar analysis on a larger, more diversified sample of bloggers. Specific attention will be devoted to discovering the issues that may lead to the abandonment of a blog at each life cycle stage.

Following a refinement of the model with new data, we will transition from an inductive to a more deductive analytic approach to test the explanatory power of the resultant model.

References

- [1] Bar-Ilan, J. *An outsider's view on "topic-oriented blogging"*. in *Proc. of Intl. World Wide Web Conf.* 2004: ACM Press.
- [2] Blood, R., *We've got blog - how weblogs are changing our culture*, ed. J. Rodzvilla. 2002, Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing.
- [3] Gruhl, D., et al., *Information diffusion through blogspace*. SIGKDD Explor. Newsl., 2004. 6(2): p. 43-52.
- [4] Gumbrecht, M. *Blogs as "Protected" Space*. in *World Wide Web*. 2004: ACM Press.
- [5] Herring, S., et al. *Bridging the Gap: A Genre Analysis of Weblogs*. in *Proc. of HICSS*. 2004.
- [6] Herring, S.C., et al. *Conversations in the Blogosphere: An Analysis "From the Bottom Up"*. in *Proc. of HICSS*. 2005.
- [7] Kumar, R., et al., *Structure and Evolution of Blogspace*. Commun. ACM, 2004. 47(12): p. 35-39.
- [8] Lilia, E. and M. Aldo de, *Beyond Personal Webpublishing: An Exploratory Study of Conversational Blogging Practices*. in *Proc. of HICSS*. 2005
- [9] Muller, M.J., et al., *Introducing chat into business organizations: toward an instant messaging maturity model*. in *Proc. of SIGGROUP*. 2003: ACM Press. 50-57.
- [10] Nardi, B.A., D.J. Schiano, and M. Gumbrecht. *Blogging as social activity, or, would you let 900 million people read your diary?* in *Proc. of CSCW*. 2004: ACM Press.
- [11] Nardi, B.A., et al., *Why we blog*. Commun. ACM, 2004. 47(12): p. 41-46.
- [12] Perseus, *The Blogging Iceberg*. <<http://www.perseus.com/blogsurvey/>>. 2004.
- [13] Rainie, L., *New data on blogs and blogging*. 2005, Pew Internet.
- [14] Strauss, A. and J. Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research*. 2nd ed. 1998: SAGE Publications. 312.
- [15] Technorati, <http://www.technorati.com>. 2006.
- [16] Ubiquity, s., *The world wide blog*. Ubiquity, 2004. 5(25): p. 1-1.
- [17] Venolia, G., *A Matter of Life or Death: Modeling Blog Mortality*, Microsoft Research. Available at <http://research.microsoft.com/~ginav/ljmodeling.pdf>