Weblogs: A New Phenomenon?

Introduction

Weblogs and weblogging have been with us for over four years with significant growth rates and much media attention. Many new media commentators see weblogs as a significant development as a online medium. In my essay I have attempted to examine the significance of weblogs in two ways, firstly the idea that weblogs are more than just re-purposing of existing technology that some sceptics believe - more specifically comparing the attributes of weblogs with the personal home page format. Secondly taking on board Lev Manovich's views of information behaviours. Weblogs can be seen as being a new 'information behaviour' for the Web where filtering links and providing personal commentary is important.

The growth of weblogs

Web pages using a specific format has somewhat surprisingly attracted much attention from new media commentators since around 1999. These Web pages are known as 'weblogs' (later shortened to 'blogs'), pages that are frequently updated with entries placed at the top of the page [BR2002]. Entries range from interesting links with personal commentary(filter-style) to personal perspectives on anything that interests the author from a comment on a news article to things happening in the authors lives(journal style), but they are usually based around a core theme. From the few dozen weblogs at the beginning of 1999 created by expert Web users who knew how to program to the current estimated hundreds of thousands weblogs [BL2003] their rise has been significant and notable. The growth of weblogs is widely attributed to the availability of easy to use Web based tools. Rebecca Blood comments that tools like Pitas and Blogger [TO] "remove that final little barrier" [GD2000]. Now anyone who was familiar with Web based email accounts could create their own weblog. Due to the unrestrictive nature of the tools, filter based weblogs moved towards the journal style weblogs.

Weblogs are rapidly moving into the mainstream, they are influencing news items [BO2002], being discussed as a new form of journalism [LJ2001], forming communities and are portrayed as 'The next big thing', not just for aspiring writers but also in a business [MJ2003] and education [WBE] environments. Some webloggers have even attained celebrity like status [WE]. Although initially seen as a fad that would gradually disappear, weblogs have remarkably outlived many high-profile Internet companies and sustained a growth rate that many would be envious of. Books and research articles published on weblogs are only

starting to appear. The increasing significance of weblogging as part of the Web is perhaps highlighted by the recent acquisition of Blogger by the popular search engine Google[GO2003].

Just as there are those who champion weblogs the growing number of sceptics cannot be ignored. John Grohol a psychologist has been writing about weblogs since 1998. Although he does find the format of a weblog "unique and worth noting", in a recent essay he says:

> "The content and purpose of a blog is no different than a Web page, a Usenet discussion group, a mailing list or anything else adapted to a specific purpose."
>
> *John Grohol* [GJ2002]

His point establishes a question to identify what purpose the weblog serves as a new online medium. As Grohol goes on to question "do blogs add something better or more unique to this online conversation?". Grohol is not convinced that they do and suggests commentators have a selective blindness ignoring many of the mediums that precede Weblogs still in existence, in particular Usenet newsgroups. There is not enough space to compare weblogs with all the different online mediums so my focus will be on personal home pages - what could be considered the closest relative to the weblog pages (Derek Powazek writes 'mostly weblogs became the new home pages' [PW2000]) - in order to form a grounding to answer Grohol's question.

Home pages and weblog interchangability

If we first consider these two quotes :

> "They have personality. Simply put they are an interactive extension of who you are."
>
> *Cameron Barrett* [BC1999]

> "A website produced by an individual which is centred around the personality and identity of the author"
>
> *Charles Cheung* [CC2000]

The first is describing weblogs and the second describes home pages. Without knowing the context, it would be entirely feasible to think that Barrett was talking about home pages and Cheung about weblogs. This is partly the point Grohol makes, the similarities between weblogs and other online mediums are too close for comfort. Certainly from my own experience the building blocks and technical aspects of building a home page and weblog are identical - HTML and style sheets are written to define the layout of the page; Forms for feedback and comments require programs to be written to process them; Images and file formats remain the same. Having said that I have found Weblog programs and websites

make it a lot easier and convenient to add new content to your site but it could be argued that updating your Geocities/Tripod[GT] homepage is just as easy using the tools that are provided. Marshall McLuhan referred to technologies as 'extensions of man' [MM] and in both home pages and weblogs this is true. Grohol also identifies that the growth of weblogs mirrors the growth of home pages when the easy to use tools became available to everyone [GJ2002]. It would be unfruitful if this essay just focused on the technological aspects of weblogs. I feel that the important differences of weblogs are more subtle than the confines of a particular layout, technology or tool and we need to examine the differences on another level.

The idea of personality and hypertext links are often seen as being the makings of a good weblog as webloggers like Bridgitte Eaton will tell you [RJ1999]. Again are these not also the important qualities of a home page too? In Daniel Chandler's essay 'Personal Home Pages and the Construction of Identities on the Web' [CD1998], Chandler says "the one unifying feature underlying the content of [home] pages is the unspoken question: 'Who am I?'". This identity creation happens in all online mediums - synchronous(MUD's, chat rooms) and asynchronous(email, newsgroups) and in real life situations whether we are aware of it or not and is has been written about extensively by people like Turkle[TS] and Goffman[GE1959]. The overall aim is to "present themselves as an acceptable person"[MH1995] in interactions. Personality is a key part of identity forming.

In home pages the author explicitly publishes an impression of themselves for the entire world to see. This impression will have been carefully prepared and honed to ensure that the presentation is acceptable. Everything from the style of writing, layout, choice of background colour, images that are used and favourite links will have been selected to reflect what you want people to see as the 'real' you. Miller describes it akin to furnishing your home to 'show that you are like or what kind of person you are' [MH1999] or what Goffman would say is 'the expression he gives' [GE1959]. It also is entirely possible for people to create different home pages to present themselves differently as Chandler identified. Where do weblogs fit into this? With weblogs the actual furnishings are seen as "unnecessary noise and interference"[MD] and conventional weblog building advice is that the design is not at all important [SK1999]. In weblogs the identity is created predominantly not in the presentation but through the content. When webloggers add new entries they are also building up an impression of themselves, in most cases not explicitly. Even in the filter style weblogs that identity can still be created. Miller's comment on home pages - "Show me what your links

are, and I'll tell you what type of person you are"[MH1995] still holds true for weblogs but even more so because of the frequency of added links and the addition of commentary. The difference here is that weblog entries can be seen as being single snapshots of the weblogger at a particular moment in time rather than the whole presentation of a home page. The importance of links on the Web can be summed up by usability guru Jakob Nielson - "Good links, both incoming and outgoing, boost credibility almost as much as poor links lower it"[NJ2003]. From the point of view of weblogs and home pages, links affect the impression of self.

With these small snapshots of insight they are actually building up an impression of self over time that evolves and regular readers can 'get to know the person behind it' even if they have never communicated with them in any form. A collection of snapshots often forms a better picture than the singular image that a home page offers. This form of presentation of self is quite different from how the home page is viewed as it is not explicitly saying "I am so and so, work at *STU* and like *XYZ*" but through the entries of the weblog the personality created is more like "I am so and so, am partial to *XYZ* but not as partial to *ABC* and currently *EFG* gets on my nerves…". The clues are scattered within the entries, from a link to personal opinions or in the style of writing. Judith Donath writes in her examination of identity in Usenet newsgroups but still applicable here that "Over time, the frequent contributors…creates a strong impression….Although [the] writer says little about himself, there is a great deal of expression given off" [DJ2000]. A similar thing happens with weblogs. Also like newsgroup postings, weblog entries also tend to invite dialogue to be formed with the user regarding a link or a point of view they have raised allowing them to be open ended conversations. If you have the desire to find out more it is easily done with the feedback forms thus allowing the audience to find out even more of the writer. Although home pages will also allow this, the narrative is less open ended to facilitate conversations as the presentation tends to be complete.

In terms of identity forming weblogs can give you a greater insight to the personality of the weblogger than the less frequently updated personal statements on a home page. People change their ideas and views and weblogs help to present that change on the Web. The nature of the Web allows us to change what we have written so nothing is set in stone, weblogs further this by having a format that facilitates constant updating and additions allowing them to seen as 'exteriorised psychology'[CJ2002]. The automatic archival nature of weblogs provide an valuable history of the author and the Web. Unlike most home pages

where the text is updated/revised and the old text discarded. Nothing is over written with the weblog format, only moved into the archive areas. Reading the archives of weblogs enables us to see the changes in perspectives of the author and further enhance our view of their identity [EX].

Immediacy is also an important difference between writing a weblog entry and the content on a home page. The convenient way of posting of a new link with comments in the most prominent position of your web page is what originally gave rise to the weblog format [BR2002]. The speed and frequency at which weblogs are updated allows for a more 'truthful' presentation of self. It is very difficult to write regularly attempting to create a different identity as sooner or later someone will spot inconsistencies that creep in such as in the case of Kaycee Nicole [GA2001]. I am not saying that everything we read on a weblog is an accurate representation of the author but in terms of creating a false identity (although still possible) it is much harder and less likely to occur. Donath writes "One can write 'I am female', but sustaining a voice and reactions that are convincingly a woman's may prove to be quite difficult for a man"[DJ2000]. Also Chandler writes "Text which is constantly revised seems to some writers to be part of themselves"[CD1998].

As a weblogger you are continually presenting new links or a continuous commentary based on personal points of view that you find interesting regardless of what other people think. As journalist John Lascia says "[Weblogs] tend to be impressionistic, telegraphic, raw, honest, individualistic, highly opinionated, and passionate, often striking an emotional chord" [LJ2002]. If all webloggers spent a lot of time creating perfectly judge commentary on a link or news item attempting to be politically correct and careful not to offend anyone then weblogs will not be so appealing for the authors or the readers. The content would resemble what can be found on mainstream news sites, highly edited and sanitised before being allowed for public consumption. David Weinberger notes the differences in content:

> "The weblog is updated more frequently than her home page, but the two pages also differ in the types of disclosure they publish. It's almost as if they were the views two different friends might have of her, each site drawing the line between the public and the private differently. The home page doesn't feel quite as free."
>
> David Weinberger [WD2002]

An analogy can be made with newspapers and fanzines. Just as newspaper journalists are constrained by their editors, writers for fanzine tend to write more freely on their chosen subjects allowing them to be more personal in their rants and raves. Glenn Reynolds says that mainstream journalism needs to emulate the "speed, openness and lack of pretension" of

weblogs[RG2003]. This leads to a consideration of the audiences for home pages and weblogs.

Placing anything on the web page means that you can have a potential audience of everyone in the world [HC2001]. The reality is that the audience for the majority of home pages and weblogs are tiny. Target audiences for both home pages and weblogs are usually for family, friends or people with related interests. Although the audience reach will - in most cases - not be the motivating factor for starting a home page or weblog. The advantage that weblogs obtain over home pages is the frequency with which they are updated. Search engines such as Google index web sites that are frequently updated more often especially those that continually refresh their links [HJ2002] . So the potential for an obscure weblog to be presented as a high ranking result for a search will be far greater than for a home page. When a friend wrote about the earthquakes in Manchester on his weblog it was of much delight that a few days later if you typed into Google the terms 'earthquake england' his weblog was ranked first [LM]. This is over all the biggest news sites like the BBC. Home pages have not seemingly created this power of nudging into the arena of mainstream web sites except in highly specialised or obscure topics.

Although the elements that make a good weblog different from a home page are not immediately identifiable through just the technology, Grohol's frustration that older mediums of the Internet are forgotten is quite justified. What makes weblogs different as a presentation of 'self' is a combination of frequency, immediacy and openness. It is less the explicit representation of self found in home pages but a thoughtful representation of the internal self built up through a collection of snapshots. It is what Goffman would describe as the 'expression given off' [GE1959]. However Grohol does agree that the format is worthy of note. The weblog format aids returnability as the latest entries are always posted on the same page at the top. The brief narrative nature of weblog entries enables readers to read single entries as well as take in a collection of entries they are interested in.

The essential weblog

Although I have shown that weblogs are a different way of creating identity on the Internet, there is still the question of whether weblogs are a significant development for the majority of Web users as the 'new home pages' or do they simply contribute to the increasing banal content of the Web that we have to wade through every time we want to find something.

I want to look at the idea of 'information behaviours' that Lev Manovich poses in his essay *Post Media Aesthetics* [ML2001]. In this essay he says that most things we do each day can be seen as information behaviours from searching the Web to the way we organise our files on the computer. He writes :

> "In our society daily life and work to a large extent revolve against new types of behaviour activities which involve seeking, extracting, processing and communication large amounts of information, often quantitative…from navigating a transport network of a large city to using the World Wide Web."
>
> *Lev Manovich* [ML2001]

His idea that we use information behaviours to overcome the information overload we encounter everyday is significant. This is more so on the Web. People often complain of not being able to find the right information even though they feel it is out there somewhere and frustrated by the quality of information accessible [BD2001]. Manovich goes on to say "Information behaviours of an individual form an essential part of individual identity: they are particular tactics adopted by an individual or group to survive in [the] information society." There is a clear relation with weblogs(in particular the filter style type), in what Manovich suggests. I have already discussed identity forming and self-presentation that is apparent in weblogs but Manovich takes this further as we could also view weblogs as a behavioural development. Could the entire weblog community be a new information behaviour.

When Bell describes how we cope with 'navigating the complexities of cyberspace', one way he suggests we cope is by 'making a link on our home pages'[BD2001]. He describes the people that do that as being 'some kind of knowledge gatekeeper'. Weblog authors can in one part be contributing to much of the banality of the Web yet at the same time building up a knowledge portal in the form of a *Wunderkammer* [DJ2002], each one invariably unique and reflecting the personal tastes and preferences of the creator. The role of hypertext linking forms an essential part of the Web [HJ1999], weblogs promotes linking to a new level over and above home pages through the format and ease of entry posting. It is common for Weblog authors to cross reference to other weblogs they like and may develop ideas another weblogger has started. So rather than being isolated knowledge they interconnect with each other forming what could be regarded as an information behaviour community. Weblogs that filter interesting links and providing personal commentary that allows other users to "benefit from the efforts of those who have explored the space before"[DK2001]. The archives of weblogs can form a valuable path for other people to follow making Web browsing potentially less solitary and more collaborative. Although many giant web portals such as

Yahoo! go toward some way of helping us reduce information overload as an immediate starting point, the lack of personality in the form of commentary on the links can in actual fact hinder the progress of finding information as you are still exploring blindly. This is despite the fact that portals like Yahoo! use human editors to sort through their links. Yahoo! and similar sites conform to the database symbol that Manovich describes is frequently used in new media [ML1998]. Weblogs also fit into the same idea on a smaller scale but provides the important narrative that aids the navigation of the encompassing database which is the entire Web.

What Manovich describes allows us to place weblogs into the context as a needed medium to reflect the changes in our culture. The challenge for the development of weblogs is enable users to find the relevant links and information from the numerous weblogs. One idea I have not brought up so far is that with the increasing number of weblogs that are personal soap boxes and straight filter based sites becoming a minority it has become difficult to find more specific weblogs that focus on less general subjects and do not comment on every thing in general. I too am part guilty of this when writing my own weblog. Some webloggers agree with the need for more specific weblogs to make them of greater worth as the generalised nature of the majority of weblogs devalues them for the wider audience [BC1999]. If weblogs are to serve as a information behaviour beyond individual necessity into the wider community there needs to be better way of organising the numerous weblogs out there. Maybe this requires yet another information behaviour to be developed. Other writers such as Patrick Peiffer have also identified similar roles and issues for weblogs on the Web [PP2001].

David Weinberger suggests that we can look at the Web as consisting two basic forms of knowledge: the database and the joke [WD2002:2]. His database idea follows that of Manovich's. His idea of the joke encompasses the unexpected - "links we hadn't seen, an unfolding we hadn't anticipated. Laughter is the sound of sudden knowledge". So even though many weblogs increase the banality content of the Web, they can serve their purpose as the occasional punch line in a joke that many of us enjoy stumbling across.

Conclusion

So are weblogs the important development that many media commentators see it as being and more importantly are they are significance development that benefits the Web audience? In weblogs the expressions of self differs by not being an explicit presentation that can be

found on personal home pages. Weblog entries can be seen as snap shots which collectively build a more personal impression of self. Weblogs also seem ideally placed as a new information behaviour for the Web but my concerns are that they only serve a purpose for individuals. What makes weblogs unique is that it encompasses some of the best attributes from multiple existing online mediums. This does however make it difficult to examine them objectively from any particular view. Even with it's sceptics, I feel weblogs are worthy of discussion and dissection and hopefully this essay will have produced some insights from a different perspective which can be further examined. An area that has not been looked at is here is the sense of community that webloggers feel they get from having a weblog making them even more significant than home pages.

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