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Research Prospectus

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Introduction

The creation of online diaries that are publicly accessible is the laymen's definition of the new phenomenon known as weblogs, or blogs. Blogs have become a universal Internet phenomenon. What started out as places for people to journal thoughts and personal life stories has expanded to an entire online world of niche blogs and user-generated communities. Blogs are frequently updated and allow authors to dialogue with readers through comments. In the past several years, a number of bloggers have gained international exposure and often, a great deal of online credibility and authority. Blogging has greatly affected many industries, fields of study and lifestyles worldwide, but one of the largest effects blogs have had is on the bloggers themselves.

This study is an exploration into this fairly recent trend. More specifically, it is about what motivates people to not just start a blog, but to maintain it over time. Blogging is a relatively new form of communication (posting personal journals for public view and comment) on a relatively new platform (the internet). As a result, most studies on the subject begin by addressing some form of the question, 'What is a blog?' and this study has been no exception. The natural follow-ups to that question are 'Who is blogging?' and 'What are they blogging about?' The focus, however, is on why, over the last decade or so, so many people have taken up and maintained this habit of recording their thoughts and feelings online.

My interest in this topic was struck, initially and most impressionably, by my older brother, Noah Brier. In June of 2004, after freelancing for many years as a part time web page designer, Noah started his first blog. Over the past 3 years Noah has avidly blogged about his life, interests, career goals, etc. His blog has changed with him,

both in style and in topic. The growth that Noah has experienced since beginning his blog is immeasurable and very inspiring. It is because of him that I wanted to find out what motivates bloggers to continuously open themselves up and share the information that they do. How has it changed them and what do they take away from it?

Review of the Literature

Research for this study has drawn on the literature from a wide range of fields, from communication and media studies to education, and from business and marketing to library science. The mere fact that blogging is being investigated, and practiced, in such a diverse number of fields suggests that it is an important trend in communication and as a form of self-expression. In addition, the internet itself has proven an invaluable primary research tool, both for exposure to blogs as individual case studies and in the discovery of a surprising number of bloggers who have been conducting their own ethnographic research about why bloggers blog.

What is a blog?

Mark Brady's (2005) working paper on blogging describes these websites as having risen, "From a humble beginning as 'What's New' pages ..." to, "... arguably the most popular online personal publishing platform on the internet." (p. 4) Michael Stephens (2006) provides a list of blog characteristics, but notes. "It's good to point out, when talking about blogs, the discussion is fundamentally about ... a software tool that, when created and developed by its human operator, performs a whole lot of organization and page building for Web sites. What began as hand-coded personal journal pages, moved into free-hosted space, and then into blog software, both commercial and open

source. Blogs have grown from "what I had for breakfast" chronicles to a mechanism that creates thriving personal, business, nonprofit, and educational Web sites with some keying and the click of the mouse." (p. 16)

Wordpress is a provider of the type of software Stephens described. It is an "open source personal publishing platform" ("Wordpress", n.d.), which in laymen's terms means that it provides free software to bloggers. Their website is subtitled, "What is a Blog?" and offers a fairly easy to understand set of definitions, beginning with the basic facts that 'blog' is short for 'weblog', a term originally coined to describe a website used as a personal log, or journal and that most blogs include a way for readers to comment on what has been posted. Other commonly mentioned blog characteristics include: categories for posts, which are generally called 'tags' and can be used by bloggers to organize their posts and by readers to find specific topics or themes (Brier, 2005); archives of older posts that can be searched by date, tag or unique URL (Stephens, p. 17), and 'RSS' (really simple syndication) feeds which allow readers to 'subscribe' to a blog and thereby receive new posts by e-mail (Brier, 2004).

As Stephens mentions (p. 16), in 2004, "blog" was the single most frequently searched for word in the Merriam-Webster online dictionary. For the record, they added the word 'blog' in 1999, noting it was short for Weblog, and defining it as, "a Web site that contains an online personal journal with reflections, comments, and often hyperlinks provided by the writer." ('Weblog' was added in 1997) Brady traces blogs back to the early 90's, indicating that these first sites were limited because they required knowledge of HTML, a computer "language." It was not until 1999 that the first software programs began to appear. Citing Coates (2003), he suggests that what makes blogs particularly

noteworthy is that they make it possible for anyone to publish anything they wanted to, and have it be accessible to everyone using the internet (p. 6). As Lev Grossman (2004) put it in *Time* magazine, “In a way, blogs represent everything the Web was always supposed to be: a mass medium controlled by the masses, in which getting heard depends solely on having something to say and the moxie to say it.” (p. 4)

Who is blogging?

According to a 2006 study by the Pew Research Center, the increased ease of blogging has encouraged many people to share their views of the world. Their national telephone survey indicated that approximately 12 million American adults (defined as aged 18 and over) consider themselves bloggers. This is approximately 8% of all adult Internet users. The survey also indicated that approximately 39% of all adult Internet users read blogs with some regularity (Lenhart & Fox, 2006, p. 1). In addition, Pew studied 12 to 17 year old Internet users the previous year, and found that an even higher percentage of teens than adults were bloggers, approximately 19% of teen Internet users (or 4 million of this far smaller age segment.) Twice that many teen Internet users, 38%, said they were regular blog readers (Lenhart & Madden, 2005, p. 4).

The same studies provide fairly detailed demographic profiles of their separate blogger groups. Among the adults, 54% were between 18 and 30 years old and another 30% were between 30 and 50 years old, with only 16% over 50. Lenhart and Fox contrast this with the demographics they found for all Internet users, and note that only 24% fell into that 18 to 30 year-old range, while 45% were between 30 and 50 and 24% were between 50 and 65 (p.2). This suggests that blogging appeals to the young, a trend which seems to be supported by the previously mentioned teen survey. More adult men

blog than adult women, with a balance of 54% to 46% (p.4). In contrast, however, among the teen bloggers, 25% of female Internet users between the ages of 15 and 17 blog, while only 15% of the males in that age range do. A combined total of approximately 18% of male and female teens between 12 and 15 maintain blogs as well (Lenhart & Madden, p.5).

Pew's demographics may accurately reflect the profile of the personal blogger in America, but it would be inaccurate to suggest that all blogs are either personal or American. Technorati, arguably the most widely known blog-tracking website, claims to track 111 million blogs worldwide. In April of 2007, their tracking research showed that Japanese (37%) and English (36%) were almost tied in terms of the number of blogs by language, with Chinese a distant third at 8% (Sifry, 2007). While this literature review barely scratches the surface of the whole spectrum of blogs on the Internet, it is because the details are beyond the scope of the study, which is intended to focus on the impact of personal blogs on their individual authors.

What are they blogging about?

A better question might be, 'What aren't they blogging about?' Ronald Roach (2006) surveyed bloggers who write specifically about politics and public affairs. Teri Lesesne (2006) discusses tech bloggers in her article *Technology meets literature: Meeting authors through their blogs*. Michael Stephens (2006) focuses on the use of blogs in libraries. C.K. Kerley (2006) is devoted to blogging about marketing. Toby Bloomberg (2006) also has a blog about marketing, but she started a second which is simply devoted to other blogger's stories, because she felt that blogging itself created a bond between people, regardless of the specific focus of their blogs. Jan Schmidt

(2007), citing numerous studies in specialized fields, notes the connections between blogs and professionals in journalism and politics, as well as corporate blogs and blogs "... as channels for expert communication ... for example, with regard to academics." (p. 1410) Technorati, which calls itself "...the recognized authority on what's happening on the World *Live Web*, right now" says, "Some blogs are intended for a small audience; others vie for readership with national newspapers. Blogs are influential, personal, or both, and they reflect as many topics and opinions as there are people writing them." According to Technorati, there are over 175,000 new blogs published every day, and it is estimated that bloggers post updates at the rate of about 1.6 million per day ("Technorati", n.d.).

In short, blogs are about everything and anything. In fact, based on the Pew survey of adult bloggers, Lenhart and Fox (2006) concluded that a small number of high profile blogs tend to receive the most media attention, but the primary interests of most regular bloggers is to share something creative or be part of a community. More than 75% of those surveyed simply blogged "... to document their personal experiences and share them with others." (p. 7)

Why blog?

The previous quote from the Pew survey begins to answer the question of why all these people have taken up blogging: they have something to say that they want to share. This is a very new field of study, so there are no definitive answers, but more and more people are asking the question, and several common characteristics are beginning to emerge. "Why We Blog" is a 2004 report on an ethnographic study of "... a sample of ordinary bloggers." The authors of this fairly limited but in-depth study of 23 bloggers found five key motivations for blogging, "... documenting one's life; providing

commentary and opinions; expressing deeply felt emotions; articulating ideas through writing; and forming and maintaining community forums.” (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, p. 43) Two things were particularly interesting about this study. On the positive side, the motivators they found were common despite the fact that the content of the various blogs was extremely diverse. However, they also suggest in their conclusion that, “Bloggers value that they can post and share their thoughts without the intensive feedback associated with other forms of communication.” (p. 46) While the first of these findings was fairly consistent with other research, the second does not seem to show up elsewhere. Perhaps this is because three years ago, in blog time, is practically ancient history.

Mark Brady’s 2005 working paper on blogging ultimately focuses on bloggers’ interest in participating in “... public knowledge-building on the web.” He differentiates between personal and public motivations to blog, suggesting that, on a personal level, a blog may just be an “...efficient way to store and organize information.” Also on the personal level, he sees the ability to link to other blogs, and post comments, as a way to, “...enable creation of new knowledge” (p. 10), stating, “The reward for doing this is the cognition that it encourages, allowing new thoughts to develop.” (p. 11) Noah Brier echoes this in a post called “Random thoughts on online ads and blogging” in which he says, “I take an idea I haven't fully developed and get feedback and viewpoints I never would have been able to amass before I had this forum.” (Brier, 2007)

Brady’s public motivations to blog include popularity. He cites Barbasi (2002) and Shirky (2003) when he says, “Many bloggers strive to travel further toward the top of the lists of the most-read blogs, toward the top of the ‘power curve’.” However, he

suggests a "...deeper motivation" in the search for a larger audience is the "... increased social capital and access to knowledge." (Brady, p. 11)

Du and Wagner's (2007) "Learning with Weblogs: Enhancing Cognitive and Social Knowledge Construction" more or less picks up where Brady left off. Their research goal was to examine whether using blogs as "...online learning logs," on a regular basis, would affect student performance on the theory that it would support the construction of cognitive and social knowledge as well as encourage individual student's responsibility for their own learning. Their results showed a significant correlation between students' blogs and their success in the course, and considerable evidence of students taking active responsibility for construction of their own knowledge. The authors conclude that using weblogs may be very effective in knowledge construction and social learning. Cameron and Anderson's (2006) analysis of the use of blogs as an educational tool supports the idea that blogs promote student responsibility for learning, "Ownership of a publicly visible space like a blog encourages a strong personal connection with the material presented and a desire to create identity that simply cannot be replicated in a course discussion board which lacks personal space." (p. 4)

Less directly, so does Russ Beebe, author of the blog [Winehiker Witiculture](#), in his 2007 post entitled, "Why do I blog, anyway? Is it all just about mememe?" The 'mememe' in the title is a play on the word 'meme,' which is defined as, "Any unit of cultural information, such as a practice or idea, that is transmitted verbally or by repeated action from one mind to another." ("wiktionary", n.d.) Memes are popular among bloggers, particularly in the form of a question that gets passed from one to another. Beebe was asked why he blogged, and he cited five reasons: 1) he started it to promote

his business; 2) he was a technical writer who loved wine-tasting and hiking and saw the blog as a way to achieve a creative balance with his more structured writing; 3) it felt good when readers responded to what he wrote; 4) blogging opened doors for him with winemakers that he never anticipated; and 5) he thought blogging would help make him a better writer and (being modest) likes that others enjoy his blog. Beebe posted the names of the five bloggers he then tagged with this meme, and apparently, this meme has criss-crossed the blog world.

C.K. Kerley (2006) decided to ask 28 of her fellow bloggers in the marketing community a single question, “What is the single greatest point of value you receive from blogging.” She then put their responses into what she calls a “collage” – a graphic which incorporates one or two words of their brief responses, along with their names, into a picture of the value of blogging. (The full quotes from each person are included in follow-up pages on this post, which was formatted as a .pdf file.) The words, which include, “exchange of ideas”, “mental exercise”, “connection”, “contact and communication”, “learning” and “self-improvement,” provide a very concise but insightful summary of bloggers’ motivation.

While neither of the previous two ‘studies’ are scientific, they are consistent with the research on motivation to blog, including Lu and Hsiao’s 2007 research paper on Taiwanese bloggers’ intentions to continuously share information through blogs. They used social cognitive theory to examine 155 randomly selected bloggers’ expectations for self-efficacy, subjective norms, feedback, and personal outcomes as the factors which influenced them to blog. The survey results showed that all these things had an effect, but that people’s personal expectations had the strongest impact on their intentions to

continue blogging. The study also showed that others' expectations, i.e., social pressure, had an indirect influence on bloggers, but no direct influence on bloggers' intent to continue to blogging.

Virtually all of the research mentioned here notes the newness and the need for additional research into every aspect of the blogs and blogging (Brady, 2005; Cameron & Anderson, 2006; Du & Wagner, 2007; Schmidt, 2007). Lu and Hsiao (2007) emphasize that as a new media form, there has been very little research done on people's personal motives to maintain their blogs over time. In fact, they say most of the studies on blogging are focus on the technology being used. Citing specific studies (Wasko & Faraj, 2005; Bock et al., 2005; Kankanhalli et al., 2005) they also say that most recently, studies have also looked closely at the reasons people want to share information through blogging in the first place, but they are among the first to examine, "... individual motives behind continued usage." Their study is scientific and seeks to "...develop and empirically test a model to analyze what factors affect the users' intention of updating blogs." (p. 346)

However, based on the very substantial gaps in the knowledge of this subject, qualitative research is also very important. It will help to shed light on how the experience of blogging impacts people's interpersonal, as well as intrapersonal, views. For example, does publishing your thinking about your experiences, personal and/or professional, give you better insight into them? Is it a form of intrapersonal therapy? Personal blogs (Beebe, 2007; Brier, 2007; Kerley, 2006) offer considerable evidence that blogs have really changed people's lives. I am hopeful that my research on what compels bloggers to continuously share their experiences and knowledge online can help fill a

void in the research and draw a clearer picture of the impact of this new form of mediated communication.

Research Questions and Justifications

Beyond the larger, historical, scope questions such as: What is a blog? What are you blogging about? and Who blogs?, my hope is that using broad-based research questions will allow room for participants to reflect on their blogging experiences and allow me to funnel their personal information into concise ideas and theories. Because of this, I plan on asking the following questions throughout my research:

1. What does your blog say about you?
2. What made you start blogging?
3. How has blogging changed your life?
4. What would you tell potential bloggers about the future of blogging?
5. Why do you blog?

These questions are an integral part of understanding the blogosphere in general and should provide some insight into the specific motivations of individuals and what differentiates one blogger from the next. I believe the best way to get bloggers who believe in their writing to discuss and introspectively look at the phenomenon they have had a part in creating is going to their level, joining their world and understanding the context in which that world exists on a very personal basis.

Method

I am interested in studying blogging in the only manner that seems possible and honest to study it, qualitatively, through ethnographic research and content analysis. I think starting to blog for this research project will be like creating a new-age ethnography. Ethnography is defined as a researcher's full immersion into a culture, so becoming fully immersed in the culture of the online blogosphere means blogging regularly, responding to comments on the blog and becoming involved in other blog conversations online. I also hope to interview frequent visitors and well-known bloggers (for which I will seek IRB approval), and conclude my research with a textual analysis, written in a creative nonfiction style, looking as comprehensively as possible at all the information created on the blog and gathered in interviews.

The first step in creating a blog is to choose a domain name. Choosing a name means deciding on the first, and probably most superficial level of the blog. It seemed fitting to purchase a domain name that will be the culmination of the research done, so for an annual fee of \$9.99, I chose www.whyyoublog.com. Because it is the question the entire body of research is based on, and because it is a natural search term, the likelihood of a fair amount of traffic is good. This is based on the idea of 'search engine optimization' which is defined as optimizing the amount of searchable words, and popularly searched words, to increase and improve traffic. Natural searches are what people ask the google search line to find for them. Because 'why you blog' is a popular question, or some combination of those words, the chances for a higher initial ranking in search engines means more overall traffic.

The next step is to create the visual element of what the blog will look like. This begins to define who the blogger is, and what the blog will stand for online. Many, if not

all major blogs, have an interactive communication component these days. That means that in addition to a section for the latest entry, there are opportunities for readers to get involved in the action by commenting on the posts that strike them. Comment forms are usually at the end of a post or on a contact page. However, for me, the importance of people's comments and blogger's interactions with one another is key to creating a synthesized idea of who is blogging and why people blog. Therefore, a comment form will be clearly positioned, at all times, at the top of the page with a one-line explanation saying something like: 'the people reading this blog are why this blog exists and therefore, their input is what really matters.' Below the comment form will be the latest post. The post will always have a title and an opening paragraph about what direction the research is moving. This is meant to help new readers to feel connected and to help returning readers feel included in the motion of research. On the left side of the screen, in a bar about 2.5-3 inches wide will be the stream of comments having to do with the latest posts. The dialogue blogging allows seems to be one of the key reasons bloggers continue to blog; it gives them a forum to open up and then have readers to interact with either personally and professionally. Finally, at the right top corner in a 'post-it' side box will be links to previous posts and their comments.

The actual posts on the blog will be determined by where the conversations take me. I want to start with questions, get answers, and move from there, either by using a comment that motivates me to post something new, or by commenting back to someone, hopefully on their blog, and bringing that conversation into full view. The first posts will be fairly basic introductory posts including such topics as: "What is a blog? Can we agree on a definition for this thing all of us do?", "Does what you blog about make a

difference? Is it the quality of your post or the relationship to a particular subject that really matters?” and “Why are you blogging? What gets you onto your computer everyday to share with the world?” Hopefully, these questions will garner enough attention that readers will provide or at least inspire the next question, either by asking it, creating it in conversation, or leaving others asking about something.

The anticipated end result is to successfully extract all of the research information needed from the readers and frequent visitors to the blog, as well as from my participation in other blogs and interviews with bloggers. In the end, posting my final thesis will be important because it will bring the research full circle. The beauty of doing the work online is that it is chronicled already. The key, however, will be to tie my research to the communication theory of cognitive and social knowledge construction without taking away from the limitlessness the internet offers bloggers. By its very nature, the act of blogging is creating, interpreting and playing with communication theory. However, it's possible that the reason blogging has become such a phenomenon is because it has that power without being locked into a stuffy social science theory. Keeping with this trend will be extremely important in my research, although it may be difficult to balance because of the lack of theoretical research related specifically to blogging.

This is where a creative nonfiction piece about my journey into blogging and the lessons I learned comes into play. My goal is to create a synthesized field study of the blogging experience with responses I am inspired to answer personally, in contrast and comparison to the answers created online by readers. For example, Shauna James Ahern is an avid blogger, blogging about her gluten-free live online. Her success in reaching

others, gaining insight into her own life, and the sheer amount of data she collected through writing and blogging recently hit stores in the form of her new book, *Gluten-Free Girl: How I Found the Food That Loves Me Back...And How You Can Too*. While her book is more kitschy, includes recipes, stories and lifestyle advice, it is nonetheless a narrative, nonfiction, look at what she has learned through blogging. My hope is to garner enough attention online that I can continue blogging and use my nonfiction piece to better explain my experience to other bloggers, beyond the scope of the more ‘traditional’ blog of journal-type daily entries.

Anticipated Findings

In the final analysis, my goal is to discover what motivates people to share personal information in a completely public forum. I anticipate finding out that most people blog for three main reasons. The first is a desire to connect with society as a whole in way that makes them feel safe, comfortable and perhaps even anonymous. Secondly, there is a desire to better oneself professionally by melding professional and personal lives and truly immersing themselves in what they do for a living. And finally, I foresee a personal interest in being a part of a specific subset of society, or online community, based on a population of likeminded people.

Strengths, Limitations and Ethical Considerations

Without a doubt, one of the most obvious strengths of this study is the niche it fills, due to the lack of qualitative research regarding blogging. Because of that, the ethnographic look into the culture that is the blogosphere will hopefully influence and

inspire future research in the same field. Another strength of this research is the personal interest I will gain in blogging as well as the connections I hopefully will make with people on a worldwide level. As important as it is for bloggers to grow from discussing and discovering what really motivates them, I want to be motivated to continue blogging after this research is completed to help facilitate learning in a field that many know very little about.

One obvious challenge will be the need for traffic to the blog. If the blog doesn't bring in readers, finding research from other avenues, such as writing on others' blogs, is going to have to be a fallback. A second challenge that I will face is bringing all of my research and data together into a comprehensive final product. The assortment of research and information surrounding blogging, while not necessarily vast and infinite, is definitely varied in theme and interpretation and will make unifying all of my information a difficult task. In addition, while others have collected bloggers' stories, I have not yet found much of anything synthesizing the questions I have raised in an ethnographic study, so there is very little to use as a model. I also feel some concern that people haven't thought deeply about why they blog. Therefore, pulling information out of them may not be as easy as jogging their memory with thought-provoking questions and openly streamed conversations. This also brings into consideration the amount of time needed to gain any sort of popularity and then have enough time to synthesize the data and compose the final report. Finally, while I am pretty comfortable with the online system I am using to produce the blog, I am not always the most technically savvy person, so a limitation may be my own lack of knowledge if there is ever a serious problem with the technology behind the blog.

In terms of ethical considerations, the biggest concern I have is the lack of coherent rules and regulations for online data collection and research. Therefore, a lot of choice will be left to me to decide if my choices for interviewing online, participating in online forums, and referring to my research, are ethical or not. I plan to do most of the interviewing of bloggers and visitors to my blog electronically, so I will create a clear, concise, consent document which also give the interviewee ample information about the background of the study, as would be expected of any participant in a research study. For the blog itself, I will allow people to post comments without using their names and also refer to my interview subjects by their blog, or pseudonyms if they would prefer. To avoid inappropriate language or exchanges, I will also post clear guidelines about what types of comments are unacceptable and will be deleted. Personally, I need to be watchful of where my research places me ethically. I want to make sure that I become part of the blogging culture but because I tend to be a shy person, I don't want to push myself into something I could become uncomfortable with. I have already started practicing writing entries in a voice I feel confident and comfortable with, and then editing and posting them myself online. In all, I think the benefits and positive outcomes of my research will outweigh the costs in terms of limitations and ethical road blocks.

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