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Abstract

An investigation into the motivations of women who write blogs (web logs) and the audience for whom they consider themselves to be writing. From the outset of blogging, journal blogs have been associated with women. They offer them a safe place to explore their lives and communicate with like-minded people. Blogs exist in the public space of the Internet, yet are also safe spaces within which the blogger has total editorial control. Women bloggers can safely invite readers into their homes and family lives and at the same time receive virtual – but safe – support from their small group of readers. Above all, blogs offer a place where women can experience the validation of their opinions that only comes from being read by others and receiving feedback.

Keywords

Blogs
Women's writing
Internet
Computer-mediated Communication

This is not going to be one of those spiritually uplifting blogs in which I name every fetus I've ever lost and then derive comfort from the fact that I have so many little angels looking down on me from heaven. No, this is going to be an angry blog, so please spare me the lectures about my attitude.... I get plenty of opportunities to be a smiley-faced trooper in my real life. This is the only place where I get to be plain old pissed off at the universe.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the motivations of women who blog, and in particular the audience for whom they consider themselves to be writing. What makes a woman, like the one in the passage just quoted, write about her anguish, her hopes, her feelings of loss and pain and her plain anger in a publicly accessible website, where her words can be read by total strangers all over the world? And such outpourings are not one-offs or infrequent. Most blogs have weekly or daily updates. Of course, most blog entries are not as dramatic or tragic as the one just quoted. The blog researcher becomes used to reading for hours about how Jim didn't come home for his tea when he said he would, or precisely what that fat cow in accounts said this morning. Blog journals can detail the minutiae of a woman's life as well as important events. A Canadian blogger living in London puts it well:

Yes, there are a lot of blogs that consist of nothing but entries like 'I bought a new skirt today', 'here are 500 pictures of my cat', and 'here's a list of songs that make me cry'. There are sites out there that ramble on about DIY, puppies, and babies for goodness sake. With pictures! We blog for various reasons, we write about a million different things, which are read by a million different types of people. A blog can be about anything.

Interestingly enough, a few years later this writer has blogs about her dog and her new baby running....

What is a blog? The word 'blog' is commonly agreed to have been coined in 1999.¹ Blogs – or web logs – can have many different themes, looks and writing styles. However, the basic form is usually brief, dated posts, collected on one web page. They are chronologically ordered rather than by topic or argument. At first, the use of blogs was restricted to those who had the necessary programming skills. Such prototypical blogs were primarily link-driven sites with editorial commentary – so-called filter blogs. However, with the introduction of cheap and easy-to-use software in the last few years, the number of blogs has expanded rapidly. In April 2004 it was estimated that there were 1.3 million sites calling themselves weblogs on the Web, of which about 870,000 were

¹ Blood, Rebecca. 'Weblogs: a history and perspective.' <http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog-history.html>, accessed June 2004.

actively maintained.² In August 2005, the blog research firm Technorati was tracking 14.2 million blogs and estimated that 80,000 blogs are created daily. Of course, not everyone who starts a blog becomes a frequent blogger. Nonetheless, Technorati tracks, on average, 900,000 posts to blogs every day.³ Filter sites have been joined by a new type of blog – the journal blog, which is used more as an online diary or digest of the blogger's thoughts and life. Whereas filter blogs are heavily reliant on links to and from their site and the comments of readers, journal blogs tend to have smaller audiences and fewer links to other sites. From the outset, journal blogs have been associated with women. The research of Susan Herring et al, for example, suggests that journal bloggers are at least 50% female.⁴ The number of journal blogs is growing and now accounts for around 70% of all blogs on the Internet – meaning that the number of women bloggers is rising.

It has been suggested by Mortensen and Walker that, just as Habermas conceived of the French literary salon existing on the borderline of the private and public, situated in private homes but part of the public sphere, so do blogs.⁵ Blogs are anchored in the public sphere of the Internet, yet are also safe spaces within which the blogger has total editorial control. In his analysis of personal home pages and the construction of identities on the Web, Chandler points out that such pages 'make public the personal'.⁶ In a similar way, women bloggers can safely invite readers into their homes and family lives and at the same time receive virtual – but safe – support from their small group of readers.

Women have been drawn to use and read blogs more than any other Internet-based communication tool. Unlike other forms of computer-mediated communication, such as discussion forums or chat rooms, where women report feeling intimidated by male users, blogs appear to offer women a safe place to explore their lives and communicate with like-minded people. One blogger, whose blog focuses on her battle to lose weight, described how her blog had brought a new dimension into her life:

Why diet now? I've never had a support system like this before; I can share this stuff (stuff that I haven't shared with anybody except my therapist) at least in part because, although you kind of know me, you don't REALLY know me; so in a way you're safe.

This paper reports on a content analysis of 50 women's blogs undertaken over the spring and summer of 2005 and focuses on the reasons for blogging given in these blogs. The blogs were selected using the randomising feature of the blog-tracking website globeofblogs.com. This site was selected as the data source because it tracks a large

² Schiano, Diane J; Nardi, Bonnie, A; Gumbrecht, Michelle and Swartz, Luke. 'Blogging by the Rest of Us.' *Proceedings of the CHI*, 2004, April 24-29 2004, Vienna, Austria, accessed June 2004.

³ Sifry, Dave. 'State of the Blogosphere: August 2005.' <http://www.technorati.com/weblog/2005/08/34.html>, accessed August 2005.

⁴ Herring, Susan, C; Scheidt, Lois Ann; Bonus, Sabrina and Wright, Elijah. 'Bridging the Gap: A Genre Analysis of Weblogs.' *Information, Technology and People*, 18(2), accessed June 2004.

⁵ Mortensen, Torill and Walker, Jill. 'Blogging thoughts: personal publication as an online research tool.' In *Researching ICTs in Context*, ed. Andrew Morrison. Oslo: Intermedia Report, University of Oslo, March 2002.

⁶ Chandler, Daniel. 'Personal Home Pages and the Construction of Identities on the Web.' <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/short/webident.html>, accessed June 2004.

number of blogs from diverse sources. The only criteria for the selection of blogs was that they were written in English and by a woman. Inactive blogs were as useful as active ones for this research because the reasons for someone to cease blogging are also interesting. The content analysis focused on reported motivations for blogging stated either in the 'About Me', section which most blogs offer, or in the blog itself. Blogs usually contain an archives section where all previous blog entries can be read and the majority of the blogs analysed for this research contained two or three years' worth of entries in such archives.

In a paper published December 2004, Nardi et al suggested five main reasons for blogging.⁷ These are: documenting the author's life; providing commentary and opinions; expressing deeply felt emotions; working out ideas through writing; and forming and maintaining communities and forums. The blogs studied for this paper all contain elements of such motivations. However, it is suggested that the over-arching motivation to be found in all the women's blogs studied is a desire for validation, for their experiences, lives or thoughts to be given a quasi-formal validation by being publicly posted, read by others, and possibly commented upon.

Most women bloggers attempt to come to grips with their reasons for blogging at the start of their blogs. However, the motivations expressed at the start of a blogger's career might change and adapt during the years of writing a blog. As one blogger comments:

This site started as a rather sad collection of pages containing fonts, files, and a bit about me back in 1996. I started a 'Thoughts' page; a list of bulleted random thoughts updated every few months. At that point, I could count all the visitors on one hand and I knew who every one of them was. Now I get 50,000+ hits a month, so this page has become a lot less personal (e.g. I won't lament about my deepest thoughts and feelings and write sad poems about my cat). I now blog for a variety of reasons and people back home use it to see what's up with me, but it's mostly a way to sneak in some creative writing when I'm not writing software user guides.

Like this woman, many bloggers use their blog as a place in which to write creatively and receive feedback from the readers of their short stories, poetry or thoughts on a wide variety of topics from President Bush to Buffy the Vampire Slayer.

Quite a few blogs were originally established as part of the writer's career or studies – librarians and students often start blogs to document aspects of their work. However, these blogs, and their motivations for blogging, can change and grow over time. A Canadian librarian, who started her blog as part of her continuous professional development, 'to stay informed about changes and developments in our field', was surprised to find that this was not all she wanted to write about and that her life outside the library continually intruded into her blog entries. She accepted this and adapted her blog. What is surprising is the way in which some bloggers refuse to allow their blog to adapt to include references to matters outside its stated purpose. Recipe blogs are 'phased out' because the blogger 'rarely had anything to add'; a blog focused on the South Beach Diet is stopped when the diet stops, but the blogger reports that she will start a more general blog instead – 'I have so much else to write and the topic of this blog has limited

⁷ Nardi, Bonnie A; Schiano, Diane J; Gumbrecht, Michelle and Swartz, Luke. "'I'm Blogging This": A Closer Look at Why People Blog.' submitted to the Communications of the Association for Computing Machinery, <http://www.ics.uci.edu/~jpd/classes/ics234cw04/nardi.pdf>, accessed December 2004.

me'. Another blogger reported that her writer's block was due to an earlier decision not to write about men or her job 'and as I don't want to write about them, I can't think of much to write'. Some women even manage to keep more than one blog on the go at the same time, in order to fulfil different needs. Several of these second blogs document the writers' sex lives. As a woman from New York explained: 'While I love this blog and keeping in touch with my friends and acquaintances is precious to me – I think that even I feel a touch apprehensive at laying it all out in all its delicious sensual sybaritic glory. Plus I have the occasional child peeking at this blog.' Readers who wished to be directed to her second, more erotic, blog were encouraged to email its creator.

This brings us to the question of who these women think they are writing for. Firstly, and most importantly, they are writing for themselves. The blog is used to vent their rage or celebrate their achievements in a more formal way than merely telling their family or friends. As someone who describes herself as an 'atypical female' says: 'One of the reasons I love my blog is that I can talk about how crazy and anal I am, and I don't have to see heads nodding in agreement. Even though I know you're doing that, and don't try to tell me that you're not, I don't have to shut my eyes to go into denial. I can just close the browser window.' She kept her blogging secret from her family and friends, but was aware that she had posted so much information about her life in her blog that it would be easy for an interested party to find her. Another blogger commented 'Unfortunately for you, dear readers, I am writing to myself as the primary audience and you all as the secondary. So it might not be as interesting for someone else to read. And for that, my apologies, but I won't be changing the behaviour. You're more than free to skip it.'

Again, this writer had not told her family about her blog, which meant an irregular approach to her entries, caused by the need to keep her blog – and the comments about her family to be found within it – a secret. Despite the restricted time she had to blog, she actually had four other blogs – two photo blogs, a private blog which was not publicly available and, of all things, a blog for her pet hedgehog.

Other women, however, did inform their families and friends about their blogs and actually used them as the main form of communication with loved ones, particularly if they lived away from them. Such bloggers commented as they posted that they were aware that their postings were being read by people who knew them in 'rl' – real life. An American living in London told her boyfriend about her blog, only to be met by complaints about the lack of mentions he merited.

He says he loves reading my blog cos I write about things he doesn't ever hear about. Is it cos they are so inconsequential that I don't even feel it's worth it to waste the time telling him about them? Maybe. Is it cos I only really write about things that I don't want to talk about with others? Maybe. Is it cos it's all a lie and in reality I'm some 45 year-old housewife in Ipswich with a vivid imagination?

A student in Bloomington, Indiana, was 'wierded out' to be informed by her boyfriend that his mother now read her blog, while a woman in the middle of a divorce settlement was warned by her lawyer to start a new blog under a different name so that her soon-to-be ex-husband couldn't use any statements in the blog as evidence in his battle to be granted custody of their children. A blogger in Belgium reported on the shock she got when an acquaintance in her office commented 'I loved the write-up of me and my wife's a great fan of yours' since she couldn't even remember mentioning him in her blog, and reflected bitterly that 'Belgium is *too* small'.

Although most of the bloggers studied had 'come out' to their loved ones about their blogs, they were still very aware, and mostly appreciative, of the total strangers who read

and sometimes commented on their posts. Many had regular readers, who became virtual friends and offered support and encouraging words on a daily basis. Those who left comments on a blog were likely to have a blog of their own, and dialogues over two blogs, with associated links, are common. Bloggers often apologise to their readers for boring them or not blogging for a day or two. As a Canadian put it, 'I don't really have anything to say today, but that doesn't stop me from writing. Oh, no. That's because I care about **you**, the reader. Yes, I do.' This writer was one of several who were fascinated by the search strings which brought new readers to their sites. She extended a particularly warm welcome to the searcher who visited her site looking for pictures of 'two-headed cats'.

She was continually surprised that people who didn't know her continued to read her blog.

I understand that most visitors stumble across this site either by accident or curiosity but it amazes me when people keep coming back. I don't think I write about anything particularly interesting or intellectually stimulating, and this blog certainly won't win any awards. Not that I'm complaining, mind you. I love how people interact with each other and myself via the comments... It's just all a bit odd.

This is the essential difference between a blog and a diary – the feedback from readers, and I would argue that it is the validation offered by such feedback which is the main motivator for women who blog. A Canadian living in London spent a good amount of time in her blog trying to work out why she blogged, particularly because she was a television presenter and so had invasion of privacy issues about the public side of blogging. She described how she used to keep a diary from the age of 12, but stopped writing it ten years later when it was read by someone she thought she could trust. Unlike a diary, her blog was *designed* to be read by others – friends and strangers. 'With blogging I can write a 'diary' with the intention of others reading it which a) satisfies my love and need to write b) in some way documents a bit of my life c) helps me reach a lot of people and d) is a bit of fun.'

Readers frequently comment on the latest blog entry and such comments are almost always supportive: either contrasting the blogger's experience to their own, offering advice or simply using the oft-repeated phrase 'You go, girl!' It is noticeable that commentators are usually similarly situated and therefore feel that they understand the bloggers' experience. Perhaps this is not an unexpected finding. Working mothers comment on the blogs of other working mothers, ditto stay-at-home moms or home educators. Supportive comments on sites dedicated to miscarriages or attempts to conceive come from other women in the same situation. On rare occasions, a negative comment might be made. The useful thing about a blog is that the blogger is the editor and can immediately remove such a comment – thus making the 'public' sphere more 'private' again. However, in the time that this comment exists, the blogger is usually inundated by many more supportive comments than usual.

Bloggers encourage their readers to make comments and frequently thank individuals for making a useful, wise or just funny reply. One woman urged readers to seek out her mother's new blog and to leave a comment so that she knew that people were reading her. Another, an administrative assistant from Minnesota, ruminated on how her attitude to blogging had changed in the two years she had been writing:

I've realized some things recently. One is that all I seem to be doing with this blog lately is whining, bitching, moaning, crying, etc. I feel like I sound down or negative almost all the time lately. I don't know what my

original purpose with this blog was, but this doesn't seem like what I had in mind. Suddenly it feels like it has become less of an outlet, less of a 'journal' and more of an opportunity for me to seek the opinions of others – opinions that I'd never come across in offline-life, due to my fairly small circle of friends. I crave comments. I crave support. I crave attention. I crave the feedback.

It seems, therefore, that the women bloggers surveyed for this paper blog for a variety of reasons, some of which have been outlined by previous researchers. Such reasons might include a need to publish their creative writing; to keep a diary; to communicate with family and friends across distances or to vent their feelings and emotions about particular problems or events in their lives. However, the important overall factor in all of these reasons is that they do this *publicly*. All the blogs studied were publicly accessible on the Internet and made even more available to the general reader through joining a blog-tracking website. These women did not just want to write down their thoughts and feelings; they wanted the validation of their opinions which only comes from being read by others and receiving feedback. They could have chosen to write a diary or even to keep their blog private, accessible only by password by a chosen few. Instead, they chose to publish their lives and experiences to the world and welcomed comments, feedback and even the occasional criticism. Perhaps this can be best summed up by the description of blogging given by a divorced college lecturer somewhere in North Carolina as 'A public forum where someone non-judgmental is theoretically listening.'

All blogs are quoted anonymously and with permission.

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