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Weblogs - a Definition and Classification

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1 Introduction

Over the past few years, "weblogs" have gained importance in the on-line world. In 2004, *Merriam-Webster* named "blog" (the short form of weblog) as their Word of the Year, based on online lookups¹ (*BBC News*) – a good indicator of a broadening of the weblogs' scope. Most people will have come across terms such as weblog, blog, blogger, and maybe even blogosphere in the mainstream media by now. Still, as it is often the case with new developments, many questions arise. For example: what exactly constitutes a weblog? What different types exist? Having decided that blogs deserve to be looked at in this format, I aim to provide answers to some of these questions.

The first part of this paper will deal with the former question. After defining the term weblog and looking at its ongoing shift in meaning, I will give some general information on blogs, along with a glimpse at selected technical features. To provide better understanding of blogs, I will portray the idea of the "two-way Web" and offer a glance at wikis, a similar phenomenon, before concluding the first chapter with a look at some of the problems facing weblogs.

The second chapter presents different types of weblogs, thereby answering the latter question. This categorization of blogs is necessary due to enormous differences regarding their style and content – but above all, their intention. In the course of this chapter, I will point out some of the problems the groups face, along with giving examples for each of the types specified.

Finally, in the conclusion, I will evaluate the success in answering the questions posed and list areas prompting further research.

¹ discarding swear words and common "problem words"

2 What is a Weblog?

The term "weblog" was introduced by the writer Jorn Barger in 1997. In an interview conducted in 1999, Barger states that by the time of his arrival on the Web in 1997, "the Web had grown into a vast impenetrable treasure cave, generally in pitch blackness" (Rhodes). He decided to "devote full time to lighting up the dark corners" while: "keeping up a running commentary in my weblog." To this day, Barger's weblog² offers his list of selected links, updated daily. In early 1999, Peter Merholz³ coined the term "blog" in the sidebar of his weblog: "I've decided to pronounce the word 'weblog' as wee'- blog. Or 'blog' for short". "Blog" was interpreted as both a short form of the noun and as the verb "to blog". The term was picked up by one of the first web-based blogging tools, *Blogger*⁴, helping spread its usage. To this day, both versions of the word are in general use.

Originally the usage of the words blog and weblog was simple: a log of the World Wide Web. Over the years, with different types of weblogs emerging, the meaning of the term has shifted. *Webster's New Millennium Dictionary of English*⁵ provides entries for the terms blog and weblog, respectively:

Main Entry: blog

. . .

Definition: an online diary; a personal chronological log of thoughts published on a Web page; also called Weblog, Web log

. . .

Usage: blog, blogged, blogging v, blogger n

Main Entry: weblog

. . .

Definition: a personal Web site that provides updated headlines and news articles of other sites that are of interest to the user, also may include journal entries, commentaries and recommendations compiled by the user; also written web log, Weblog; also called blog

Usage: computing

In my opinion, the separation into two entries is not according to prevalent usage of the term. In fact, both entries describe certain types of weblogs: diary, chronicle and journal blogs.

2 <http://www.robotwisdom.com/>

3 <http://www.peterme.com/>

4 <http://www.blogger.com/>

5 Preview Edition (v 0.9.5)

This highlights the fact that the term weblog is not as clearly defined as it had once been. In its entry on weblogs, the *Meatball Wiki* takes this a step further: "Due to the progressive mutation of the term weblog, it's pretty much a meaningless term." Nevertheless, to be able to take a closer look at blogs, it is necessary to provide the reader with a definition of the matter at hand, finding out what divides and what unites the different types of blogs in existence today. There are, of course, exceptions to most of the characterizations given.

Generally speaking, a weblog is simply a personal Web page, featuring original, unedited writing by its author. A weblog consists of periodical date- and time-stamped entries which are listed in reverse chronological order. Most blogs offer a comprehensive archive of previous posts, allowing the reader to browse through the whole weblog, dating back to its creation. Common to the vast majority of blogs is their feature of linking to sites of interest on the Web, usually with subjective comments made by the author. These link collections are typically accessible to any Internet user, free of charge. While weblogs can be maintained by both a single author and a community of writers, they are rarely the work of the maintainer alone. A key feature makes them stand out amongst Web pages: the ability for any user to comment on blog entries. Along with helping democratize the Web, this feature has made blogs the format of choice for various purposes, which I will look at in the following chapter.

To better understand how weblogs differ from other Web pages, it is necessary to take a short look at some of the technologies employed. Amongst these are "blogrolls" – collections of links to other blogs dealing with similar issues – and more significantly "trackbacks" and "pingbacks": direct links to entries on other blogs commenting on the given entry of the source blog. This feature can be extremely interesting for the reader: firstly, it gives information regarding the perceived validity and the significance accredited to the blog entry by the blogger community, and secondly, it may provide different viewpoints on the subject at hand. The "permalink" for a blog entry is a permanent link to this entry which stays valid even after the entry is moved into the archive. Generally, certain links on Web sites – and thus also on weblogs – are temporary, often due to technical reasons arising during a page's creation. Only by incorporating additional software or enhancing existing software to provide a per-

manent link for a web page, news story, blog entry, etc., is it possible to create time-independent quotes or bookmarks.

In the early years of the development of weblogs, their creation was limited to technologically savvy individuals who were generally the only ones capable of publishing Web pages. This changed in 1999, dramatically broadening the scope of weblogs. The crucial proliferation was brought about by the advent of web-based blogging tools. These easy-to-use applications enabled anyone with Internet access and very rudimentary knowledge of Web pages to create their own weblogs. Arguably the single most important event for weblogs, it helped lead to a further democratization of the Web, reintroducing its original theory: a "two-way Web".

When Tim Berners-Lee⁶ created the original Web browser⁷ in 1990, it featured the ability to read Web pages – as all contemporary browsers do – but also enabled the surfer to edit pages online: this was the "two-way Web". His idea was that Web pages would simply hold information, with layout and style being added by the browser software according to user preference. If the user can define a personal, uniform way for Web pages to be displayed, the advantage is clear: a layout of his choice, a clear navigation – thus providing swifter access to information. However, the Web developed differently. Design and layout are fixed for the vast majority of Web sites – not according to user preference, but according to editor preference. Now every browser displays a given Web page nearly identically – very much like a printed page. This focus of design and layout on the server side goes hand in hand with the "read-only" effect: the browser simply displays the Web page the way it is told to and in most cases does not give the surfer the option of editing any content. Blogs are one exception to this; wikis are another.

Like blogs, wikis re-implement the idea of editable Web pages. They do this in a slightly different way, however. Instead of presenting single entries in a chronological order – as blogs do – wikis generally offer entries sorted by topics. There is no reliance on a comment system to offer interaction. Each wiki entry can be edited in its entirety by any one of the wiki's allowed editors. Since most wikis are set up to enable maximum interaction, they allow any Web user to edit any entry. This unique

6 Inventor of the World Wide Web, cf. <http://www.w3.org/People/Berners-Lee/>

7 <http://www.w3.org/People/Berners-Lee/WorldWideWeb.html>

feature has the consequence of wikis generally offering a broad view on any given subject. They are becoming extremely popular for online lookups and are displaying phenomenal growth. Started in January 2001, the *Wikipedia*⁸ offers a place for its world-wide community of editors to freely gather knowledge and make it easily accessible to its readership. By its own account, the *Wikipedia* has already grown to be the world's largest encyclopedia, featuring 460,000 articles in the English language alone and growing at a rate of 3,000 per day⁹. As a comparison, the largest traditional English-language encyclopedia, the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, offers 65,000 articles in its printed form and 120,000 articles in its online version¹⁰.

Weblogs and wikis face some similar problems. One major point of criticism is their lack of authority as a reliable source for news or reference. Rebecca Blood, self-described writer, speaker and blogging pioneer, stresses the importance of transparency in weblogs. In an excerpt titled "Weblog Ethics", taken from her 2002 publication "The Weblog Handbook: Practical Advice on Creating and Maintaining Your Blog", she proposes six rules for ensuring blog ethics, stating:

[E]ach of these suggestions attempts to bring transparency--one of the weblog's distinguishing characteristics and greatest strengths--into every aspect of the practice of weblogging. It is unrealistic to expect every weblogger to present an even-handed picture of the world, but it is very reasonable to expect them to be forthcoming about their sources, biases, and behavior.
(Blood)

While there appears to be a general consensus regarding the need of transparency for weblogs, particularly one point in Blood's list prompts discussion: "4. Write each entry as if it could not be changed; add to, but do not rewrite or delete, any entry." In his entry "Weblog Ethics", Jonathon Delacour comments:

This rule exemplifies how Rebecca Blood's enterprise is based on the rules and practices of traditional media . . . The expectation is that the information is immutable, that it has been inscribed on a stone tablet.
I find this difficult to accept. Rather I'd prefer to rewrite entries as many times as I choose, *in the interests of improving the writing and getting closer to the emotional*

8 <http://en.wikipedia.org/>

9 As of February 2005

10 As of 2004

and intellectual truth of the story. I'm not writing a book, or a magazine article; and I'm not writing journalism.

Delacour claims not to be writing journalism; he goes on to state that other rules then apply. However, he does make a concession: "I'll ensure that any subsequent editing does not negate the essence of the original post." This is an important point: if the essence of the post is modified, comments might be rendered nonsensical. What defines the essence of the post has to be left up to the blogger. In the further comments regarding Delacour's entry, Chloe – also a blogger – differentiates between a blog as a work of personal art and as a form of news. This highlights the importance of taking the various goals of weblogs into account, especially when proposing a set of rules for them to abide by. In the following chapter, I will take a look at the different types of weblogs to be found.

3 Types of Weblogs

Due to the rapid, ongoing evolution of weblogs, there can be no clear-cut classification into different types. Of the various categorizations to be found, I prefer a content-driven approach to a format-driven one. The weblog entries on *Wikipedia* and *Meatball Wiki* offer somewhat different categorizations, with the *Meatball Wiki* focusing more on the content factor. It offers a categorization into five different types of weblogs: chronicle, journal, diary, soap box and community blog. I will take the liberty of merging the types journal and soap box into one class, as the segregation criterion is one of format. There are definitely overlaps and some blogs might fit into more than one class.

3.1 Chronicle Blog

Meatball Wiki defines a chronicle as an "objective, time-ordered history of events that happened in the world at large." This can well be seen as the original form of weblogs: a log of the Web – or at least of one small part of the Web. Common examples of chronicles would be pages such as *Recent changes* or *What's new* found on countless Web sites, e.g. *Google Blog*¹¹. The first of these weblogs was published long before the term weblog came into usage: it was Tim Berners-Lee's *What's new* page, started in 1989. Some companies employ blogs of this type to keep customers updated. Chronicles often differ from other weblogs by not allowing comments. Readers of these weblogs are commonly surfers who wish to be kept informed of updates regarding one specific Web site or company.

3.2 Journal Blog / Soap Box Blog

According to the *Meatball Wiki*, a journal blog is a "subjective, time-ordered history of events that happened to the author" and a soap box blog an "OnlineCommunity [sic] that formats discussion by a strict dichotomy between time-ordered articles . . . written by the soapboxer and separate, second-party commentary by TheAudience [sic]."

This type is what many people now understand as *the* weblog: a journal with a certain topic, consisting of pages the author found while surfing the Web, or – as the case may be – of the pages the author wants the community to see. Often everyone is given the ability to provide com-

¹¹ <http://www.google.com/googleblog/>

ments on the blog entries, thus enabling dialog between the blog's author and its community. One of the first – and claiming to be the longest currently running – weblogs, Dave Winer's *Scripting News*¹², started on April 1, 1997, falls into this category.

Journal weblogs often provide a good counterpoint to official news sources. However, they are sometimes also used as a primary source of news – tempting, as the hand-selected links deal with the weblog's topic, and thus offer a guide to Web pages or news items which are likely to be of interest to the readership. They have the ability of providing nearly instant commentary on televised events. This ability was proven in the run-up to the United States presidential election of 2004, as both political parties invited selected bloggers to their conventions. It is important to remember that most blogs are subjective, as is their selection of stories and links. Barely any blogs are impartial – and barely any claim to be.

This impartiality becomes especially apparent in politically motivated blogs. *Daily Kos*¹³ is one of the most influential liberal blogs in the United States, run by Markos Moulitsas Zúniga, a US Army veteran. One of the most widely-read blogs in the world overall, *Instapundit*¹⁴, published by Glenn Reynolds, a professor of law at the University of Tennessee, is an example of a conservative political weblog. *Instapundit* is often referred to as a "war blog" due to its frequent and sympathetic coverage of the US war on terrorism and the war in Iraq.

To illustrate just how one-sided the selection of links – and thus, the picture painted – can be, here are two entries posted on these two weblogs, both dealing with articles on *DER SPIEGEL*: "Bush cancels...when German event can't be scripted" (*Daily Kos*, 23 Feb 2005) and "DER SPIEGEL: 'Could George W. Bush be right?'" (*Instapundit*, 23 Feb 2005). Both articles deal with Bush's visit to Germany, and both were published on the English online version of *DER SPIEGEL* – on the same day, within six hours of each other. Nevertheless, the conservative *Instapundit* makes no mention of the article reporting the White House's refusal to accept an unscripted "town hall"-style meeting in Germany, while the liberal *Daily Kos* fails to report on the commentary likening George W. Bush's visit to Mainz in 2005 to Ronald Reagan's visit to Berlin

12 <http://www.scriptingnews.com/>

13 <http://www.dailykos.com/>

14 <http://instapundit.com/>

in 1987. As with any form of news, it is important to draw on different sources to ensure creating as objective a picture as possible – maybe even more so when drawing on weblogs, due to their nature of unedited, unmoderated presentation.

Other topics covered by journal and soap box blogs include press criticism blogs such as *PressThink*¹⁵ by Jay Rosen, Associate Professor at New York University, Department of Journalism; IT related news blogs such as the influential *SlashDot*¹⁶; consumer product blogs such as *Gizmodo*¹⁷, "The gadgets weblog"; corporate blogs such as *Hewlett Packard's* "HP Enterprise blogs"¹⁸, featuring an array of both executive and technical blogs; blogs by soldiers, often referred to as "milblogs"; and even gossip blogs.

3.3 Diary Blog

The *Meatball Wiki* defines a diary as a "subjective, time-ordered introspective analysis of oneself." The proliferation of web-based blogging tools has led to an influx of blogs of this type. They can be found in abundance on free online blogging Web sites, such as *Blogger*, and deal with any topic imaginable.

Due to their contents often being perceived as trivial, diary weblogs are criticized for being responsible for the general increase of uninformative Web pages. *PeriodicDivisions*, itself a blog, warns in its *Blogger Manifesto* of "a widening Internet wasteland as weblog authors produce unwitting editorial content without journalistic sensibility." Personally, I do not see this as a problem due to the temporary nature of the Internet. Any Web pages, including weblogs, will "naturally" disappear from Internet as soon as there is no interest in them for a given amount of time.

It is also important to point out that while a vast number of diary blogs do deal with the completely harmless and trivial, many also deal with personal hardship and first-person accounts of illnesses. One recent example is the *Tumour diary*¹⁹ by *BBC News'* late science and technology writer Ivan Noble who, after being diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor in August 2002, shared his experiences in a weblog until his death in January 2005.

15 <http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/>

16 <http://www.slashdot.org/>

17 <http://www.gizmodo.com/>

18 <http://www.hp.com/go/blogs>

19 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/4211475.stm>

3.4 Community Blog

The final genre in *Meatball Wiki*'s list is described as a "blog that is aggregated from the individual posts in a community." One example, the *SeaBlogs*²⁰, sees itself as a blog portal, while another, *AustinBloggers*²¹, refers to itself as a meta-blog. This type of blog is interesting insofar as it gives the reader an overview over a whole community of bloggers. While the community in these two cases is defined by geographical proximity, numerous other community blogs are imaginable.

20 <http://seablogs.hellbent.org/>

21 <http://www.austinbloggers.org/>

4 Conclusion

In this paper I have answered the questions posed on blogs regarding their definition and types. It has become obvious that due to their on-going evolution, blogs are not as clearly definable as may have been expected. However, the incessant new developments are one of the key aspects making further research interesting. And although blogs can already be seen as an old feature of the Internet, they do prompt further research in quite a few areas.

Especially the growing interaction between journal blogs and the traditional media appears to be a highly interesting one. While the "MSM" – as bloggers generally refer to the mainstream media – naturally affects the contents of news blogs simply by being their major source, it is becoming increasingly apparent that this interaction is two-sided. By means of their unique ability to spread information, blogs can keep a news story alive, thus exerting pressure on established news sources. But weblogs not only shape and spin existing news items: in certain cases blogs are being accredited with breaking news items. This new ability provokes further questions: Can certain blogs be regarded as journalistic works, in spite of their unedited and unmoderated nature and their subjectivity? And if so, what moral codes should they abide by? What further influence will they have on the Internet, on the media, and on society in general?

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