

Categorizing Blogs as Information Sources for Libraries and Information Science

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INTRODUCTION

Why should libraries and information scholars care about blogs (or weblogs)? Blogs are widespread and Nielsen (2012) estimates that “6.7 million people publish blogs on blogging websites, and another 12 million write blogs using their social networks” (para. 2). A study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project shows the changes in blogging that have occurred between 2006, 2009 and 2010 (Zickuhr, 2010; Lenhart, Purcell, Smith & Zickuhr, 2010). Blogging was primarily an activity of teens in 2006, who shared their lived experiences with peers. Furthermore, the Pew reports that only 14% of teens ages 12–17 worked on their own blog in 2009 in comparison to 28% in 2006, suggesting that other social media sites, such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, are probably replacing blogs for young people (Lenhart et al., 2010). Even though blogging is less popular among teens than it was a few years ago (Lenhart & Fox, 2006), all other age groups are showing an increase in blogging (Lenhart et al., 2010). This may suggest that the role of blogs in society may be changing from a medium primarily embraced by teens for self-expression to a medium that is more widely accepted among all age groups. While blogs have often been considered a type of social media and primarily geared toward supporting social interactions, their value as an information source has often been neglected. This neglect could also be linked to the fact that blogs were primarily used by teens for connecting with peers as the Pew Internet and American Life report shows. The strong presence of teens in the blogosphere could have yielded a biased perspective of the value of blogs as credible, accurate and current sources of information. As a result, little work has been

done to examine how blogs function as information sources, despite studies finding that blogs are relevant in supporting the work of various professionals, such as lawyers and judges (Maxwell, 2008) and journalists and foreign policy analysts (Drezner & Farrell, 2005). Moreover, key political stories are often reported first on blogs and only later diffused through the traditional media (Drezner & Farrell, 2005). Blogs have served as a unique outlet for political commentary and debate, allowing for multiple voices and perspectives on key societal issues to be presented. Clyde (2004a) has also found that blogs serve as information sources capturing current developments in the existing state of knowledge for various professional specializations. In addition, blogs provide news and information about products and services offered by businesses as well as customer reviews on company products and services.

The use of blogs for meeting information needs warrants investigation into how blogs fit into the established spectrum of information sources formally recognized by information scientists (e.g., Leckie, Pettigrew & Sylvain, 1996). As professionals, customers, companies and hobbyists continue to create and to use blogs, and as the diversity of blog usage continues to grow, it becomes increasingly relevant to investigate where blogs fit into existing typologies. It is also relevant to determine if issues of credibility, trust and currency can be addressed within the blogosphere. To address these pressing issues, the present article has the following four objectives:

1. To provide background information on the research on blogs by discussing definitions and categorizations of blogs.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-5888-2.ch475

2. To examine the literature in information science to obtain a good understanding of how information sources are categorized and how blogs could fit into these existing frameworks.
3. To argue for an understanding of blogs as not only social spaces, but also as sources of information that need to be better examined in terms of credibility, trustworthiness and currency.
4. To discuss possibilities for how blogs can be integrated into the collection development efforts of academic and public libraries to better serve patrons.

BACKGROUND

Definitions of Blogs

Due to the newness and continued evolution of the blog, there exists an ongoing debate as to how best to define this term. Blogs—as many social media tools—are also constantly evolving and this problematizes defining what constitutes a blog (Garden, 2011, Hogan & Quan-Haase, 2010). Blogs are considered Webpages with briefly and regularly updated content arranged chronologically (Clyde, 2004a). What distinguishes blogs from Webpages is the temporal dimension of information as it gets updated. Webpages contain information without much reference to when the information was posted and how current it is. Blogs on the other hand, are considered a part of Web 2.0 because these sites foster interactivity and connectivity via comments and linking, respectively. Apart from being conceptualized as Webpages, an entire debate has emerged in the literature about whether blogs are a medium or a genre of computer-mediated communication (CMC). To complicate matters, the literature presents ambiguous conceptualization of blogs, especially with the emergence of ‘microblogging’ applications, such as Twitter (Garden, 2011). How blogs link to microblogging is an important question to address. For instance, the Pew Internet and American Life Project measured microblogging separate from blogging in their 2010 study. They isolated participants’ creation and use of blogs from their use of microblogging. This suggests that blogging and microblogging are often studied as separate digital tools. The decrease in teens’ use

of blogging could perhaps reflect a move toward microblogging sites, such as Twitter. Therefore, clearly articulating which technologies fall under the umbrella term of blogging is central in any definition of the term.

At the most basic level, the definition of blogs focuses on the key technical features of this digital technology. Miles (2005) proposes that blogs possess certain technical features that distinguish them from other media of ‘electronic writing’. According to Miles (2005), blogs contain a hierarchy of text, images, media objects and data arranged chronologically that is accessible through a Web browser. However, Miles (2005) also adds that blogs must possess additional technical features in order to distinguish them from other Websites:

1. A heading,
2. Time and date stamp,
3. The presence of permalinks to postings,
4. A blogroll and
5. Support for comments and trackbacks.

Miles (2005) also argues that blogs unlike Webpages or Websites are created by more friendly content management systems (CMS), rather than Web authoring software. As such, blogs are distinguishable from Webpages and other electronic documents by a number of technical features specific to the medium.

For some scholars, blogs are the successors to personal Websites. Herring, Scheidt, Bonus and Wright (2004) conceptualize blogs as being related to, or replacing, personal Websites created by single individuals with content focusing on the blogger’s life or interests (Herring, et al., 2004). However, Clyde (2004a) suggests that not all blogs are created by single individuals, as some blogs are produced by institutions, organizations, or groups. Hence, it is possible that blogs are the successors of not only personal, but also institutional Websites. Blogs have, however, not replaced Websites, but rather users tend to have Websites that link to blogs. This provides maximum flexibility in terms of the production and dissemination of content. Moreover, many institutions, government agencies and companies have a blog that is current, frequently updated and provides in-depth commentary in addition to having a Website containing content that changes infrequently.

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