

Chapter 30

Researching Community in Distributed Environments: Approaches for Studying Cross-Blog Interactions

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter we examine how a variety of research approaches can be applied to the study of cross-blog interactions. Cross-blog interactions can be challenging to study because of they often require the researcher to reconsider traditional notions of temporality, discourse space, and conversation. Further, in many instances they are neither static nor well defined; defining the beginning and end of a discussion as well as locating all components of the discussion can be difficult. For this reason, we advocate a blend of six approaches (social network analysis, content analysis, discourse analysis, conversation analysis, narrative analysis, and ethnography). For each, we discuss strengths and limitations and provide examples of how the approach may be used to help fully capture the complexity of these interactions. Additionally we discuss web-based tools that are helpful when engaged in this type of research.

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, blog-based communities in which people write in a diaristic manner about their lives, thoughts, and interests, have increas-

ingly developed around the Internet. Their development has been a largely informal process as people connect with others who either have shared interests or are otherwise considered desirable virtual neighbors. These communities exist around many topics, including parenting, knitting,

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medical conditions, cooking, and travel, and a wide variety of professions including education, research, medicine, politics, and library science.

A shared hobby, lifestyle, or profession is the glue that initially binds many of these communities. At first, a small group of individuals start their own blogs and find other individuals with blogs toward which they feel an affinity. These bloggers connect to each other via links and comments. Over time these small networks attract others who are initially readers but become commenters and/or bloggers themselves. This second phase of community development encompasses both people who intentionally begin blogging in order to be part of the network as well as people who have long been silo-style bloggers or bloggers in other networks who later make the decision to connect into the community.

Community connections in online settings, particularly distributed ones like blogs, are complex. What may initially appear to be individual posts on individual blogs upon closer inspection reveals itself as a complex, interwoven dialogue of sorts among multiple participants, not necessarily all aware of each other, across multiple spaces. These dialogues are read, in part or whole, by the bloggers, their commenters, and unknown lurkers. In most cases the availability of blog archives means that the dialogues linger on well past their initial active phase.

In this chapter, we examine issues related to researching these blog-based interactions. First we raise some of the challenges facing researchers who work in this area. Next we discuss how a variety of research methods and approaches might be used, both alone and together, to look at various elements of blogging interactions. Finally, we share ways in which Web-based tools may be used to support these research efforts. Our findings here are based both on our experiences as researchers studying blog-based communities of practice and on our readings in this area.

BACKGROUND AND BRIEF REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The growing body of research on blogs represents a variety of topics, including the traits and motivations of bloggers (Miura & Yamashita, 2007; Stefanone & Jang, 2008), identity issues (Dennen, in press; Qian & Scott, 2007), content, characteristics and taxonomic categories for blogs (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2005; Lagu, Kaufman, Asch, & Armstrong, 2008), the impact of blogging on people's lives (Baker & Moore, 2008), and how blogging might be characterized within a particular country or culture (Trammell, Tarkowski, Hofmoki, & Sapp, 2006). Many, although not all, of these studies have looked at blogs and bloggers as individual units, surveying or observing them in a singular context. However, blogs are an interactive medium and often blogging is a community enhancing or community founding activity. By community enhancing, we refer to blogs that are used to enhance communities that already exist in other forms, like face-to-face social networks and professional organizations. Studies in this area have looked at how real-life acquaintances interact via blogs (Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, 2004; Takhteyev & Hall, 2005). In the community foundation sense, blogs represent the backbone of a community, and the community typically is one that would not exist were it not for blogs. Studies in this area have shown how communities have formed around collections of individually authored blogs (Dennen, 2006; Dennen & Pashnyak, 2008; Qian, 2008; Wei, 2004) and around single blogs with a larger readership that is active either via collective authorship (Silva, Goel, & Mousavidin, 2008) or, in the case of sole-authored blogs, comments (Blanchard, 2004).

Community is one reason why people blog, although it should be noted that not all bloggers engage in community interactions and a large number of blogs exist in relative isolation (Herring et al., 2005). Bloggers who have strong social ties

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