



Imagining the Blogosphere: An Introduction to the Imagined Community of Instant Publishing

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"The Blogging Iceberg," a survey conducted by the Perseus Development Company (2003), found that two thirds of public weblogs created via centralized hosting services have not been updated in two months and are considered "abandoned." Furthermore, 1.09 million of these have been deemed "one-day wonders"—blogs that were posted to just once and have not been touched since. The remainder of the abandoned blogs averaged a lifespan of just four months. Of the 1.4 million active blogs surveyed, 80.8% contained at least one external link, yet only 9.9% contained a current link to a traditional news source. Taking this data, Perseus concluded that the blogosphere takes on the form of an iceberg whose vast bulk floats out of sight and out of mind. Blogs above the waterline—those which are frequently updated, widely read, and consistently linked—may represent the conception of blogs in the public mind, but they are not representative of blogs in general. They instead found that the "typical blog" is written by "a teenage girl who uses it twice a month to update her friends and classmates on happenings in her life." These blogs have "nanoaudiences" comprised of a blogger's friends and family. They are rarely linked to by other blogs, and they more closely resemble personal diaries rather than the classic link-commentary mode of blogging.

For those making a case for the blogosphere as a community, the results of the Perseus study are anything but encouraging. How can a community be said to exist among individuals, the vast majority of whom have never met one another and do not communicate with one another? The easy answer is to declare that the blogging community does not exist, that the blogosphere is not a cohesive group of people who share common goals and values. This answer, however, does not account for the widespread notion of the transnational blogging community or for the persistence of the blogger identity. A clearer answer to the community conundrum lies somewhere between the hype of a new and revolutionary online community and the sobering statistical reality of the Perseus study. In the absence of strong interpersonal links among members of the blogosphere, an alternative explanation for the persistence of community is needed. At the core of the blogosphere lies a minority of active and engaged bloggers who post, comment, and link frequently, creating a kernel of conversational community based on personal networks facilitated by blogging tools and associated technologies. However, for the vast majority of users who blog casually, infrequently, and for the benefit of their real-world friends and family, the blogosphere does not exist in the ethereal, hyperlinked connections that bind blogs to one another; rather, it resides in the mind of the individual blogger as an online imagined community resulting from the shared experience of instant publishing. In order to understand the nature of the blogosphere's community as a whole, one must acknowledge the differences between these forms of blogging as well as the inherent value of each.

Imagining Community

To say that the wider blogging community is imagined should not be taken to mean that its very existence is in doubt; indeed, nearly all communities to which human beings belong are imagined in some manner or another. In his pivotal work *Imagined Communities* (1991), political scientist Benedict Anderson argues "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined." Although Anderson concerns himself with the rise of nationalism and its particular version of the imagined community, his call to distinguish such communities by "the style in which they are imagined" is a promising framework for analyzing

and describing the features of any given imagined community. In the case of the blogosphere, the sense of community is coaxed into existence within the minds of its members in a style that stems from the instant publishing medium itself to create a discursive, transnational, online imagined community.

Anderson (1991) credits the daily newspaper with creating the necessary preconditions for the rise of the modern nation-state; the reading of the morning paper is a "mass ceremony" during which individuals receive information relevant to their lives within the national community. More importantly, the reader imagines that "the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion." Bloggers consume information in a similarly ritualistic manner—albeit via computer monitor rather than newsprint. Clicking from link to link replaces flipping from page to page. However, between print journalism and instant-publishing lies a number of key differences that distinguish the style of bloggers' imagined community. Unlike the profit-driven enterprise of Anderson's print-capitalism, the economy of the blogosphere is driven by the free dissemination of texts produced by unpaid amateurs. This distinction between the not-for-profit gift economy of the blogosphere and the market economy of the traditional press has been cited by press critic Jay Rosen (2003) as the number one indication that weblog-based journalism represents a substantial shift from the status quo.

The form of journalism found in the blogosphere has the potential to pull power away from the dominant one-way communication of formal and professional print and broadcast journalism to a decentralized realm of individual publishers who not only consume texts but also produce texts that are circulated, reproduced, and consumed by others. The blogosphere forms an imagined community based on a new form of amateurized and personalized journalism practiced by persons who may never meet one another yet can engage in conversation and share a common identity. This journalism can be considered personal because the output of a singular blog is closely linked with the personality of its author. Because it is generally understood that a blog directly represents the intent of the person who produces it, a blog empowers the writer with greater freedom to provide colorful, subjective, and political commentary than would be possible within the framework of a traditional media outlet, which has an economic interest in maintaining a sense of detached objectivity.

Although the blogosphere may still largely depend upon traditional media sources for breaking news and for costly investigative reporting, the blogosphere has been said to form a unique symbiotic relationship, or "ecosystem," with the global mediascape (Hiler, 2002). In a number of widely-publicized instances, such as the 9-11 terrorist attacks and the comments made by Senator Trent Lott at Strom Thurmond's 100th birthday celebration, bloggers have covered stories in ways that the mainstream media could not or would not. During the terrorist attacks, blogs were able to provide first-hand, unedited accounts of ordinary people in New York and Washington that otherwise may have been lost amid broadcast media's more pressing coverage of overarching national security issues (Rainie, Fox, & Madden, 2002). In the case of Lott, it was bloggers like Joshua Marshall of Talking Points Memo and Atrios of Eschaton who pointed out the racist nature of his comments and kept the pressure on until the mainstream media took notice. When Lott eventually resigned his post as Senate Minority Leader, bloggers were given credit for keeping the story alive when the traditional media had let it slip through the cracks (Scott, 2004). These two events not only helped to define bloggers for the public as a kind of rag-tag group of lone wolf journalists, but also further reinforced the community's own sense of purpose, uniqueness, and import.

By facilitating the entrance of laypersons into online discussions regarding national and international events, issues, and ideas, the process of blogging has a democratizing effect that can evoke feelings of shared experience. Anderson (1991) rhetorically asked of the imagined nation of mass consumption of common news, "what more vivid figure for the secular, historically clogged, imagined community can be envisioned?" The answer is clearly the

blogosphere, which simultaneously engages users as both consumers and producers. Whereas the novel and the newspaper were the two media forms that "provided the technical means for 're-presenting' the kind of imagined community that is the nation," it is the instant electronic production and consumption of texts that has given rise to the blogosphere. Because of the nature of hypertext and the web, bloggers have the ability to provide their readers with one-click access to the information upon which they are basing their opinion and analysis of a given issue. On this point, blogging clearly has the upper hand on print and broadcast journalism. For forming community, hyperlinks become essential for creating the central core of the blogosphere. Bloggers have the ability to publicly debate issues back and forth by directly linking to one another's posts as well as news articles that may serve as source material.

At its most developed point, the so-called link-commentary style of blogging becomes conversational, with the emergent web of connections growing denser with each additional post. Take the debate over Clay Shirky's "Power Laws, Weblogs, and Inequality" (2003) as the paragon of blogging-as-discussion. Shirky's essay on the distribution of influence and power in the blogosphere is still being debated and has followed Tom Coates' model for discussion in the community (2003). Within this model, discussion resembles an amateurized academic citation network, with each new argument referencing the original work and influential derivative works.

It is among these small, tightly knit bundles of blogs where a kernel of real interactive community lies; however, this is the point of departure from which the blogosphere's wider community must be imagined in the mind of the individual. The vast majority of bloggers do not link to the works of other bloggers and debate issues back and forth. Rather, they use their blogs as personal diaries or to keep in touch with friends and relatives whom they already know from "meatspace," or the off-line world (Perseus, 2003). A study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that only about 10% of American bloggers update their sites daily and 60% update their blogs 1-2 times per week or less (Lenhart, Horrigan, & Fallows, 2004). These results indicate that the perception of blogging as a rapid-fire back-and-forth exchange actually only describes a very small minority of the blogosphere, which itself only comprises about 2-7% of the entire Internet population.

With this new data, a clear separation can be seen in the blogosphere between an active, highly social core and a large periphery that is disengaged from that core. It is within this periphery, containing the hundreds of thousands of "teenage girls" who have been wrongly disparaged as not contributing anything useful to the web (Orlowski, 2003), that the blogosphere as imagined community thrives. For those on the periphery, who mainly orient their blogs to those with whom they already have established relationships, the main force that keeps them within the blogosphere is the ritual of posting their thoughts and feelings to the web. This ritual may not be daily, as indicated in both the Perseus and Pew studies, but it nonetheless defines a certain class of people who use a shared technology to produce amateur works of writing to be read by others.

To further understand the structure of this online imagined community, one must look to the very medium on which it is based and the kinds of communication to which it lends itself.

Filtering Community

The most striking feature of the imagined community of blogging is that it enables users to both experience a shared base of knowledge and to contribute directly to that cultural consciousness. It all begins with the basic unit of "blogdom"—the singular blog, an entity comprised of distinct, short chunks of information arranged in reverse chronological order. A blog is also likely to include links to external sites and commenting mechanisms by which readers can react and respond, and participate in conversation (Blood, 2000). This medium emphasizes currentness (the quality of being current or up-to-date) by placing the most recent posts at the top of the

page. It allows for interaction in the small scale by giving readers the opportunity to add their own thoughts to an individual blog. It facilitates interaction in the large scale by promoting hyperlinking among individual blogs.

With so many people being able to publish so much content for such little investment, filtering is essential for individuals wanting to make sense of the decentralized jumble of blogs. Because there are so many thousands of diarist bloggers within the blogosphere, filters must act to promote stories and posts that represent the more common interest of the larger community. While a diarist's account of her Friday night activities may be of interest to her friends, it is most likely not relevant to the other hundreds of thousands of bloggers the world over. Importantly though, as Shirky (2004) notes, filtering in the blogging community occurs after the act of publishing, guaranteeing that one's work is always available for reading even if it is not actually widely read.

The blogosphere filters content more collaboratively and without the same profit motive of print-capitalism, making it more open to outside voices and dissenting views. The critical difference between the front-page stories of newspapers and the top-rated stories on blog indices is that in the blogosphere, there exists no editorial board with centralized authority to decide what constitutes news for the greater community—the community itself decides (with the help of mathematical algorithms and a bit of clever programming). Free of many of the constraints of Anderson's print capitalism, the blogosphere filters content more democratically than national media outlets and indeed forms its own unique mediascape, to borrow a helpful and illustrative term from Arjun Appadurai (1996). Instead of deciding what will be most profitable to promote, the blogosphere promotes what its members find to be most interesting by means of both human and automated processes.

This filtering occurs on the micro level through the work of individual bloggers who point to posts and news articles they find interesting; it also works on the macro level through aggregate blog indices like Blogdex, Technorati, Daypop, and Popdex. The aggregated filtering that occurs in the blogging community is based both on the perceived value of each discrete bit of information (an individual blog post) and the authority and exposure of the author (quantified by accumulated inbound links) within the community (Sifry, 2003b; MIT, 2003). Small-scale filtering engages bloggers with their readers and other community members; by pointing one's audience to other sites (both traditional media outlets and other blogs) via hyperlink, a blogger simultaneously strengthens the ties that bind the core of the blogosphere and also reinforces this dominant theme within the community. Large-scale filtering in the form of news aggregation serves a purpose more akin to traditional national print journalism—providing community members with a shared set of world events and issues that further allows individual bloggers to imagine themselves as part of a greater whole. While most diarist or small-audience blogs are left out of these types of rankings, at least one person has taken it upon himself to rework his indexing engine to be more favorable to newcomers. David Sifry of Technorati produced a new index on his site that reverses Shirky's power law to make it work in favor of the under-linked, providing greater exposure to lesser-known bloggers (Sifry, 2003a). Additional mechanisms that promote the quality writings of diarist bloggers would serve to promote that population within the blogosphere. Seeing more of their own kind of writing represented in the public blogging discourse would perhaps further enforce their feelings of belonging within the imagined community itself.

Global Audience, Global Access

As the blogosphere continues to grow and new members try to stake their place on the frontier, issues of access and attention will become increasingly important. Tools like Blogger and Movable Type have reduced barriers to online participation and have also removed the inherent authority with which the written word is imbued. As Shirky (2002) has noted, weblogs destroy the "intrinsic value" of publishing "because they are a platform for the unlimited reproduction and

distribution of the written word, for a low and fixed cost. No barriers to entry, no economies of scale, no limits on supply." Because of the financial investment behind traditional print publishing, the system has served as a preemptive filter that considers a text's marketability and profitability as well as its quality, making it more difficult for certain kinds of ideas to make it into cultural consciousnesses. Mass amateurization changes all this by enabling anyone with access to a computer to publish her or his work for the entire world. Being able to publish globally, however, by no means guarantees a global audience; the vast majority of bloggers continue to write in abject obscurity, and the vast majority of global citizens remain offline.

The low-cost appeal of instant publishing promotes a democratic feeling that permeates the blogosphere, but when one critically considers global Internet access and usage, it is clear that the community represents a relatively small number of global elites who have the luxury of time, talent, and expendable wealth. In this way the blogosphere parallels ancient Athens, with a system of enlightened democracy that was nonetheless restricted to the wealthy few. While there are no formal mechanisms barring entry into the blogosphere, the mere luxury of Internet access remains out of reach for the vast majority of global citizens. Although many blogging services may be free, the substantial amount of capital and operating costs needed to simply access the Internet are insurmountable obstacles to many in the developing world. Global patterns of information technology usage show that developing countries predictably lag behind developed countries both in terms of access and sophistication of use (Chen, Boase, & Wellman, 2002). Additionally, as previously noted, only 2-7% of Internet users have created weblogs, further enforcing the notion that the blogosphere includes an incredibly tiny proportion of the total global population (Lenhart, Horrigan, & Fallows, 2004).

Internet access and, subsequently, instant publishing access are not solely dependent upon individual wealth. In the case of American blogger Kevin Barbieux of "The Homeless Guy" fame, who is able to blog by going online at local libraries (Luo, 2003; Barbieux, 2003), national wealth, technological advancement, and public investment allow him greater access to the Internet as a homeless man living in the United States than could perhaps be afforded by a middle-class homeowner in Bangladesh. Adding to this global digital divide is the dominance of English on the Internet, which is reflected in the blogosphere as well; English-language blogs outnumber all other blogs three to one (NITLE, 2003). The promising response to Blogger's introduction of a Portuguese version of its software for users in Brazil (Rebêlo, 2002) demonstrates that there exists a demand for instant publishing in non-English contexts. Through these tailored blogging portals, tens of thousands of Brazilians have entered the blogosphere and have made Portuguese second only to English in its share of blogdom (NITLE, 2003). How the community reacts to changing transnational demographics as the blogosphere continues to incorporate more non-English bloggers will be an interesting topic of further research.

Conclusion

As the blogosphere grows and adapts to new demographics, the continued coherence of this online community is dependent upon the strengthening of shared experience and a fortification of what it means to be a blogger. Though the active core of the blogosphere has received the most attention for its effects on the global mediascape, the much larger periphery of diarist bloggers represents a vital part of this online community. While filtering out the bulk of the diarist's content may serve a valuable purpose in producing a cross-section of meaningful material for Internet users, it must be remembered that those hundreds of thousands of writers also add value to the blogosphere and should not be marginalized. The community must begin to find ways to promote the writings of diarist bloggers in order for their unique style of blogging to be more widely represented, which would serve to deepen the shared experience of diarist bloggers and subsequently strengthen the image of community. So far, the blogging community has been able to scale from a handful of early pioneers to a transnational imagined community of millions, but further research into the effects of increasing blog ubiquity on the blogger identity

will soon be warranted. For the foreseeable future, the imagined blogging community created by the mass ceremony of instant publishing will continue to produce previously unimaginable quantities of indexed, archived, and hyperlinked material that impacts people's every day lives.

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