Audiences as Media Producers: Content Analysis of 260 Blogs

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Advertised by blogger.com as “push-button publishing for the people,” blogs provide the opportunity for amateur journalism and personalized publishing. Blogger.com, the fastest and most prominent provider, claims 750,000 subscribers (www.blogger.com, accessed January 2004). Some of the most frequently cited blogs are hosted by journalists, like Andrew Sullivan (www.andrewsullivan.com) and Mickey Klaus (www.klausfiles.com). A weblog or blog is a webpage that consists of regular or daily posts, arranged in reverse chronological order and archived (e.g., Herring, Kouper, Scheidt & Wright, 2004). Blogs present a significant topic of study because they provide the opportunity to study media audiences as content producers instead of content consumers (Dominick, 1999; Papacharissi, 2002a, 2002b).

Blogs provide media consumers with an audience and a relatively audible voice; they also offer a virtual space where information ignored by mainstream media can be published. As Andrew Sullivan (2002) argues, blogging is “arguably the most significant media revolution since the arrival of television,” providing the ability to “make arguments, fact-check them and rebut them in a seamless and endless conversation” (A4). In addition, this study adds to the body of literature examining the role of the Internet as a revitalizer of social relations, together with growing research on the social potential of the Internet revealing beneficial and harmful behavioral consequences of Internet use (Katz & Aspden, 1997; Kraut et al., 1998, 2002; Nie & Erbring, 2000). Extensive studies of blogs have demonstrated their ability to create online networks social contact (e.g., Herring, Scheidt et al. 2004; Herring, Kouper et al., 2004).

Communication researchers have studied personal home pages in the past (Dominick, 1999; Papacharissi, 2002a, 2002b; Walker, 2000), but they have not focused on blogging, which is different because it: (a) utilizes more user-friendly software; (b) sometimes presupposes a journalistic approach; and (c) dictates a diary-like format and orientation. This study analyzes a random sample of all such blogs to determine content characteristics and speculate on gratifications obtained from sustaining them. This approach should help
us consider audiences as producers of media content, determine whether this technology extends the traditional boundaries of journalism and address the personal and social gratifications of blogging.

**Blogging as Self-Expression and Social Connectivity**

The advent of new media technologies—specifically, personalized publishing—has provided communication researchers with the opportunity to examine media audiences not just as consumers, but also as producers of mass media. Numerous aspects of creative online activity have thus been unveiled, focusing on self-expression, use of rhetorical strategies, socialization and display of alternative content. In an analysis of the rhetorical construction of self in personal websites, Smith (1998) studied strategies webpage hosts use to present the self and invite communication, revealed through a case study of a personal website focusing on fuller figured people. Smith explained how online tools allowed individuals to project their identity and establish connections with online audiences. Specifically, he constructed a taxonomy of web-based invitational strategies, identifying the following:

- feedback mechanisms (e-mail, guestbook and others)
- vertical hierarchies (the position of items on the page, from top to bottom)
- personal expertise
- external validation (awards bestowed upon the site)
- direct address
- personality

In the same vein, Dominick (1999) conducted a content analysis of personal home pages and found that the typical page had a brief biography, a counter or guest book and links to other pages. For Dominick, the manner in which individuals used links on their personal home pages as a means of social association was of special interest because people indirectly defined themselves and their social status by listing their interests and linking to other sites. Webpage hosts also sought positive reinforcement and social contact by inviting visitors to e-mail them or sign and view their “guestbooks” (collections of visitor signatures and comments). Even though most webpages did not contain much personal information, the strategies used for self-representation online were very similar to those used in face-to-face settings.

Walker examined several personal home pages qualitatively to study self-presentation online and found that several authors used personal home pages as a back-up for online interaction or to create and support a specific identity. The Internet facilitated expressions of connectedness through the use of hyperlinks and, at the same time, constrained personal expression through templates that enforced a certain type of structure and content (Walker, 2000).

This focus on self-presentation was further investigated by Papacharissi (2002a), who combined survey and content analysis to understand the utility
of personal home pages for their creators. Even though most web authors created a page for information- and entertainment-related purposes, several sustained one for self-expression purposes and to communicate with friends and family. Fewer used them for professional advancement or to pass time. The research also revealed that those less socially active and less satisfied with their lives tended to see the webpage as a way of passing the time and spent more time editing their pages and using the Internet. Overall, the results indicated that this medium further pronounced existent personality predispositions, allowing those who were social to become even more so, while those socially removed became more engrossed in solitary Internet-related activities.

A more extensive follow-up content analysis by Papacharissi (2002b) revealed that the creative potential of personal home pages was somewhat limited by personal home page providers, who inadvertently influenced page design for the less experienced users by providing specific design tools and templates. Therefore, AOL and MSN users were directed to less inventive and more limiting formats, and Geocities users were guided to create more original pages by tools that allowed greater innovation. These findings can be applied to blogs to understand variations in content, expressive strategies and the utility of blogs for individual users. Moreover, a study of content and design templates offered by blog providers can help determine how individual creativity is enhanced or compromised by the extent of publishing services offered.

Recent studies focusing on blogs have demonstrated bloggers’ tendency frequently to follow the templates provided by blogging venues faithfully. For instance, in a content analysis of a random sample of blogs, Scheidt and Wright (2004) found that bloggers did not deviate from the standard layout of the blog host and mostly used slightly altered templates provided by the blog venue. Most individual customization was located within a sidebar area, standard with most templates. The lack of visual customization points to the influence exerted by the design and tools offered by the blogspace provider and the primary function of blogs as tools of personal expression and connectivity, rather than artistic creativity.

The focus of this study, then, is to examine descriptive elements of blogs and possible gratification obtained from authoring them, while at the same time investigating the journalistic potential of this medium. Several studies suggest that the journalistic potential of blogs is frequently exaggerated in popular folklore, at the expense of more meaningful social objectives sustained by blogs (i.e., Herring et al., 2005; Herring, Kouper et al., 2004; Herring, Scheidt et al., 2004). Research on personal home pages, a precursor of blogs, also supports the social utility of the medium.

Several blogs feature information on national, local and personal news. Although blogs do not necessarily feature the extensive news content of online news sites, they do allow for personalization of news items and interactive communication with other bloggers and potential audience members; this
could be conceived as an alternate form of online journalism. Therefore, this study also includes the informational utility of blogs and assesses the quality of news items present on blogs.

To examine blogs as a new communication genre, the study focuses on general descriptive elements of blogs and centers on elements of content, structure and design. An examination of content should expand our understanding of the overall utility of the blog. Structure and design attest to the type of communication blogs support and encourage. Therefore, this study is guided by two research questions:

RQ1: What are descriptive elements of blogs?
RQ2: How are the content, structure and design of blogs interrelated?

Method

Sample and Procedures

The initial phase of this research focused on extensive perusal of blogs by collecting information on their characteristics, sketching out a codebook and codesheet for the content analysis, taking notes and conducting informal interviews with a handful of bloggers. Web logging providers offer web-based tools that allow bloggers to edit and update information online and instantaneously. This service is offered in exchange for some personal information; advanced services and support are usually offered at a monthly fee. Many blogs feature personal musings, while others focus on family communication, displaying news items, listing author interests and links or all of these combined.

The information collected during the initial phase of research informed the design of the codebook and codesheet, which were pilot tested on a small sample of blogs by two coders who had been properly trained to check for accuracy and intercoder reliability of the coding instrument. The research questions were investigated by employing a content analysis of a random sample of 260 blogs. If the web address led to a site that no longer existed, had switched focus or had mistakenly been identified as a portal by the search engine, that listing was skipped and the next one sampled, based on the sampling interval.

Because blogger.com was the primary host of blogs at the time the study was conducted and because it presents a pioneer in providing blogging space and the services that facilitate the practice, the complete sample for the study was randomly drawn from the user directories of blogger.com, employing a random sampling interval with a random starting point. Random sampling intervals and the starting point were calculated so as to ensure representative and comprehensive sampling from this blogging service. Blogger provides the software and hardware that render blogging convenient and accessible to large audiences. It also enjoys wide appeal and had a reputation for drawing a variety of bloggers at the time at which the study was conducted.
Given the lack of previous research on blogs, the focus of the study was
descriptive and explanatory. Therefore, the content analysis focused on
descriptive characteristics, structural features, content, design and estimated
uses and gratifications of blogs. An attempt was made to record information
regarding the gender and occupation of bloggers in instances when they were
clearly stated on the webpage.

The coders began by recording the URL and page title of the blog and also
recording the age of the blog and the latest date on which the content had been
updated. The age of the blog was calculated by visiting its archives and count-
ing the months for which it was active, with average blog age at 11.10 months
(SD = 12.51), and blog age ranging from less than a month to a total of 56
months (mode = 5 months). The date on which the blog was last updated pro-
vided some indication on the currency of the information presented and the
interest of the author in maintaining the blog. Based on information provided
on the blog, the two coders were able to determine the gender of 181 bloggers
(male = 52.5; female = 47.5). This gender distribution is closely aligned with
the gender distribution reported in studies of other blog domains (e.g., Her-
ring, Kouper et al., 2004), thus partially supporting the representativeness of
the sample.

Bloggers tended to be students (21.6%) or appeared to be employed as com-
puter consultants or programmers (12.5%), although it is important to keep in
mind that we were only able to obtain this information for half (50.4%) of our
sample through the blog site. Because the items involved information clearly
present on the site, the two coders reached complete intercoder agreement.
Reliability for all content analysis variables was calculated using the Perreault
and Leigh (1989) reliability index:

$$I_r = \left\{ \frac{F_o/N - (1/k)[k/(k-1)]]}{k} \right\}^{0.5}, \text{for } F_o/n > 1/k$$

where $F_o$ is the observed frequency of agreement between coders, $N$ is the total
number of judgments and $k$ is the number of categories.

This index accounts for coder chance agreement and the number of catego-
ries used and is sensitive to coding weaknesses. Reliability scores can range
from 0 to 1, with higher scores indicating greater intercoder agreement.

Structure
The coders recorded structural elements reflective of the organization of the
blog, focusing on textual extensiveness and the use and manipulation of tem-
plates. Extensiveness was captured by counting the number of words featured
on the blog index page. We focused on the index page as exemplary and typi-
cal of the content of the blog. Because blogs are structured like diaries, with a
central index page typically featuring the most or the last few recent entries,
the index page served as an adequate reflection of blog textual extensiveness.
The decision to select a blogger template and the tendency to deviate from it
were also recorded, the latter by employing a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("no template manipulation") to 5 ("a lot of template manipulation"). The two coders reached complete agreement on extensiveness and template use and .92 intercoder reliability on template manipulation.

**Design**

Coded design features included innovation, vividness, interactivity and sophistication. These measures were adapted from previous research involving personal home pages and online journalism (Papacharissi, 2002a, 2002b; Walker, 2000). Interactivity was measured on a semantic differential scale, employing a few items so as to investigate how bloggers present material online. Interactivity is a central and fragmented concept typically employed to gauge the overall responsiveness of new media. Definitions of operationalizations of interactivity vary, depending on the context and medium.

Rogers (1995) defined interactivity as "the degree to which participants in a communication process can exchange roles and have control over their mutual discourse." Rafaeli (1988) emphasized variable degrees of medium responsiveness, distinguishing among two-way (noninteractive) communication, reactive communication and fully interactive communication. Applied to the context of online publishing, Ha and James (1998) conceptualized interactivity on commercial sites on the basis of five dimensions: playfulness; (availability of) choice; connectedness to the audience; ability for information collection; and reciprocity. Steuer’s (1992) explication of interactivity and vividness as key components of online environments was also consulted because it focuses on these two dimensions to describe virtual environments like the Star Trek Holodeck or the imaginative environments created through books, which have more in common with the virtual environment that bloggers create and present to a potential audience. Papacharissi (2002b) used a similar definition to measure the interactivity of personal home pages. Therefore, Steuer’s and Ha and James’ work influenced the manner in which design features of blogs were measured in this study.

Consequently, vividness was operationalized as the degree to which the home page presented a sensorially rich environment. The vividness items were phrased in a 5-point semantic differential form and asked the coders to record:

- amount of text—ranging from 1 ("little text") to 5 ("just text"); .89 intercoder reliability
- degree to which the page attempted to create a graphical user interface (GUI) between host and user—ranging from 1 ("not GUI oriented") to 5 ("very GUI oriented"); .94 intercoder reliability
- presence of graphics—ranging from 1 ("no graphics") to 5 ("many or a wide variety of graphics"); .96 intercoder reliability
A highly vivid blog included several graphics, animation and several audiovisual elements, whereas a blog low in vividness was mostly textual.

Interactivity in this study was operationalized as the degree to which the page could be manipulated as well as the degree to which the blogger invited interaction with visitors, to allow for connectedness and reciprocity in communication. Four items were employed to measure interactivity, using a 5-point semantic differential scale. The coders recorded:

- degree to which the blogger directly addressed potential readers—ranging from 1 (“no address”) to 5 (“direct address”); .91 reliability
- degree to which the blogger invited feedback—ranging from 1 (“no feedback”) to 5 (“various different forms of feedback”); .95 reliability
- whether the blogger just listed interests or used a more narrative structure to present interests (it was assumed that the narrative structure would engage the user more than a dry list of links)—ranging from 1 (“list”) to 5 (“narrative”); reliability at .94
- whether the content of the blog could be manipulated, allowing the user to select among the different offerings of the site or even interact with it and its host—ranging from 1 (“content not manipulated at all”) to 5 (“content easily manipulated”); .92 reliability

Adapting from Papacharissi (2002a and 2002b), a highly interactive blog provided e-mail and ICQ author information and employed a narrative style through which the author directly addressed the audience and delved into personal thoughts and sharing interests. A blog low in interactivity was usually less inviting, contained fewer feedback mechanisms, and consisted of a simple list of interests or links.

Innovation and sophistication were also measured by single items on a 5-point scale. Adapted from previous research, innovation was operationalized as the degree to which a person presented a page that deviated from the standard templates and tools provided by the webpage service (Papacharissi, 2002a and 2002b). This was not inclusive of the sophistication of blog code because a page can be amateurish and still reflect an effort to move away from templates. Sophistication was measured by recording how advanced or complex the code of the blog was. To determine this, coders looked through templates provided by bloggers and the HTML source code so as to make valid and reliable assessments. Intercoder reliability for innovation and sophistication reached .92 and .89, respectively.

Content

Several aspects of blog content were recorded for this study. Coders were asked to describe, in their own words, the content of each blog. To supplement the open-ended coding of blog content orientation, a coding category titled “focus of diary” asked the coders to browse through the entire blog and then
select from specific categories that accurately described the focus of the blog, such as:

- personal (strictly a diary format)
- interests (collection of links and information, including news)
- family (facilitates family communication)
- combination (covers two or more categories)
- personal views (not a diary, but focused on expression of personal opinion)
- creative expression (artistic endeavors)
- support (health and other support offered)
- fan page (exclusive coverage of fan interests)
- other

In selecting a category, coders were asked to consider what the blog was predominantly about. Coders also recorded the presence and focus of links featured on the blog; these are typically gathered on the index page because the rest of the blog site is usually reserved for the display of archives. The presence of feedback mechanisms was also noted, including e-mail, listservs, guestbooks, counters, contact forms, webrings or other communities, ICQ or other forms of feedback. In the intercoder reliability testing of these variables, the two coders reached complete agreement.

An attempt to describe the language featured on the website using a quantitative instrument was made by recording the formality of the language employed and the use of humor. Future studies can focus on a smaller sample and gather more qualitative and detailed information on language used. The purpose of this study was to work with a large sample and gather general information on the tone employed by bloggers. Using a semantic differential scale ranging from 1 ("formal") to 5 ("informal"), coders read through the blogging entries featured on the website and assigned blogs respective ratings.

If a blogger wrote in incomplete sentences, not paying much attention to grammar, syntax, spelling or etiquette, then that qualified the tone as informal. Informal pages were more impromptu, fragmented, light and direct, usually tackling less conventional topics or discussing topics in a less conventional manner. Formal blogs, on the other hand, were written carefully with strict observation of grammatical conventions and general decorum. They appeared to be more planned, serious and organized. Blogs that combined a less planned or conventional approach, but were written carefully and in an organized manner, were defined as moderately (3) formal or informal. Slight deviations from extreme formality or informality were assigned ratings of 2 and 4, respectively. This operationalization of formality was conveyed to coders through training and produced an intercoder reliability rating of .90.

The content analysis also attempted to record the use of humor in blogs because humor is frequently employed together with an informal tone. The coders simply recorded the presence or absence of humor and the presence or
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absence of humorous devices (sarcasm, irony, self-deprecation, joke, offensive language, other), refraining from operationalizing humor on a continuum and resorting to more subjective judgments. Even though it is possible to identify the presence of humor, determining how funny or unfunny something is on a semantic differential continuum is a matter of personal taste.

The two coders reached complete agreement on the presence/absence of humor and the categories of offensive language, other and regular joking. Sarcasm was operationalized as the use of caustic language and coded with intercoder reliability at .89. Irony was operationalized as a humorous focus on the contrast between how things appear as opposed to how they really are and coded with intercoder reliability at .91. Self-deprecation was defined as a humorous attempt effected by making fun of oneself and coded with .95 intercoder reliability.

The coders also noted the amount of personal information provided by the host on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (“none”) to 5 (“a lot”), with intercoder agreement at .95. A second item targeted the same concept and asked the coders to record how well they thought they knew the person after having read the page. The range was from 1 (“hardly know this person at all”) to 5 (“know this person well”); reliability was .93.

Finally, having read the blog, coders were asked to take notes, record observations and speculate on possible motivations and gratifications obtained from sustaining a blog. The basis for these observations was founded on a uses and gratifications (U&G) framework, assuming that individuals pursue media-related behaviors based on specific predispositions or motives and social–psychological characteristics. U&G has been recommended for the study of new media technologies (Newhagen & Rafaeli, 1996; Rubin & Bantz, 1987) and has been used to examine different types of Internet use (Kuehn, 1994; Papacharissi, 2002a, 2002b; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000).

According to this perspective, relatively active audiences select particular media to satisfy felt needs, which are influenced by a number of social and psychological factors that affect media selection and use (Rubin, 1994). Even though U&G typically employs self-report measures to gauge individual motives and gratifications obtained, this content analysis asked coders to speculate on the possible motivations and gratifications of bloggers as a precursor to possible surveys of bloggers that might follow in future research.

Blogs actually present voluntarily offered self-reported accounts of individual thoughts and opinions. Coders were shown motives and gratifications employed in previous media and new media research as examples of categories they might encounter. They were also advised to steer away from these conventional categories, if necessary, so as to include new motives that might be specific to the use of blogging. Open-ended observations were recorded and recoded into specific categories based on the frequency with which certain
categories occurred. These findings are reported in the following section, in response to RQ1.

Results

RQ1: Descriptive Elements of Blogs

The first research question focused on obtaining a systematic description of the essential elements of blogs by focusing on blog structure, design and content. Average word count for blogs was 2,327 words (SD = 12,021), with a maximum value of 188,857 and minimum value of 4 words. Almost all blogs employed some type of template provided by Blogger (99.2%), indicating that was the most convenient way for most authors to post material. Bloggers chose to manipulate this template significantly (6.4%), somewhat (23%), a little (24.2%) or not at all (46.4%). This implied that most blogs featured an index page that adopted a diary-like look, with links to blogger interests, other blogs and archives of previous postings. Therefore, in most cases, the blog resembled an electronic version of a diary. Unlike conventional diaries, however, which are frequently held private and may even feature a lock to guard the privacy of contents, these electronic diaries are open and available to mass potential audiences.

Relating to design features, blogs tended to be rather textual (M = 3.83; SD = 1.12), with little or no presence of a graphical user interface (M = 1.80; SD = 0.93) or graphics (M = 1.52; SD = 0.78). Unlike personal home pages, blogs featured a more diary-like format, which accounted for the lack of a vivid interface or use of multimedia decor. Bloggers, in their majority, viewed these Internet-related tools as the means to publish their personal musings and did not seem interested in employing interactive tools to project a multisensorial sense of self online. Tellingly, the vividness composite scale constructed by averaging these three items produced a mean score of 1.82 (SD = 0.78; alpha = 0.74), indicating blogs that were moderate to low in vividness.

In this sample, bloggers tended to address their potential audiences somewhat (M = 2.94; SD = 1.03); solicited a moderate amount of feedback (M = 2.16; SD = 1.06); tended to present their thoughts primarily in a narrative, diary-like or stream-of-consciousness format (M = 3.41; SD = 0.974); and invited content manipulation (M = 3.57; SD = 1.37) in the sense that they combined text with a list of links to blog archives, friends’ blogs and other interest links, thus inviting the reader to select instead of passively read specified content. Blogs tended to be slightly more interactive than vivid, but still only interactive at a moderate level (M = 2.80; SD = 0.52; alpha = 0.53). In terms of blog innovation, blogs did not deviate from the template norm (M = 1.97; SD = 1.02) and revealed a moderately sophisticated crop of online publishers (M = 2.01; SD = 0.98).
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The closed-ended categorization of blogs revealed a similar focus, with the majority of blogs possessing a personal orientation (strictly a diary format, 76.3%) and others falling under the following categories:

- family (facilitates family communication, 0.8%)
- combination (covers two or more categories, 0.8%)
- personal views (not diary, but focused on expression of personal opinion, 1.2%)
- creative expression (artistic endeavors, 2.4%)
- support (health and other support offered, 0.4%)
- fan page (exclusive coverage of fan interests, 0.8%)
- other (0.4%)

The open-ended coding of content confirmed these categories and distribution. News links were present on several pages with a different focus (15.5%). The news content typically included links to alternative and mainstream news stories that related to popular culture interests of bloggers. Presence of links to current events or stories pertaining to the political sphere was very limited. For these sites, the presence of mainstream (1) to alternative (5) links and news stories was recorded on a semantic differential scale and indicated that most news links or stories on blogs came from a fairly even combination of alternative and mainstream news sources (M = 2.64; SD = 1.25).

Most blogs adopted a diary, self-reflective format; therefore, the modal value for total number of links present was 0. Links, however, were present on several blogs at a varying degree (M = 19; SD = 25) and covered a wide range of topics including, but not limited to, computer news, alternative news, fan information, links to other bloggers and family, and political, religious, music and art interests. Feedback mechanisms were present on 54% of all blogs; bloggers chose or combined e-mail (48.8%), listservs (3.5%), guestbooks (4.3%), counters (3.6%), contact forms (8.7%), webrings or other communities (2.8%), ICQ (3.6%) or other forms of feedback (10.8%).

Blogs were overwhelmingly informal (M = 3.69; SD = 0.83), tackling unconventional and intimate topics with a whimsical, direct and deeply personal tone. Most bloggers did employ humor in general (54.7%) and humorous blogs relied on sarcasm (42.7%), irony (32.5%), self-deprecation (39.2%), jokes (29.2%), offensive language (13.9%) or any other type of humor (0.8%). Very few pages featured offensive visual or verbal material, humorous or not (4.3%). Most blogs featured a moderate amount of personal information (M = 2.22; SD = 0.98). While the purpose of blogs is to supply information, frequently the display of information is selective and so referential that readers do not feel they know the bloggers intimately (M = 2.18; SD = 0.99)—an understandable fact, given the complexity of individual personalities.

Coders observed significant overlap in the speculated uses and gratifications obtained from authoring a blog. Several bloggers took advantage of the
diary-like format of the blog to explain their motivation and expectations from authoring the blog, so this information was easy to obtain. Most bloggers specified their primary motivation for authoring the blog:

- personal expression (60.4%)
- personal expression and the ability to show off a creative side or artistic work (10.6%)
- personal expression and the provision of information (14.6%)
- personal expression and social communication with friends (8.6%)
- passing the time (2.7%)
- completing coursework (0.4%)
- entertainment (0.8%)
- family communication (0.8%)
- relating to profit (0.4%)
- professional advancement (0.8%)
- support for a cause (0.4%)

Bloggers sustained these websites with the expected gratification of primarily self-fulfillment obtained from the ability to express themselves freely online (83%). Coders were able to estimate this based on the writings of the bloggers, who frequently elaborated on their appreciation of the expressive opportunities blogging provides. Several bloggers valued their websites as opportunities for professional advancement and used them to feature their professional skills (3.2%). Others were appreciative of the opportunity to share information with others online (5.5%) or to sustain social communication with their circle of family and friends (5.9%), or of the entertainment (1.2%) or pass time (1.2%) functions of blogging.

**RQ2: Relationships Between Descriptive Elements of Blogs**

In coding for the descriptive elements of blogs, this study examined the content, structure and design of blogs. These evaluative items had not been used in previous research, yet they captured the appeal of blogs for blog producers and audiences on a continuum. Therefore, they were grouped and factor analyzed to determine whether they represented dimensions of an evaluative scale employed when assessing the general appeal or utility of blogs. This also provided a meaningful manner through which to organize descriptive elements of blogs along different dimensions.

The first factor was a combination of innovation, sophistication, use of graphics, presence of a graphical interface and level of feedback, which was termed Creativity. Even though this factor included feedback, interactivity and vividness items, it seemed that the combination of items reflected blogs with elaborate construction, thus marking design-related creativity. The mean score for the five-item creativity factor was 1.89 (SD = 0.80) and the coefficient alpha for this creativity scale was 0.89. The second factor combined level of
formality, amount of text, presence of direct audience address and ability to manipulate content. These four items reflected a tendency to use the page as a forum to write and express one’s beliefs, ideas and emotions; therefore, this factor was labeled Expressiveness (M = 3.51; SD = 0.82; alpha = 0.74).

Finally, the third factor included the presence of personal information, the sense that readers felt they knew the blogger well and the presence of a narrative structure. This three-item factor was labeled Intimacy because it represented the tendency to share private information of an intimate nature online (M = 2.60; SD = 0.82; alpha = 0.79). Different from expressiveness, intimacy reflected not simply the tendency to share information, but to disclose information of a personal nature. Table 2.1 presents the results of the factor analysis in more detail.

Table 2.1 Factor Analysis of Blog Elements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovation</td>
<td>-.16</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of GUI interface</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of graphics/multimedia</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>-.20</td>
<td>-.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback level</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophistication</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressiveness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence/dominance of text</td>
<td>-.29</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct address of audience</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content manipulated</td>
<td>-.22</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimacy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List/narrative</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion of personal info on page</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How well do you know this person?</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.88</td>
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Note: A principal components analysis, with a varimax rotation, an eigenvalue of 1 or greater and a 60/40 criterion yielded these factors. After the varimax rotation, the three factors explained 68.12% of the retained variance. Factor 1, Innovation, explained 35.21% with an eigenvalue of 4.23, Factor 2, Personal Information, 23.21% with an eigenvalue of 2.79, and Factor 3, Expressiveness, 9.70% of the retained variance with an eigenvalue of 1.17.
tively related to the level of intimacy (r = .31; p < .001), indicating that creative blogs were no less likely to share personal information; they simply did so in a less textual and expressive manner. Similarly, creativity was positively related to the presence of links (r = .52; p < .001), reluctance to use a template (F (1, 244) = 9.23; p < .01) and greater manipulation of a blog template (r = .69; p < .001). Creatively inclined bloggers were likely to feature more links on their pages and modify the standard blog template substantially.

Creative blogs were also less likely to employ humor in general (F (1, 249) = 8.55; p < .01), especially irony (F (1, 236) = 7.92; p < .01) or self-deprecation (F (1, 241) = 24.27; p < .001), thus confirming the findings of the factor analysis. Humor implies a degree of informality, an element included under the expressiveness dimension of blogs, which, in this study, was negatively related to creativity. Feedback was an element of the creativity dimension of blogs, so, understandably, creative blogs were likely to include feedback mechanisms, including e-mail (F (1, 250) = 140.04; p < .001), listservs (F (1, 250) = 5.43; p < .05), guestbooks (F (1, 250) = 7.69; p < .01), contact forms (F (1, 250) = 7.94; p < .01) and ICQ information (F (1, 249) = 15.00; p < .001).

Expressiveness was negatively related to creativity and positively associated with blog intimacy level (r = .24; p < .001). Expressiveness was also negatively associated with the presence of links (r = -.16; p = .01), indicating that blogs adopting a dominantly textual and informal tone were less likely to display numerous links. Interestingly, highly expressive blogs that featured news items were more likely to include alternative over mainstream news-related information (r = -.51; p = .001).

In this sample, female bloggers were slightly more likely to be expressive than male bloggers, although it is important to keep in mind that these data were not available for all bloggers in the sample (F (2, 248) = 22.6; p < .001). Expressive bloggers were more likely to employ humor in general (F (1, 248) = 18.14; p < .001)—especially sarcasm (F (1, 247) = 27.4; p < .001), irony (F (1, 234) = 6.11; p = .01) and self-deprecation (F (1, 239) = 83.71; p < .001)—and to employ offensive language in a humorous context (F (1, 245) = 5.18; p < .05). Tellingly, expressiveness is not inclusive of feedback and therefore did not relate to any feedback mechanisms in a statistically significant manner.

Positively associated with expressiveness and creativity, intimacy was also related to the tendency not to use a template (F (1, 244) = 9.23; p < .01) or to manipulate one significantly (r = .30; p < .001) and to present blogs extensive in word use (r = .19; p < .01). This indicated the need to go beyond the norm when presenting personal information textually and visually. Intimacy was also the only dimension to be associated with the focus of the blog, revealing that blogs containing information of a more intimate nature were more likely blogs combining the diary focus with other interests, blogs dedicated to family communication and blogs employed for the expression of personal views (F (1, 244) = 9.23; p < .01). Female bloggers were slightly more likely than male
bloggers to share information of an intimate personal nature, although these findings are compromised by the lack of such data for the entire sample (F(8, 244) = 4.30; p < .001).

Blogs containing information of a more intimate nature were likely to feature use of sarcasm (F(1, 243) = 6.62; p = .01), irony (F(1, 229) = 15.61; p < .001), self-deprecation (F(1, 235) = 22.82, p < .001) and offensive language in a humorous context (F(1, 241) = 4.57; p < .05). These blogs also employed feedback mechanisms selectively in support of the positive correlation between intimacy and creativity, featuring presence of an e-mail address (F(1, 244) = 8.29; p < .01), use of a listserv (F(1, 244) = 6.72; p < .01), presence of a guestbook (F(1, 244) = 4.16; p < .05), reference to web rings or other online communities (F(1, 244) = 4.23; p < .05) and the provision of ICQ information (F(1, 243) = 6.09; p < .01).

Discussion

This content analysis revealed that blogs, on average, feature personalized accounts of information that resemble the diary format more than the independent journalism ideal. This is consistent with previous findings reported by Herring, Scheidt et al. (2004), who concluded that popular accounts frequently overstate “the extent to which blogs are interlinked, interactive, and oriented towards external events, and underestimate the importance of blogs as individualistic, intimate forms of self-expression.”

The present study found that these template-influenced online diaries were frequently extensive and verbose, offered moderate interactivity and made little use of a graphical user interface or multimedia tools. The online diary metaphor serves the blogging context well because these online daily musings are disorganized, frequently fragmented, and largely self-referential. The format of blogs is aligned with author uses and gratifications because these self-reflective accounts seem primarily to serve the purpose of personal expression and provide the perceived gratification of self-fulfillment; thus, they comply with the organization, format and utility that serve the individual user best.

Still, blogs present an interesting diversion from the traditional diary format in that, unlike written diaries, the privacy of which is cautiously guarded by their authors, blogs are open for all to browse. In fact, several blogs are authored for the explicit purpose of perusal by friends, family members and the occasional accidental browser. Therefore, they present an interesting paradoxical combination of private and public information that challenges our conventional understanding of the private and public sphere and follows in the tradition of new media technologies that empower the individual to project personal experiences, usually considered private, to a mass audience. Blogs allow the private domain to become public and privatize a portion of the public.
sphere. Unlike diaries, which are frequently written to express secrets or private thoughts of the individual for the individual, blogs are written to be read.

While most blogs adopt the diary format, not all information featured on blogs is of a private nature. Indeed, even though personal expression presented the primary focus, use and gratification in this sample, the display of interests and sharing of information presented the second most important function, focus and gratification obtained from blogs. Blogs frequently combined the display of personal and social or news-related information, thus challenging and personalizing the conventional news format. Personalization in online journalism implies that the user is allowed to customize his or her news page; however, in blogging, personalization refers to a true melange of private and public information, the social utility of which is ambiguous, but determined solely by the blogger.

Nonetheless, imposing journalistic aspirations upon all blogs may be limiting; blogs are oriented towards providing individuals with a public forum that can be used to provide news of a personal or a general nature. While traditional journalism provides individuals with pictures of a world they cannot experience firsthand, to paraphrase Walter Lippman, blogs operate in the opposite direction, broadcasting the pictures in our heads back to a worldwide audience.

The statistical analyses that identified three primary descriptive dimensions of blogs and investigated the relationships among blogs’ descriptive elements indicated that most blogs were not creative, in the sense that they did not rely on a graphical user interface, did not make extensive use of multimedia elements, did not employ innovative or sophisticated design and did not invite feedback on blog content. Thus, these blogs were primarily low-tech affairs of a self-referential nature.

The findings on expressiveness, which was negatively associated with creativity, indicated that whatever blogs lacked in creativity, they made up in expressiveness. Most blogs were moderately to very expressive, implying that the presence of text dominated the entire page, the tone was primarily informal and that bloggers addressed their potential audiences in a very direct manner and created a blog structure that allowed visitors to browse through the entire contents of the blog. Thus, bloggers acknowledged potential audiences and invited them to all aspects of these online diaries, even though, ultimately, bloggers were not focused on feedback and therefore not too concerned with what their potential audiences had to say about their blogs.

Finally, intimacy (or the presence and divulgence of personal information through use of a narrative structure) was present in creative and expressive pages, indicating that, no matter what the author’s approach to storytelling was, blogging endeavors were about the display of intimate thoughts, information and insight. Bloggers tended to share intimate information by employing humorous contexts.
To summarize, blogs in this sample presented low-tech, self-referential, verbose attempts to display personal thoughts and information, with little interest for how these thoughts would be received by an audience. The tendency for blogs to support more personally oriented communication has also been identified by recent research, which separated A-list blogs (popular publicized blogs), blogs that are somewhat interconnected and the majority of sparsely socially connected and less conversational blogs (Herring et al., 2005).

Psychology, literature and popular culture have frequently toyed with the idea that individuals keep diaries of personal experiences with the subliminal hope that eventually these diaries will be read by a third person. Blogs allow individuals to play with this desire to have personal memoirs published, awarding their authors with personal gratification, publicity and perhaps a sense of assurance that these private thoughts matter. In a culture saturated with private information on celebrities and public figures, blogs allow their authors to become public and gain a compromised expression of notoriety. Future studies could explore how blogs further blur the distinction between private and public information online, thus redefining how private and public space is perceived. Additional studies of larger samples and surveys of bloggers could lead to information that illuminates the utility of blogs for the individual and society.

Viewed as the latest trend in online use and publishing, blogs present a personalized, self-referential and self-serving use of the Internet, a medium first introduced as informational that then established a following based on the social communication avenues it provided. Blogs present a turn to self-involved uses of the Internet, which are becoming more prevalent. They also create an interesting contrast between earlier uses of the Internet, studied by communication scholars as more socially focused and oriented. Future studies should examine uses of the Internet and blogging to determine whether in fact they have become more self-serving and to clarify the impact this turn could have on the social capital generated by new media.

References


