E–Collaboration Through Blogging

Murli Nagasundaram
Boise State University, USA

INTRODUCTION

On September 8, 2004, about 2 months prior to the U.S. presidential elections, the national TV network, CBS, broadcast a segment on its *60 Minutes* program that cast doubts on George W. Bush's service in the Air National Guard. The program host shared four documents obtained by the network which appeared to suggest that Mr. Bush had not adequately satisfied his service requirements. Within hours of the broadcast, the Internet *blogosphere*—Webspeak for the community of *webloggers* who share information through online Internet journals—was abuzz with discussions regarding the veracity of the documents, and it soon began to emerge that the documents might have been forged. On September the 20th, Andrew Heyward, President of CBS News, apologized on behalf of the network for disseminating unverified information. Six months later, CBS's longtime anchor, Dan Rather, was compelled to resign (Thornburgh & Boccardi, 2005).

Numerous individuals—many unacquainted with each other, and geographically dispersed—*electronically collaborated* in dissecting and dismantling the CBS report through the medium of blogs. They precipitated a crisis in a powerful media organization that required the intervention of its chief for its resolution. All of this occurred in a matter of less than two weeks. Blogging had established itself as a media force to reckon with.

This article is a brief introduction to blogging with its application to *e-collaboration*. We learn what blogs are, their history and evolution, how they might be categorized and in what manner they could be used to support e-collaboration. We also discuss some issues and concerns regarding blogs.

BACKGROUND

The term *blog* is short for *Web Log* (also, *weblog*), a frequently updated, online, Web-based journal or diary (Blood, 2000), with postings presented, typically, in reverse chronological order. The term *Web Log* was coined by Jon Barger (Blood, 2000). Blogs are "owned" by one or more *bloggers* who access their blogs via a Web browser. A *blogger* can log in, type up, and publish a blog entry containing their ideas, comments or other information within a matter of minutes. Blogs are distinguished from other websites and other e-collaboration technologies in that:

- The blogger makes fairly frequent postings to the site, which are listed, typically, in reverse chronological order, allowing visitors to read the latest post first
- Blog entries have date and time stamps, allowing the reader to assess its historical value
- Readers may post comments, engaging in a *conversation* with the blogger as well as other readers
- Bloggers may post images, audio, and video documents

After a slow start less than a decade ago, blogging has been growing very rapidly in recent times (Sifry, 2006). Blogging has permeated into corporations, politics, news—practically every segment of society (e.g., Greenwood, 2006). In 1998, there were just a handful of blogs (Blood, 2000), 23 in 1999 (Garrett, 2002), and only 200 in early 2002. Subsequently, blogging rapidly grew to such prominence that in December 2004, the *Communications of the ACM* devoted a special issue to the subject (vol. 47, Issue 12) titled, *The Blogosphere*. Blogger (www.blogger.com), a free and easy-to-use blogging tool-cum-blog hosting service was the most responsible for the growth in blogging. In October 2006, the *blogosphere* tracking blog, Technorati, was tracking 57 million blogs (up from 27.2 million in February) and estimated that the number was doubling every 236 days (down from 5.5 months in February); the "blogosphere" grew to 60 times its size in 3 years. About 100,000 new blogs were coming online everyday (up from 75,000 in February)—more than one new blog every second. About 1.3 million postings are made

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daily to all the blogs—about 54,000 per hour (Sifry, 2006). Blood (2004) notes that the rapid evolution of blogging technology since 1997 has been driven by widespread practice: "When any sizable number of bloggers start doing something, someone, it seems, will construct a tool to automate it—further popularizing the activity" (p. 55).

E-COLLABORATION THROUGH BLOGGING

An important distinction between a blog and other types of Web sites is its *interactive* nature. Blogging technology allows every blog to be turned into an interactive discussion space and in fact, many blogs are used as such (e.g., as a community forum; Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004). Blogs are, in essence, a fusion of Web pages and Usenet-style discussions and combine the advantages of both. One of the first—and well-known—bloggers was the software developer Dave Winer (2006). Winer's widely read blog, *Scripting News* (www.scripting.com), included news and commentary on technology, politics, and society. Winer engaged intensively with his readership, and their discussions were publicly available on his blog. Some of those discussions led to business relationships or the development of new kinds of software or standards. Blogs are, therefore, well-suited for *e-collaboration*.

Blood (2000), a pioneering blogger, writes on the collaborative nature of blogging:

While weblogs had always included a mix of links, commentary, and personal notes, in the post-Blogger explosion increasing numbers of weblogs eschewed this focus on the Web-at-large in favor of a sort of short-form journal. These blogs, often updated several times a day, were instead a record of the blogger's thoughts: something noticed on the way to work, notes about the weekend, a quick reflection on some subject or another. Links took the reader to the site of another blogger with whom the first was having a public conversation or had met the previous evening, or to the site of a band he had seen the night before. Full-blown conversations were carried on between three or five blogs, each referencing the other in their agreement or rebuttal of the other's positions. Cults of personality sprung up as new blogs appeared, certain names appearing over and over in daily entries or listed in

the obligatory sidebar of "other weblogs" (a holdover from Cam's original list). It was, and is, fascinating to see new bloggers position themselves in this community, referencing and reacting to those blogs they read most, their sidebar an affirmation of the tribe to which they wish to belong.

As with individuals in the real world, many bloggers, over time, become members of blogging communities that have common interests, for instance Japanese anime films, AJAX programming or national-level politics, and often coordinate real-world activities through their blogs. A convention in the blogging community is for each blog to include a *blogroll*, which is a list of the blogger's favorite blogs, some of whose authors may be friends or acquaintances, at least over the Internet. Blogger A might read Blogger B's post and respond with either a comment on Blog B or through a posting on her own blog. Blogger C, might read one or both postings and respond with comments on Blogs A and/or B or a post a blog entry in his own blog. This process evolves much like a face-to-face conversation, albeit in a far more complex fashion, with comments from other readers (cf. Kumar, Novak, Raghavan, & Tomkins, 2004). From such conversations, a blog network or community evolves which resembles the communication structure of an offline social group. This makes blogs well-suited for the purposes of *e-collaboration*. Herring et al. (2005) found that a few key blogs in a blog network served as lynchpins binding a network together.

Meyer (2006) noted the emergence of distinct patterns in the content of blogs. He found that bloggers in a collaborative network assume different roles as reflected in the blog entries. He classified blogs as Producers, Reviewers, and Pointers:

- **Producers:** These are blogs that create original content (for the most part). The posts you see tend to be a little longer although that doesn't have to be true. I would count my own blog as part of this category. Producers are the source of much of the original material.
- **Reviewers:** These blogs take topics that are originated elsewhere and put their own spin on the material. Often they will expand the topic or take it off in a different direction. The hallmark of these blogs is that they don't simply point to the source material; they riff on it somehow.

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