

**Paper Summary 5: Blogging as Social Activity, or,
Would You Let 900 Million People Read Your Diary?**

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In the past two years, the weblog, or “blog”, phenomenon has drastically changed the face of the Web for many of its inhabitants. Along with a proliferation of software and services for bloggers and readers alike (both server-side applications and dedicated clients for managing the XML feeds many blogs provide), the change has been social as well, with the blog circuit becoming the virtual popular hangout on the Web, where everything from rumors to fads to news can be found, and usually before it can be found anywhere else.

What prompts an individual to decide to publish a blog, especially considering the fact that many blogs contain so much data that would normally be considered private? What sort of social behaviors and interactions result from blogging activity, if any? These questions, along with design recommendations for improving blogging software, are presented in this paper from the 2004 conference on computer supported cooperative work.

The authors begin their task by defining the salient features of a blog, mostly by example. They make a rough division of the currently published blogs into three categories:

1. Individually authored personal journals (the “diary” blog),
2. “Filter”-type blogs, because they collect and commentate on information from other sources, and
3. Logs of knowledge; basically information repositories

The majority (70%) of the blogs using in the authors’ study were of the “diary” type.

Quoting extensively from samples of blogs used in their survey, the authors pointed out several interesting and distinguishing characteristics of blogs; for instance, the conversational tone and context can shift rapidly and abruptly from personal, even

intimate, to conversational with friends, or even formal as toward the public at large. This example, they claimed, was indicative of the unique properties of the blogging medium, and one reason they classify blogging as a social activity.

Methodologically, the authors conducted audiotaped ethnographic surveys over a three-month period in 2003, both in person and over the phone. The interviews were informal (conversational), but covered a fixed set of questions regarding topics such as blogging habits, thoughts on other communication media, concepts of blogging and blogging software, etc. Sixteen men and seven women, ranging in age from 19—60 participated in the study.

With extensive sampling and quotation from the blogger's posts, the authors state their conclusions, that blogs are primarily a social activity, with various motivations, depending on the individual blogger and her context. Within this context, the authors identified 5 motivations that they specifically delineated:

1. Updating others on activities and whereabouts. In this type of blog, the posts were short and often very "diary"-like. They would frequently include details such as where the blogger had dinner that night, or who they talked to after work. Frequently, the stated purpose was to enable friends and family that lived outside a close proximity to "keep in touch" with what was happening in their lives, sometimes as an alternative to sending out mass emails.
2. Expressing opinions to influence others. This could range from the politically-motivated posts by one of their informants regarding the civil war in Uganda, to the daily digests by a Stanford graduate student of several science-related online publications he followed, usually involving the top stories or items he found interesting.
3. Seeking others' opinions and feedback. They cited as their example here an undergraduate student who published his poetry on his blog in order to solicit feedback from others, and improve and polish his work.
4. "Thinking by writing." Several of their informants indicated that they used their blog to work through the writing process, and hence, by extension, their thinking process (since for many of these people, the act of thinking took place through the writing process). This item is closely related the (3) above, since it also involved soliciting and accepting feedback from readers, but the authors distinguish it by the addition of a regulatory aspect; the writing acts as a governor for the thoughts, and a disciplinarian to encourage the author to write more frequently.
5. Release of emotional tension. The authors included this last item because of the many responses from their informants that indicated the posts provided an emotional release: "I just need to, like, get it out there.", or using the blog to "let off steam". They emphasize that even in this case, the social aspect of blogging still took precedence: "it was the emotional tension *with an audience* that was especially powerful for bloggers."

When the authors finally get around to their design recommendations, they make several good suggestions—such as better tools to integrate photos into the blogging process, better searching/sorting mechanisms for readers, increased support for audience specificity and privacy concerns, collaboration between multiple authors, and general ease of use—in this case the fast pace of development on the Web has out-

stripped them. Freely available, open-source software to power blogs is available that answers all of their recommendations, such as WordPress (<http://wordpress.org/>) and TextPattern (<http://textpattern.com/>) to name two; online photo management systems like Flickr (<http://flickr.com/>) now integrate with almost every major Blog provider. What the authors seemed to be lacking was a connection between their central thesis of the social-centrality of blogging with their recommendations, or why this was not necessary, since it is not present.

Finally, while the authors did a fine job of cataloging and categorizing the different purposes or goals of the various bloggers in their study, ultimately, they failed to provide the “Why” to the question inherent in both their conclusion and their title: Why would someone want to let 900 million people read their diary?