



Blogs, Everyone? Weblogs Are Here to Stay, but Where Are They Headed?

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Recently, blogs have been credited with everything from CBS News anchorman Dan Rather's departure, to unauthorized previews of the latest Apple Computer products, to new transparency in presidential campaigns. The big question is whether blogs, short for weblogs, have the staying power to become more than just online diaries. Will bloggers upend the mainstream media? What legal protections should bloggers have? Is there a blogger business model? While no definitive answers exist just yet, experts at Wharton advise questioners to be patient. Blogging, they note, will be around for a long time.



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Wharton legal studies professor [Dan Hunter](#) puts blogging right up there with the printing press when it comes to sharing ideas and disseminating information. "This is not a fad," says Hunter. "It's the rise of amateur content, which is replacing the centralized, controlled content done by professionals."

The growth rate of blogs is impressive. Technorati, a search engine that monitors blogs, tracked more than 8 million online diaries as of March 21, up from 100,000 just two years ago. A new blog is created every 7.4 seconds. That adds up to 12,000 new blogs a day, 275,000 posts a day and 10,800 updates an hour. "At its most basic level, it's a technology that is lowering the cost of publishing" and turning out to be "the next extension of the web," says Wharton legal studies professor [Kevin Werbach](#). "Blogging is still in its early days. It's analogous to where the web was in 1995 and 1996. It's not clear how it will turn out."

What *is* clear is that opportunities for blogging abound. Companies can use bloggers to put a more human face on interactions with employees and customers; marketers can create buzz through blogs; and bloggers can act as fact checkers for the mainstream media. There are dozens of applications for blogs, Werbach notes, and many that haven't even been conceived yet. To be sure, the concepts behind blogging aren't exactly new. Comment and feedback have been around as long as the Internet itself. What's new is the ease with which anyone can publish their thoughts on any number of topics, whether it's the latest Congressional hearings, the newest gadget or the hottest pair of shoes. "Blogging is really driven by interest and desires, not commercial activity," says Wharton marketing professor [Peter Fader](#). "It's rare to see something take off like this when commercial prospects are so minimal. People just want to share ideas."

The amateur content movement was clearly enabled by the Internet, which made it relatively easy for anyone to start a web site. Some of those early sites peddled Pez dispensers and antiques (eBay) while others were just directories pointing to other sites (Yahoo). From there, the concept of amateur content has ballooned. In South Korea, for example, a newspaper dubbed ohmynews.com is written, not by trained journalists, but by regular citizens who send in their reports to editors, who then pick the best ones for publication. Companies and individuals have created their own Internet sites offering original information and content. Other sites, like the technology news-oriented Slashdot, are populated by visitors posting items they have seen elsewhere.

Blogging takes those concepts to the next level, says Alex Brown, associate director of admissions at

Wharton and a marketing professor at the University of Delaware. "It's really at a nascent stage," adds Brown, who uses blogs to disseminate information for Wharton applicants and keep up with developments at other universities. "It's a great tool. We use it for marketing and to drive people to our sites."

The Blogosphere's Rathergate

Brown acknowledges that blogging is a promising yet undeveloped tool. For now, blogging is much like the web sites of the mid-1990s -- lots of drivel, some useful items and plenty of opinions on every topic.

Today's blogs are mostly associated with politics -- not surprising given that former presidential candidate Howard Dean used blogs to rally supporters. Blogs detailing the documents that CBS used to question President Bush's National Guard service were picked apart by bloggers, who pointed out font differences in the documents and thus raised questions about their authenticity. The scandal, known in the "blogosphere" as Rathergate, ultimately resulted in the anchorman's departure. On the other side of the political spectrum, bloggers detailed Senator Trent Lott's glowing comments in 2002 about Strom Thurmond's presidential run in 1948 during which he supported segregation. A few apologies later, Lott gave up a bid to be the Senate majority leader.

The danger of overtly political blogs is one of selective hearing, says Hunter. If there's a blog for every taste, readers will just flock to sites they agree with. Fader adds that the marketplace of ideas and readers will weed out bloggers who are on the fringe and peddle bad information; they just won't develop an audience. In the future, Fader says, a technology may be created to rate credible bloggers. The system, which would operate like eBay's buyer and seller ratings, could create a blogger pecking order based on readers' opinions.

In the meantime, the courts are trying to figure out whether the First Amendment's freedom of the press protections apply to bloggers. Are bloggers journalists? It's a tricky question, says Werbach. For instance, some bloggers are de facto journalists -- because they do interviews, file news stories and provide opinions on current events -- and others are just regular people writing about their most recent family vacations. The courts will ultimately have to develop a legal test to extend press privileges, if necessary. "A subset of bloggers performs the task of journalists," Brown adds. "But not all bloggers are journalists."

According to Hunter, determining what will shake out in the courts is anyone's guess. "It's hard to say where this will go legally," he notes, adding that courts will ultimately give press credentials to a select group of bloggers.

For now, the disputes over press protections continue. Apple Computer recently sued a site called Think Secret for publishing information about upcoming products. Apple alleges that by publishing the data, Think Secret divulged trade secrets. Should Think Secret be treated as a journalism site? The issue spawned a host of blog entries and even a blogger boycott of Apple. The lesson: Apple can use the courts to try to stop product leaks, but the effort is likely to be futile, says Brown. Indeed, a Technorati search turned up a blog revealing mockups of an iPad, a tablet PC-like device. "Just because blogging isn't journalism doesn't mean the First Amendment goes away," says Werbach. Hunter agrees. "The difficulty will be developing a test for each case. One size won't fit all."

The whole blogger-as-journalist issue also raises another key issue: Is the mainstream media about to be usurped by a bunch of amateurs? Yes and no. Hunter says the mainstream media worries about blogging just as they initially did about Matt Drudge, who created a tabloid-style news site that features a few stories penned by Drudge but mostly links to other media outlets.

Blogging has already adopted a similar role of chasing tips, rumors and other potential stories. "It's a threat to the mainstream media to the extent that it takes away central control of content and distribution,"

says Werbach. But "it's not a substitute for the resources and brands that media companies have developed." What's likely is that the mainstream media and blogosphere will share a happy coexistence, he adds. Indeed, bloggers often comment on, and provide links to, articles in *The New York Times* and other mainstream media.

Whether bloggers supplant the press will depend on their skillfulness, Hunter says, suggesting that for commentary, bloggers' opinions are just as good as commentary printed in newspapers. However, investigative journalism will still be the hallmark of the media. "First-hand reporting will be the distinction between blogging and journalism," Hunter adds. According to Brown, it's a good idea to read both blogs and mainstream news. "A blogger in Iraq can detail things on the ground that journalists often can't.... Bloggers are viewed more as fact checkers to keep the media honest. The challenge for mainstream media is to keep up with bloggers' speed."

Overall, Hunter adds, media angst over blogs is misplaced. "The idea that blogging will kill media is as overblown as when they said that e-commerce would kill the retailing business."

The Voice of Microsoft in Siberia

Media navel gazing is one blogger preoccupation, but another development has been the use of weblogs by companies and organizations. Brown relies on blogging to gain market intelligence about what's going on at other business schools and also to update information for Wharton applicants. While Brown says the blog helps Wharton's brand, it's not as easy as it sounds. The "danger" is that corporations might not "understand the culture of blogging" and produce content that contains carefully vetted material instead of spontaneous writings that appeal to blog fans. Indeed, corporations are allowing employees to keep blogs, and in many cases encouraging online diaries. Microsoft, Sun Microsystems, General Motors and Boeing are just some of the companies that use blogs to communicate with employees and outsiders.

Robert Scoble, a Microsoft employee who operates Scobleizer, a blog about Microsoft products and developments, maintains one of the more interesting blogs around. Scoble, whose official title is "technical evangelist," sounds like many employees at large companies. He has his share of gripes, but will also defend his employer. The key is that he is balanced, says Brown. "This Microsoft employee has to maintain credibility by remaining transparent. By being negative once in a while, it's more credible when he's positive."

Scoble is so credible as a Microsoft blogger that he is viewed as the voice of the company across the globe. When Ted Demopoulos, principal of Demopoulos Associates, an information technology consulting company, was traveling in Russia recently, he stopped in Surgut, Siberia, where he was surprised to find Scoble fans. "I'm out in the middle of nowhere and they ask me about Scoble," says Demopoulos. "To them, Scoble is the voice of Microsoft."

Is There a Business Model?

While corporations can chalk up blogging as a marketing expense, the story is a little different for individuals. Can blogging pay the bills? If you are lucky, you can pay the hosting fees, but that's about it, say Wharton experts. Nevertheless, Werbach predicts that multiple business models will emerge. Individuals ages 18-25 are spending more of their time online, and marketers need to reach them. That means blogging could become a way to target the most coveted audience for media.

Bloggers currently can sell ads through a keyword system such as Google's AdSense. If an individual writes a blog about asbestos lawsuits, he or she is bound to get significant traffic from lawyers. And that could lead to subscription models. Some bloggers may become so successful that they can charge for their output. The rub with the subscription approach is that it's not clear if anyone will pay for content beyond financial news, data and pornography, says Fader. The other model is one that depends on being acquired, adds Demopoulos. Google bought Blogger.com, and media companies such as Gawker Media

are buying and consolidating popular blogs.

What happens when bloggers try to make money off their sites? "It's not a matter of when bloggers want to be paid, but when do readers want to pay for content," says Fader. "The mainstream media hasn't had the guts or savvy to start charging. It will be difficult for bloggers."

While most agree that blogging will continue to be popular, its next steps are uncertain. Demopoulos suggests that blogging overexposure is on the horizon. "Right now, blogging is trendy," he says. "I see that lasting a few years, but it will slow down." Hunter contends that blogging is here to stay, as many sites start to incorporate blogging features, and some news sites become more blog-like. The blogosphere will also become known for topics other than technology and politics. Two things are certain: Blogging will remain disruptive to the traditional media, and new uses will surface. "You are going to see blogging move to video and instant messaging," says Werbach. "It's just the beginning."

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