Preface

BLOGGING IN THE GLOBAL SOCIETY: CONTEMPORARY ISSUES, INTERPRETATIONS, AND VIEWPOINTS

Blogging in the Global Society

During the last decade, the Internet and the Web have undergone a remarkable expansion, permeating all aspects of people’s lives and resulting in an unprecedented growth of social interaction technologies. Social interaction technologies (SIT) are Internet-based tools and techniques that help initiate, share, and maintain interactive and collaborative activities online (Dumova & Fiordo, 2010). New SIT-based social media have notably changed people’s information gathering and communication habits by adding a strong interactive and collaborative aspect to the milieu. As perhaps the best-known example of social media globally, blogging has experienced outstanding growth, evolving from an online version of old-fashioned personal journaling into a global mass medium. According to a comprehensive social media survey, the global blogosphere “rivals any mass media in terms of reach, time spent, and wider cultural, social, and political impact” (Wave 3 Social Media Tracker, 2008). The current number of blogs in the world amounts to 168 million (BlogPulse, 2011) with some popular blogs having hundreds of thousands of subscribers.

Merging the storytelling and editorial powers of the newsroom, blogging puts publishing and broadcasting into the hands of any individual who is determined to let the world hear his or her voice. It is not accidental that many ready-to-use templates offered by blog hosting services use the phrase “Hello World” as a header. All one needs to succeed as a blog writer is an Internet connection and the persistence to keep a blog updated several times a week. As bloggers themselves note, there are many types and varieties of blogs aside from a private diary:

While personal blogs are still far and wide across the blogosphere, you will find a lot of non-personal blogs as well. Today, a blog is a platform for news, tutorials, travel tales, articles, video, photos and more. Blogs have several categories similar to what websites had several years ago. You have technology blogs, travelogues, personal blogs, news blogs, videologs, photoblogs etc. (Scocco, 2008)

Blogs create a personalized, two-way multimedia rich online communication channel. People blog for a myriad of reasons, from complex to simple, which is in part documented in this edited volume. As one blogger explains:
I started blogging because I wanted to explore my own point of view on topics around communication, branding, and eventually the emergence of social media. More than anything, writing helps me work through ideas, find clarity, and find connections between threads. It has helped me establish an area of expertise, a personality and point of view, and work through ideas that interest me. Also? I love to write. Words are my chosen medium, so blogging is a natural fit for me. (Naslund, 2011)

Another blog writer mentions that blogging provides her with the opportunity “to share photos and information with anyone, anywhere, at anytime” (Knittingsings.com, 2008). In the words of a scholar explaining the popularity of social media through collaborative Internet technologies, “consumers are producers; audiences are authors; users are developers” (Sunstein, 2006, p. xii). A blog’s ability to effortlessly create mosaics with words, images, video, audio, and animation releases the creative energy of the individual, increases human agency, ignites a personal quest for change, and creates social, political, and economical momentum for societal transformation.

For many, blogging has turned into an ample outlet for self-expression and originality in the age of intruding big governments, brazen transnational corporations, ever-growing plutocracies, and diminishing civil and human rights—sometimes to the point of obsession. Blogging has evolved into a platform for social contact, sharing information and opinions, learning from others, and ultimately for creating new knowledge. A blogger reflects:

Now that I have been writing for about 2 weeks I have come to find that blogging is a self-contained community that stretches around the world. Your blog is your window out to the world, so that everyone can see into your hobbies, interests, and passions. Each blog has its own persona and mine is the nonsensical ramblings of the mind. This is one thing that interests me and now I get to share it with the world, and not only that but the world gets to comment and interact with me. (Scocco, 2008)

Although blogging has been a subject of many scholarly investigations, there is still a noticeable lack of publications that can provide a multidisciplinary and cross-cultural analysis of the phenomenon on a global scale. Aimed to explore the phenomenon of blogging in the contexts and settings of today’s society, this book delves into the social, cultural, economic, political, and critical dimensions of blogging around the world. Furthermore, this text examines the similarities, distinctions, implications, and specific characteristics of blogs, bloggers, and blogging from various perspectives and viewpoints.

At the time when blogging as a medium is going through a transition (Technorati, 2010), Blogging in the Global Society provides a much-needed forum for sharing ideas and exchanging views among scholars and professionals. The chapters featured in this collection address a subject of keen interest to academics, practitioners, and citizens alike. The authors address a pressing demand for knowledge by offering their international expertise and specialization in areas ranging from communication and computer science to law and religion while applying a cornucopia of research methods. By bringing together contributors from academic and professional fields, this volume advances the fast-growing area of knowledge dealing with the theory and practice of blogging across continents.

Diverse Perspectives and Topics

The editors elicited diverse perspectives from experts on the subject of the global blogosphere with special attention being addressed to political, cultural, legal, and ethical issues. The result is a compilation
of state-of-the-art research findings on global blogging. Conceptually, the editors maintain consistency with Tim Berners-Lee’s perspective on Web science as being inherently interdisciplinary and aiming to “create approaches that allow new powerful and more beneficial patterns to occur” (Berners-Lee et al., 2006, p. 769). From varied perspectives on the global blogosphere, the elite scholars contributing to this book made a dedicated effort to advance knowledge.

The depth and breadth of the chapter topics in Blogging in the Global Society relate the blogosphere to the following significant issues: blogs as a source of democratic deliberation, citizen media and political conflict in Thailand, blogmongering in China, a reflection of women’s sports, a code of conduct for bloggers, a case study of the basketball blog KnickerBlogger.Net, a medium of expression among estranged American Hasidim, a case study of blogging in Ireland, a means of communication and influence toward Palestinian sovereignty, a means of grieving, a popular communication medium for political blogging in the USA, a uses and gratification study of Latin American bloggers, a First Amendment perspective on blogging in the U.S., a hermeneutic analysis of the meanings of blogs, and the future of blogging through the lens of social interaction technologies.

Scope

Blogging in the Global Society assumes a worldwide approach to its subject matter. Scholars from divergent geographical regions (such as Europe, North America, Asia, and the Middle East) have contributed to the volume. The overall scope of the geographical areas embraced by the authors in this book includes the United States, Ireland, Latin American countries, China, Thailand, Israel, and the Arab world. The text unites experts ranging from communication and computer science to law and religion; simultaneously, it embodies international perspectives on the timely and crucial subject of blogging around the world. The researchers employ qualitative and quantitative research methods encompassing empirical, interpretative, historical, critical, and philosophical approaches to answering research questions and testing hypotheses.

Chapter Organization

The chapters unfold in a unified format similar to the following: abstract, introduction, background, literature review, main body, conclusion, future research directions, references, and key terms and definitions. The abstract summarizes the content of the chapter and highlights the major findings. The introduction explains the direction of the research reported in the chapter. While the background section contextualizes the challenges behind the research, the literature review covers completed studies relevant to the research topic. The main body of the chapter articulates the position of the author and develops the content. The conclusion entails deductions from the study and its results, and the future research directions outline the implications of the findings for further investigations. Under references, the authors cite their research sources. Finally, the key terms and definitions detail important concepts selected by the chapter authors.
OVERVIEW

The book has three sections. All three sections enhance the reader’s comprehension of the global blogosphere and shed light on its political, cultural, legal, and ethical issues. The wisdom and talent of the authors are shared with the readers in the following:

Section 1: The Global Blogosphere: Political, Cultural, Legal, and Ethical Issues

Section 1 highlights blogging worldwide and includes Chapters 1-5, which circumnavigate the world via blogging. Chapter 1 by Barbara K. Kaye, Thomas J. Johnson, and Peter Muhlberger investigates how blog reliance among users influences political participation. The authors maintain that social, cultural, and political contexts in different countries may impact deliberative communication in the blogosphere. For deliberation to be open and fruitful, bloggers must be informed yet willing to listen to opposing points of view, thereby synthesizing all the distinct voices they hear. Unfortunately, much evidence suggests the public stays appreciably apathetic and ignorant, and both apathy and ignorance weaken deliberation—the heart of any democracy. In the final analysis, the learned authors demonstrate a positive correlation between blog reliance and democratic deliberation, which may depend on the motives behind blog use.

In Chapter 2, Melissa Wall and Treepon Kirdnark try to determine how the political crisis that occurred in Thailand during the spring of 2010 might yield information and elicit understanding towards the role and function of current-events blogging in a non-Western country. The themes that emerge from the analysis suggest intriguing explanations and new understanding. Technology alone does not yield enlightenment; rather, illumination follows from a communicator’s personal reflections. With respect to the Thai crisis, while blogging may enhance the public sphere by amplifying alternative points of view and voices, the authors find evidence that blogging might merely serve to reinforce existing political opinions and the intensity of the political struggle.

Zixue Tai in Chapter 3 details how the Chinese blogosphere, which developed later than in Western countries, became the largest in the world. Blogs have redefined Chinese cyberspace and revolutionized online user participation. The Chinese blogosphere has afforded netizens with the opportunity for collaborative and collective action in defense of the public interest. Chinese netizens collaborate online to demand public accountability from officials, stop corruption, and encourage positive societal change. Yet, state censorship creates barriers for self-expression that cause many Chinese bloggers to refrain from political topics. For their own safety, most bloggers employ self-censorship and focus on entertainment and amusement— even to the point of “feeding public curiosity for the sexy, the weird, and the bizarre.” In all likelihood, this direction taken by the Chinese blogosphere will continue to delineate blogging in China.

Women’s sports advocates have envisioned the blogosphere as a place free of the gatekeeping constraints and gender stereotypes of traditional media editors. In Chapter 4, the research of Marie Hardin, Bu Zhong, and Thomas F. Corrigan explores independent sports blogs and contrasts their portrayals of gender with those of mainstream sports media. Findings confirm that the American blogosphere exhibits tendencies inherited from mainstream media including the marginalization of women’s sports, and the subsequent objectification of female athletes. The authors reveal that rationalizations, not reasons, have been used to explain why sports writers have not become more progressive on gender issues with the advent of blogging. The researchers conclude that the sports blogosphere is failing to attract bloggers
with progressive views on sports; instead, the blogosphere is attracting writers who for one reason or another prefer to maintain the status quo of old-media values.

Gwen L. Shaffer, in Chapter 5, argues that the idea of a universal code of conduct for bloggers can fail to acknowledge the unique freedoms of speech and expression personified by the global and national blogospheres. Even the best-intended rules of conduct can nullify the benefits of having no gatekeepers on the Internet. The lack of central editorial control in blogging permits communities of bloggers to freely connect and decide what boundaries for self-expression they deem necessary. In spite of noble intentions, a blogging code of conduct could diminish free speech in the blogosphere. The author reaches a valuable conclusion: namely, that bloggers should fully understand and accept the expressive boundaries of a given blog before stepping into the fray. Finally, owners of single-authored blogs and moderators of collective blogs must clearly stipulate their rules so that bloggers will understand the consequences of crossing the line.

Section 2: Blogs and Blogging: Case Studies

Section 2 examines specific case studies and encompasses Chapters 6-10. Anastacia Kurylo and Michael Kurylo, in Chapter 6, inquire into whether or not blogs have evolved beyond the personal and idiosyncratic limitations of online journals. The authors decide that in the case of KnickerBlogger.Net, a name derived from a professional basketball team, the New York Knickerbockers, a blog can become a virtual sports fan “classroom” that permits diverse points of view. This case study documents the capacity for sports blogs to educate fan communities and to allow fans to express their personal opinions. The metaphor of a classroom provides a useful viewpoint for understanding how at least one sports blog has joined the mainstream and suggests a measure for interpreting how blogs may become accepted at large.

Naomi Gold probes the depths of blogging as an emotional, expressive release for disgruntled American Hasidim in Chapter 7. Gold maintains that blogging entails “reflection and conversation taken to electronic lengths.” With respect to reflection, blogging has opened new communication channels for formerly isolated individuals allowing them to connect and share ideas, perspectives, and life experiences. The researcher reveals these newly found powers of blogging in the context of American Orthodox Jewish communities. Currently, blogging in these communities is availing a platform for weighing in on Hasidic customs, practices, and lifestyles; it is affording members who are “off the path” with a means to reinforce or diversify their beliefs and ways of life. Overall, blogging has provided an equally valuable communication outlet for Hasidic members who choose to stay in their communities or leave them. The author argues that blogging has globalized the former hermitical Hasidic world. Indeed, instead of weakening Hasidic communities, blogging might be bringing the potential to rejuvenate them through dialogue and open discussion.

In Chapter 8, Lori F. Brost and Carol McGinnis report a case study of blogging in Ireland. Some pundits suggest that blogging in Ireland is on the decline, while Twitter and Facebook are on the rise. The authors, however, indicate that blogging is merely changing. Although some bloggers quit, many continue to blog while others adopt new forms, such as live blogging. Along with technologically sophisticated Irish males who were early adopters of blogging, men and woman from all walks of life are now blogging in Ireland. The lively and varied topics in the Irish blogosphere encompass “social, political, and cultural interests, concerns, and activities.” It appears that competing traditional media outlets have sensationalized the overly self-critical and reflective commentary on the coming demise of Irish blogging featured in some blogs. In short, blogging is “alive and well in Ireland.”
Justin D. Martin and Sherine El-Toukhy, the authors of Chapter 9, inquire into the Palestinian political blogosphere. Although the authors found that most Palestinian bloggers were critical of the State of Israel and its policies, research unveiled that the bloggers’ tone on the State of Israel was not as derisive and belligerent as they anticipated. Some Palestinian bloggers seem to be demonstrating empathy, and kindness; in fact, many of these bloggers embrace a restrained style over a vituperative one. The authors infer that at least a fraction of Palestinian bloggers believes that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the Middle East is curable and that the Palestinian blogosphere should not be exploited to advance extremist views.

Chapter 10, written by Jocelyn M. DeGroot and Heather J. Carmack, elaborates on blogging as a means of grieving. Individuals experiencing the loss of someone special may be grief-stricken. Since their mourning may require substantial “grief work” to reorient their lives, blogging can become an effective communication channel to help them recover from a loss. The authors indicate that grief blogging functions as a public arena for individuals to help them cope with and recover from grief while keeping the lines of communication with the outside world open. Grief blogs embody the inherent paradox of the Internet—that is, users publicly communicate private information for the sake of personal recovery, despite the number of ethical dilemmas along the way.

Section 3: Analyzing Blogs: Approaches and Perspectives

The chapters in Section 3 utilize various research perspectives and approaches for analyzing, interpreting, and assessing blogs and blogging. The section starts in Chapter 11 with the study of Lynne M. Webb, Tiffany E. Fields, Sitthivorada Boupha, and Matthew N. Stell on the contributions of blog design, rather than content, to the popularity of U.S. political blogs. Aiming to assess channel characteristics associated with popular political blogs, the study finds a positive correlation between internal accessibility, comment opportunities, and blog popularity (gauged by “hits” or page views), as well as between length of a blog’s homepage and opportunities for user interaction. Ultimately, this study of channel characteristics indicates that the most popular blog styles for users are those “with more tabs, more links, and greater internal accessibility.”

In chapter 12, Jenny Bronstein applies a uses and gratification approach to determine the motivations of Latin American bloggers. The study reveals that Latin Americans blog to satisfy emotional and social needs and that blogging incorporates releasing emotions, building interpersonal relations, and mere information gathering. The motivation that Latin American bloggers rate highest is the need to express what is felt and thought. Other motivations that are equally important include the following: to fulfill a need for self-expression, to open an outlet for communicating frustration, to develop a deeper understanding of oneself through public self-disclosure, to improve writing skills, to document personal life experiences, ideas, and thoughts, and to share information. Interestingly, the majority of Latin American bloggers do not consider “just passing the time” as a motivation for blogging.

Chapter 13, by Joshua Azriel, is written from the U.S. Constitution’s First Amendment legal perspective and yields acute information. The author holds that as bloggers enter the publishing field, they should fully realize the legal risks of retribution for distributing hurtful blog content. Since libel, privacy, obscenity, and other speech laws can be applied to blogging, future court cases will adjudicate whether new common law principles will influence the content and boundaries of blogs. Although the 1996 Communications Decency Act exempts Internet service providers from legal responsibility for offensive Internet posts, the U.S. Congress can retune the law by redefining Internet users’ liability. In conclusion, Azriel notes that with the First Amendment as a protection of free speech and freedom of
Richard Fiordo sets forth, in Chapter 14, a hermeneutic perspective in the analysis of a blogging episode. This study demonstrates that blog content can trigger extremely complex discursive interactions. When readers fail to recognize the layered convolutions of blogs in their unique contexts and with their hidden stories, misinterpretations will follow. Since multiple hazards may accompany the extraction of meaning in blogs, blogs might best be critiqued through integrated methods. To determine a blog’s overall message and identify the stories behind the stories, a blog should be approached from multiple perspectives. The research into this particular blogging incident shows: (1) that the expressed intention of the blog investigated seems to have boomeranged and resulted in the opposite of its expressed ideal of helping someone in need, and (2) that inquiry into other blogs should carefully seek to discover suppressed flaws like those masquerading as humane efforts in the analyzed blog.

Tatyana Dumova, author of Chapter 15, examines the status quo of the global blogosphere through the lens of the emerging social interaction technologies to ascertain what the future holds for blogging. Surveying global blogging for recent trends, the author concludes that underlying social interaction technologies make blogging especially suitable for grassroots initiatives and innovation. Recent technological developments, such as the convergence of blogging and social networking platforms, network-based peer production, microblogging, and hyperlocal and live blogging, have wide-ranging implications for audiences around the world. For over a decade, Internet users have employed blogs as a ubiquitous social media tool to communicate and interact with others, and there is evidence to expect that they will continue to rely on this medium in the future.

Designed to explore the global potential of blogs for bridging people and cultures in today’s world, *Blogging in the Global Society* traces blogging practices across national borders, cultural confines, and geographical constraints. An array of perspectives, research methods, and findings articulate the unique contribution of this book to the understanding of the roles and functions of blogging. On behalf of the authors, the editors express hopes that this volume will attract further scholarly attention to the diverse issues of blogging in a global context. The editors are aware of the limitations of any attempt to cover a global medium in a single book and see its publication as a small step forward into this frontier of knowledge and practice.

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**REFERENCES**


