Chapter 12

Techniques for Analyzing Blogs and Micro-Blogs

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ABSTRACT

The chapter reviews research techniques commonly used in the study of blogs and micro-blogs, including both quantitative and qualitative analyses. Using published studies as illustrations, each section explains the options before the researcher and how he/she might reasonably choose among the many methodological options.

INTRODUCTION

Studies examining online behavior appear on a regular basis in business and social science journals. Scientists “widely recognize that cyberbehavior offers a new and exciting frontier” (Hookway, 2008, p. 92), yet issues concerning appropriate research methods for such explorations remain largely undiscussed—especially research methods for examining the exceptionally popular online behaviors of blogging and micro-blogging. This chapter offers guidance to the novice as well as the experienced researcher who desires to begin a study of blogs or micro-blog posts by reviewing extant methodologies for quantitative and qualitative analyses.

What is a Blog? How Do They Work?

Blogging can be described as the offspring of personal Webpages and user-generated content (Haferkamp & Kramer, 2008; Turkle, 1995). Personal Webpages present original content in fairly static formats. In contrast, Weblogs, or blogs, contain regularly changing content; new posts typically appear on a daily basis in reverse chronological order (Wei, 2009). Blog software offers the option of archiving past posts and discussion so that they are readily available to reader. Further, blogs usually allow readers to comment on each post, thus creating original, constantly changing content. Blogs can contain information about a wide range of topics from personal life to politics.
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(Jost & Hipolit, 2006) and are often characterized into genres based on content, including self-help blogs and political-action blogs.

Because blogs are easy to create and maintain via software templates, and because various blogging services offer free blog space (e.g., wordpress.com, blogger.com, and google.com; Rodzvilla, 2002), “anyone with access to a computer and the Internet to create and maintain a blog” (Stefanone & Jang, 2007, p. 124). Blog-hosting Websites provide blog templates that encourage the posting of both text as well as graphics including pictures, cartoons, drawings, charts, and graphs. Such Websites publically post bloggers’ discourse and provide copyright protection for the authors’ intellectual work product (Hookway, 2008). From 2000 to 2005, the number of blogs grew from 100,000 to more than 4 million (Woods, 2005). Riley (2005) reported about half a million blogs in Australia and 2.5 million blogs in the U.K. In 2009, more than 12 million adults in the US maintained a blog (Schechter, 2009).

Blogs typically have three main characteristics (Droge, Stanko, & Pollitte, 2010) that distinguish them from other types of Websites. (1) Blogs offer original content in posts written by an author or authors. (2) Blogs usually link to other blogs. This list of links or the “blogroll” enables blog authors to add links to other blogs to their site, creating networks or communities of blogs sometimes called the “blogosphere” (van Doorn, van Zoonen, & Wyatt, 2007, p. 146). (3) Most blogs have an interactive component, allowing readers to comment on posts (Droge et al., 2010).

Blogs are often categorized as either filter blogs or personal blogs (Cenite, Detenber, Koh, Lim, Ng, & Soon, 2009; Herring & Paolillo, 2006; Wei, 2009). A filter blog “includes certain items while excluding others, often focused on news and political events” (Wei, 2009, p. 533). Political blogs, for example, often link to the Websites of traditional media sources, such as newspapers. In turn, traditional media outlets often quote political filter blogs (Tucker, 2009). Other scholars prefer the term “information hubs” for such blogs (e.g., Bar-Ilan, 2005) to acknowledge that many filter blogs simply offer information about a topic rather than engage in partisan advocacy, such as a blog about organic gardening that offers multiple solutions to common problems (e.g., multiple natural fertilizers that work well in a dry climate). Indeed, many blogs fiercely guard their neutrality.

Personal blogs are more journal-like and feature disclosures of events occurring in daily life and informal photographs (Jung, Vorderer, & Song, 2007); they often chronicle everyday occurrences such as haircuts and dentists visits. At the other extreme, some journal blogs become “highly confessional and self-analytical blogs in which bloggers make sense of their identity and relationships with others” (Hookway, 2008, p. 102). While such blogs are more private and personal than filter blogs or information hubs, they are written for a mass and ambiguous audience that may include family, friends, acquaintances, and strangers (Kleman, 2007). Because such bloggers write to communicate within relationships as well as to transmit messages to mass audiences, personal blogging can be described as the “epitome of masspersonal communication” (Kleman, 2007, p. 2).

From the beginning, scholars have characterized blogs as a powerful medium of communication (Kline & Burstein, 2005; Rodzvilla, 2002; Rosenberg, 2009; Woods, 2005). Researchers as well as lay people have characterized blogs as serving four powerful functions in modern democracies: “the new guardians of democracy, a revolutionary form of bottom-up news production, and a new way of constructing self and [the digital] community in late-modern times” (Hookway, 2008, p. 91). The most researched and documented of these claims include “the twin pillars” of cybercultural studies (Silver, 2000): virtual communities and identity. Scholars employ the term community to reference a sense of cohesiveness, commonality, and propinquity among members of online groups. Such groups typically coalesce