

Welcome to the world of the blog

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We all recognise the impact that the Internet and its associated technologies have had on communication, but in the last few years a phenomenon known as the “blog” has revolutionised communication in both the online and offline world. According to recent statistics from blog-tracking site Technorati, somewhere around the world 18.6 blog posts are made every second and there are now over 50 million blogs in existence. Numbers that go to prove, this is much more than just the latest internet fad.

So, if you’ve managed to survive in a blog free world to date, I bet you are now wondering what on earth a blog is and what you’ve been missing out on so far. The word blog comes from the term “weblog” and was coined in 1999. A blog is simply a set of web pages where entries are made, usually in the form of a journal or diary which are displayed in reverse chronological order. The author or blogger normally puts his or her personal thoughts and opinions in the blog but content can be extremely diverse and may include personal diaries, political commentary, books, poetry, opinions or expertise in certain fields, and comments on current news events or coverage.

Most blogs consist primarily of text although some focus on photographs, video or audio. These blogs are then read by the outside world and the readers then post their own comments to the blog in response. Hypertext linking from blog to blog is very popular as is forming cliques of bloggers who “refer” to each others’ blogs or groups of bloggers contributing to the same blog.

Like all of the best new technology related developments, the world of the blog also has its own set of jargon; so there are bloggers (blog authors), the blogosphere (the blogging community), blogsnobs (a person who refuses to respond to comments on their blog from people outside their circle of friends), blogstorms or blogswarms (which we’ll come to later) and, believe it or not even, blogorreha! (excessive and/or incoherent talkativeness in a weblog).

Although blogs have been around since the 1990’s they first started to gain popularity in America in 2001 and were largely political in nature. By 2004 blogs were becoming much more mainstream in America and a recent study published last month by the internet company MSN claimed that one in four internet users in Britain are now writing blogs. According to Technorati, the blogosphere has doubled every six months for the last three years, this equates to 175,000 new blogs per day worldwide. That’s an awful lot of people doing an awful lot of writing.

So just why have blogs become so popular, after all websites and e-mail have been around for much longer, why do we need yet another new means of communicating online? Of course, digital communities did exist long before blogs, they just took other forms including Usenet and bulletin board systems. Internet forum software has been around for a while, providing for the creation of these running conversations with their threads.

The main reason that blogs have proved to be so successful is that blogging tools/software allow for instant publishing. Blogs are easy and very quick to create, allowing anybody to comment on anything instantly anywhere across the globe. Blogging software often uses templates for generating content so users don't have to worry about formatting which can be an issue with web pages. Dedicated web applications with web interfaces allow users to create blogs without maintaining their own servers, this means that bloggers can blog from anywhere in the world. Blogs can be hosted by dedicated blog hosting services, or they can be run using blog software or on regular web hosting services. The drawback of most websites is that they are passive, whilst blogs can be truly interactive. Readers can leave feedback and comments and because of the instant nature of blogs, conversations become more interactive

So just what impact have blogs had on the world to date, aren't they merely the online rants and raves of the unbalanced or disgruntled? Well, although it goes without saying that you shouldn't take everything you read in a blog as the gospel truth, blogs are playing a major role in the dissemination of information around the world.

Blogs have turned the general public into "citizen journalists", who can react instantly to major events, incidents and stories as they unfold, posting pictures, eye witness accounts and vital on the spot information. Blogs have played major roles in natural disasters including the Tsunami and Hurricane Katrina, major incidents including the attacks in London on the 7th July and conflicts around the world such as the Iraq war. Via the blog, people are providing comprehensive coverage and people are now actively turning to blogs to get their news in the form of first person accounts from people on the ground.

As a result the online world of the blog is having a significant impact on the offline world of the media. Bloggers have been known to usurp the traditional journalists as a medium of news generation, bringing stories to the public arena which the mainstream media then have to act upon.

For example, when President Bush said that "no one could have predicted" the levees would fail and New Orleans would flood, the blogosphere jumped into action, producing dozens of articles, studies and video files that predicted just that, sparking a new round of mainstream press stories. This flurry of blog activity around a particular issue or story is known as "a blogswarm or blogstorm". By linking to each other and creating a cascade effect in this way, the bloggers can force through change. Bloggers were responsible for the early retirement of veteran anchorman Dan Rather on CBS after they spotted errors in documentation relating to a documentary on George Bush' military service and also helped to force the resignation of American Senator Trent Lott, by publicizing a speech in which he appeared nostalgic for segregation in the South. In the blogosphere, politicians in particular, have no where to hide.

Given the amount of material being produced, it isn't surprising that blogs are also uncovering new literary talents. Earlier this year "Baghdad Burning", based on the blog of an anonymous Iraqi woman, was nominated for the prestigious Samuel Johnson prize for non-fiction.

Blogs are also beginning to be taken more seriously by the world of business and they are set to have a huge impact on PR and how it is managed. Blogs do have the power to inflict considerable damage on a brand when you consider just how quickly and how far a negative customer experience exposed in a blog can travel. However, conversely with a strategy in place businesses can also harness the power of the blog to their advantage to reach and communicate with their customers. Therein lies a whole new article.

As with most things in life, blogs do have their pitfalls as well as their benefits. Several bloggers have found to their detriment that keeping a blog can be harmful to your career. In the UK a number of people have already lost their jobs for keeping blogs in which they make inappropriate comments about their employees or revealing personal or confidential information. Human Resource experts are now suggesting that companies need to implement new policies to deal with the bloggers in their workforce.

There is also the potential for bloggers to expose themselves to trial by virtual lynching. According to one recent newspaper report, Chinese internet vigilantes have launched a hunt for a self-professed British bounder who has sparked outrage by blogging about his seduction of women in Shanghai. The campaign to uncover the identity of the blogger and have him kicked out of China is the latest in a series of online denunciations that have drawn comparisons with the humiliations inflicted by mobs during the Cultural Revolution.

The blog, therefore, has become a significant medium, the online word of mouth, which as we have seen, can have powerful ramifications. So now you know more about the world of the “blog” – are you ready to add your two pennies worth to the blogosphere? One word of caution, don’t become a blogbore!