

Dear Diary: Blogs stray further afield



There now are 19.5 million Web logs – or blogs – on the Internet, with an estimated 12,000 sites created each day, according to Technorati.com.

50 million people visited blog sites ComScore Networks estimated that nearly during the first three months of 2005.

Blogs received immense media attention during the 2004 presidential election when certain postings indicated that CBS News had not properly verified the authenticity of documents used to buttress its claims about President Bush's National Guard service. Beyond politics, blogs also have had a significant effect on product design and marketing, as in the case of Kryptonite bicycle locks that were found to be easily opened with a ballpoint pen, leading to a product exchange program by the firm that is estimated to have cost million. \$10

Web logs first appeared in the late 1990s as personal diaries. Since that time, not only have their numbers grown dramatically, but the types of blogs also have expanded from the diary to interactive sites where visitors can post comments and formal company blogs used to promote products and enhance customer good will.

Certain blogs are internal Web sites accessible only to those within the host firm or organization. Although many public blogs encourage postings by visitors, some accept commentary from a only a select group of invited authors.

Certain Web sites provide visitors with the opportunity to easily create their own blogs, increasing the number of blogs managed by those with little technical skill but who wish to publicly proclaim their views and communicate with others in the blogosphere. These blog development sites include blogger.com, sixapart.com/typepad, and livejournal.com.

Company blogs are becoming increasingly popular as mechanisms through which a firm can internally communicate its ideas, policies and research results among its employees while better coordinating projects. Companies also use public versions of their blogs to introduce and promote new products, respond to market changes and post commentaries on current industry topics. Boeing, IBM, Hewlett-Packard, Verizon and Microsoft are among the many companies with corporate blog sites.

The more mature and established blogs are supported through paid advertising. Because a community of frequent visitors often forms around a blog that focuses on a topic of mutual interest, it makes sense that certain firms with services or products that might appeal to that group would advertise on the site. The danger for advertisers is that controversial statements or offensive language might be posted on the blog, linking the firm to this material.

Some sites use software filters to prevent objectionable language or inappropriate topics from being posted. An extreme example of this approach is used by mainland China to prevent its 3 million bloggers from posting certain political or other unacceptable comments. An alternative approach is used by Kaboose.com, which hires parents to act as chaperones to oversee the content of postings and online conversations among the children visiting its Web site.

Other challenges within the blogosphere include how best to ensure the accuracy of posted information so visitors can discern facts from opinion, and how best to deal with the ever-increasing volume of blogs so that Internet search engines can lead visitors to the most relevant sites and postings.

Public debate recently has focused on the effect of blogs on conventional news coverage, leading some to wonder whether the role of the mainstream media will be marginalized as the public increasingly relies upon the Internet for news and information. In fact, the Kryptonite lock case, the 2004 presidential election and other instances suggest that print and broadcast journalists will continue to serve society in primary roles that cannot be filled by bloggers alone.

Bloggers essentially acted as the catalysts for initial scrutiny of the claims made in these cases, but conventional media provided the public stage and considerable resources that were necessary for comprehensive investigations to be launched. It only was five days after the first blog posting about the Kryptonite lock design that major news media outlets such as the New York Times and the Associated Press turned their spotlights on the issue as well, and then only five more days before the firm reversed its public assertion that the lock was effective and launched its exchange program.

After other major news organizations began to focus on the veracity of the CBS allegations about the president's National Guard service, the broadcast giant began to back away from its claims. Bloggers can confirm and publicize information by working together as a community, but the conventional news media are able to devote a broader array of resources for investigation and wider public discourse. The reality is that bloggers and the mainstream media need to work together to properly serve the public.

Gerard Voland is dean of the School of Engineering, Technology and Computer Science at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne. Send comments and questions to him at voland@ipfw.edu.