

# **We Are Blog: Implications of Viewing the Blogosphere as a System**

## **Andrew Chen, Michigan State University**

### **Abstract**

In this paper the network of blogs (blogosphere) is viewed as a system. This systemic viewpoint is illustrated through examples such as the nature of information exchange between the blogosphere and search engines. As a system for memes (thoughts, ideas, or “units of imitation”) to propagate, the blogosphere is shown to be superior to forms of communication such as faxes or books. In viewing the system at the center, we find the potential of the blogosphere to become an uncontrolled supra-intelligence phenomenon. In viewing the bloggers (the humans) at the center, a vision emerges of the blogosphere as the heart and soul of the essential discussion that is vital to an informed democracy. Just as we have learned that neither the earth nor the sun nor the moon is at the center of the universe, so too, I endeavor to explain that neither is the blogosphere at the center of what is happening with the blogging phenomena, nor is it exactly the bloggers that are at the center. My own experiences with how I came to blog help illustrate some of the appeal of blogging and how this points to what I contend is at the center of the blogging phenomena.

### **Introduction**

I don't really know what I'm talking about.

But that's ok, because none of us do.

And by none of us, I mean us bloggers.

Because lets face it - we often blog on topics we aren't experts on.

And that's ok.

Why is that ok?

We get the discussion going.

We get the discussion growing -

out of the fields of specialization and into more cross-discipline ways of viewing things.

But even that doesn't matter.

What matters is that we're talking.

It is the talking that matters, not the subject of discussion.

Yes, we can imagine that the discussion in the blogosphere is good because it helps us escape from the sound-bite mentality of modern-day mass-media.

But that isn't really what matters. What matters is the discussion is public and instantly available to everyone. It enables us to learn. For me, it is important that it enables me to learn - just like the experience of presenting this paper enables me to learn - it is an opportunity to "broadcast" or "publish" some content and get some feedback. So if I say something that you think is idiotic, please don't hesitate to tell me so. For the sake of my ego, however, I ask that you do so in private, if at all possible.

For the sake of the ego - I shall return to this later.

So for me, blogging enables me to learn. However, for the blogosphere, it doesn't matter whether or not I learn. What matters is that learning is happening.

Information is being spread. The types of information that are being spread, and the ways they are being spread through the blogosphere are part of what matters. There's more. The way the information and its spread affect the information and its spread are part of how this becomes a system, for the parts affect each other.

In part, the spread of the information is through discussion. The discussion is part of the blogosphere. Yet, it relates to other things as well, and forms systems in which humans are components, vital for the system to exist. Still, in the grand scheme of things, most of the components would exist regardless of the presence or absence of almost any random human.

## **Overview**

I will discuss parts of the system that I see, as well as possible implications. In discussing the parts of the system that I see, I will explain to you how there are these systems in place that are beyond any individual or company - the relationship between bloggers and search engines, between blogs and products, services, information/ advertising, and between the blogosphere and experiences. In discussing possible implications, I draw upon some disparate notions involving memetics.

## **Bloggers and Search Engines**

The elements that flow into, out of, and around the blogosphere are memes (thoughts, ideas, or "units of

imitation”).

A search engine is a tool that is often used by humans, but can be used by other tools - details of an example of a tool that uses a search engine can be found at <http://www.answerbus.com/about/index.shtml> . Given a search term, a search engine returns a list of pages on the WWW (World Wide Web) that the search engine deems matches those search terms. There are a number of different techniques that different search engines employ to determine what the most appropriate result for a given search is. The use of links from another page to indicate that a page is “more popular” and therefore and the use of link text to highlight/focus-on important key words/phrases on that page is notable.

### **Blogs and Topic-Focused Online Communities**

Humans (and their representations online, the blogs) have an interesting relationship with search engines. When a human wants to know something, they often search for it using a search engine. A human with a blog may not hesitate to take the useful search result that they (hopefully, eventually) find and blog about it. When the search engine indexes their blog, the link to it is used to update the utility of search results. In this respect, search engines help bloggers, and bloggers help search engines, in a sort of symbiotic relationship that is neither dependent on any specific search engine, nor on any specific blogger.

Suppose I have an idea. I blog about it. Perhaps my regular readers read it. Perhaps others find it through search engines or word of mouth. If I have a comments section, or other facilities like that, I can come to know that people have found my idea and are interested in it.

So, suppose, based on the comments and such on someone’s blog (not necessarily mine), I know that there is sufficient interest in this idea to create a community - an on-line forum. So if I become passionate enough about that idea, I create the forum, website, mailing list, group blog or something like that - the on-line community. At first, perhaps only a handful of people join up, but hopefully they are regulars that establish a core group and a sense of community. As others find the forum and see the sense of community, hopefully they join up, begin to participate, and the community grows. Therefore blogs facilitate initial community creation through the comments section. Eventually, the community expands beyond the confines of what one “community location” can support, and a variety of forums to discuss the idea emerges.

A blog might have lead to the creation of a community - but the community might lead people to blog, as they gain more practice and exposure in voicing their opinions, and as they find more and more that what they want is perhaps not so much a community about that particular topic, but just community in general, so they create a

blog and some friends of theirs add links to them to their blogs and voilà, we have a little small network of bloggers in community.

Blogs can lead to the creation of topic-focused communities, which can lead to the creation of people-based-communities - a. k. a. blogs. Blogs and topic-focused communities, ever in cycle with each other.

## **Blogs and Money**

Within the blogosphere, advertising is a currency. Many bloggers seek to make money off of their blogs using advertising. Many bloggers also choose to increase traffic via advertising their blogs. Some engage in link exchanges, some actually pay money for advertising elsewhere.

Of course, the blogosphere is an open system - there are other things outside of it that affect it. One example might be a consumer product. It can be bought, reviewed on a blog, and sold on a on-line auction site. Another person might "go shopping" hear about that product, search the web for information about it, find a review on someone's blog, and based on that, decide how much to bid on an on-line auction site - or to pay at a retail (online or offline) store.

There isn't exactly a plurality of eBay-like systems that exist, but there does exist the potential - if eBay does something to lose customs just once by, for example, increasing its fees too much or having too many site failures or something like that - there are plenty of other auction sites out there ready to seize upon the potential market. Online auctions allow a faster flow of goods between informed buyers/sellers, and blogs allow a faster flow of information between owners and prospective buyers. And when the prospective buyer, if a blogger, has acquired it, and blogged about it, the amount of information available about the product has increased, and potentially now the search engine ranking has been made to be even more appropriate, as the existing content for a search on that product now has more "competition". And when people survey the available "competition" and choose the "winner", if they're a blogger, they'll link to it, causing the search engine to reflect this "winner" by a higher score. This, in turn, helps ensure that additional prospective buyers are more likely to find relevant information about the potential product, and so on.

So it helps us enter an age whereby the new product price can easily be a result of advertising/hype and the like, but the used product price quickly becomes a function of quality/value/utility/worth. From my point of view that is a side effect. The important thing to bear in mind here is that we've got a feedback cycle of product information that is facilitated by blogs and by on-line auction sites, each facilitating the other.

This feedback cycle applies not only to products, but to services as well - people compare and contrast a service such as a cell phone service provider, a web host, an internet service provider, or commercial blogging services. They then blog their opinions (or share them on a website designed for the sharing of such opinions) and let search engines pick this up. When someone else is considering such a service, they can search the web (or visit the website that was designed for the sharing of opinions about that service), and find the comments about the service. If they then try out the service, and they too blog about it, a feedback loop of information about the service grows - it winds up facilitating open discussion of different services and their merits and such.

This goes not just for products and services, but also for experiences. Someone might blog about snowboarding, someone might read about it and decide to try it out, perhaps out of curiosity, or perhaps because it sounded so good, and then blog about it. Someone might read that blog, and then try it themselves, and so on. Experiences continually shift between real and vicarious, real and vicarious, back and forth, in and out of the blogosphere.

### **From The Macroscopic View to The Microscopic View**

So, hopefully I've explained well to you how there are these systems in place that are beyond any individual or company - the relationship between bloggers and search engines, between blogs and products, services, information/advertising, and between the blogosphere and experiences. Now instead of looking at the big picture of the systems, I'm going to focus in on a little part of these systems: myself.

I'm going to relate some of the reasons why I became a blogger. For me, it wasn't a sudden thing - I didn't wake up one day and decide "I'm going to start a blog". I noticed I gradually began to transform my website into a blog and, by reflecting on this experience, I may have learned something about the parts of human nature that contribute to how the system works, came to be, and will continue to be.

I'm in computer science, so I do some computer programming. I enjoy it. Sometimes I program for fun. Sometimes I write a computer program that I think might actually be useful. Sometimes I actually use computer program(s) that I've written. Sometimes other people actually use computer program(s) that I've written. Of course, it wouldn't hurt if people would like to pay me for my stuff too. So I created my website initially with the idea that I could share the computer program(s) that I've written, and pay for them if they would like to. So for me there was a desire to share my works and a desire to be recompensed that was the initial impetus for creating a website.

We could avoid using blogging tools and just hand-edit HTML pages using a simple text editor. The issues associated with learning HTML, and the hassle of having to go through that process make it tiresome.

I created my website initially using a piece of open source software that is no longer supported (SIPS), but it worked - I was able to update my site's content from anywhere, and I was able to focus on just updating the content. I had chosen that particular piece of software because it was open source - I didn't want to have to advertise someone else's services/products, since I had intended to offer mine on my site.

To get customers, I needed to have them find me. Realizing that some might find me through search engines, I realized that I ought to have a decent amount content for the search engines to index. For this reason, it was my new year's resolution in 2002 to add new content to my website every day.

It might happen that there were certain things that I'd find myself explaining or showing or sending to multiple different people and/or on multiple different occasions. Eventually, I decided that if I just put this content on my website, I could just refer them to that. I call this content reuse. It is, in fact, something that seems to be a bit more polite than using a form letter to respond to someone.

Then, over time, what happened was people would ask me a question or forward me a link via e-mail or something similar, and I would feel my response, or the link, or my opinion of the link, was worth sharing with the rest of the world, and I would add that to my website. In this way, the desire to spread memes was a motivating force behind my coming to blog and this desire, I would contend, implies something about human nature and about the shape of the blogosphere to come.

So, in summary, I came to blog because I wanted to have a sense of online presence, to possibly make money, ease of use, visibility, to save effort and not retype, and to spread memes that were important to me.

### **A Memetic Perspective**

This spreading of memes that the blogosphere is so good at - why does it matter?

Memes "evolve" - they spread from mind to mind, get repeated, mutated, die out, etc.... The more a given meme spreads, the more likely it will survive and thrive. Memes, like genes, have a degree of "evolutionary fitness" within whatever context they are evaluated.

Often, humans see certain memes as "important" and so make it a point to spread them. For a blogger, this means that they blog about things that are important to them.

A blogger that sees things highly from a memetic perspective, where it is all about the memes, may like to be freed from having to actually visit someone's website. Various technologies enable things like this.

## Us Re "The System"

So, this perception of "the system" and us being "powerless" to it, as sort of "cogs in the machine" can sound rather depressing, I admit.

It is all about how you view it. We just need to slap a happy face on this. We can do this easily by resurrecting an idea that has been around for a long time, known as Gaia - the idea that the earth is alive and somehow evolving to protect itself - in which case we can see the blogosphere as the consciousness of Gaia. This actually winds up having an empowering feel to it - instead of saying "I'm a blogger" we can say "I'm an agent of the consciousness of Gaia." It's almost like saying "I'm a prophet of God."

That happens when we think in terms of "the system" - that is, in terms of how the "larger forces at work" combine to seem to make it so that what we do doesn't matter in the grand scheme of things. When we think in terms of "the human", we get a rather different view.

Yes, humans, or "the people," are vital ingredients to making the blogosphere into what it is. But they aren't "at the center." People have a habit of letting themselves put other things above "themselves" - sometimes that's money/sex/power, other times more altruistic things that help people envision a better future. But whatever it is, it isn't "people" that remain at the center. Even "humanist" views that aim to have "the well being of people" above and beyond all else are just codes for notions of what is indeed "the well being of people," as well as what constitutes "people," and "well being," etc.... Eventually it is not the people at the center, but the notion of "people at the center" that ends up being at the center.

In 1993 Howard Rheingold wrote in *Virtual Community* ( available online at <http://www.rheingold.com/vc/book/> ):

"We temporarily have access to a tool that could bring conviviality and understanding into our lives and might help revitalize the public sphere. The same tool, improperly controlled and wielded, could become an instrument of tyranny. The vision of a citizen-designed, citizen-controlled worldwide communications network is a version of technological utopianism that could be called the vision of "the electronic agora." In the original democracy, Athens, the agora was the marketplace, and more--it was where citizens met to talk, gossip, argue, size each other up, find the weak spots in political ideas by debating about them. But another kind of vision could apply to the use of the Net in the wrong ways, a shadow vision of a less

utopian kind of place--the Panopticon."

This vision of a "electronic agora" would make the human at the center perspective seem quite attractive (unless you favor "the system"), but along with it comes an implicit belief in human potential and human ability to know how to choose wisely the direction the system should take. I leave it to students of history to draw their own conclusions as to the suitability of doing this.

Clearly the "system"-centric and "human"-centric perspectives are both extremes, regardless of how happy or dystopic they seem to be.

### **Self Similarity**

The fact of the matter is, we affect the system, because we made it, and it affects us, because we live in/as-part of it. And since we each reflect each other, there's a degree of self-similarity going on.

In my attempt to ponder how human nature would be reflected in the blogosphere, I sought to utilize a theory of the blogosphere as a holographic projection of human nature, in a manner similar to how Dr. Ballentine, the author of the book "Radical Healing", sees the "diagnostic" sources of information that are part of alternative medicine as things that contribute to an image of one's overall health, but that each by itself may not be of great help. I believe Dr. Ballentine got this idea from Michael Talbot as presented in Talbot's book "The Holographic Universe."

I sought to explore how we could see the future of the blogosphere and what it was about as a projection of what it meant to be human and what being human was about, since ultimately humans are what makes the blogosphere go - the blogosphere would be nothing without humans. And I saw fit to try to use this holographic analogy - while no single human provides all the information about what the blogosphere will be about, a large enough broad spectrum of them together can provide a picture.

I'm not talking about a survey and finding an "average" - the "average" is often something that doesn't exist. We need to identify different groups, see how they inter-relate (or don't inter-relate) and so on and so forth.

So yeah, I was thinking of seeing the holographic projection of human nature through the blogosphere as the basis for what the blogosphere would become.

Whereas I have described it using the language of "holographic", describing the blogosphere as "fractal" is not

uncommon as well. This language hints at a notion that I hope is useful - self-similarity. Self-similarity enables one to see that the system is indeed reflective of the parts, and vice versus, and thus hopefully that neither should be seen as "the center" because both shape and are shaped by the other - both the system affecting the individual and the individual affecting the system.

So, as you can see, in the fractal or holographic view, the myriad aspects of humans and the myriad aspects of "the system" (the blogosphere) come together in a sort of tapestry of things, each clearly being a part of the other, and yet clearly shaping the other in a variety of ways.

Distinctions shape us because the distinctions that we make between self/other are the distinctions that we make between subjective/objective. These same distinctions are the ones that we make between "humans" as "us" and "the blogosphere" as "the system". Yet, instead of an all-or-nothing approach to the presence/absence of distinctions, we can allow them to be there partially - just like trying to completely draw every last detail of a fractal would be infeasible, so too, delineating distinctions between self and other, if allowed to be seen as involving the complexity of a fractal, would also be infeasible. It might explain why people continually struggle with notions of identity.

Like I said, I don't really know what I'm talking about.