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## What Is a Weblog?

*A weblog is a coffeehouse conversation in text,  
with references as required.*

REBECCA BLOOD

You may have seen them in your travels around the World Wide Web. Some provide succinct descriptions of judiciously selected links. Some contain wide swaths of commentary dotted sparingly with links to the news of the day. Others consist of an endless stream of blurts about the writer's day; links, if they exist, are to other, similar, personal sites. Some are political. Some are intellectual. Some are hilarious. Some are topic-driven. Some are off-the-wall. Most are noncommercial and all are impassioned about their subjects. They are the weblogs.

What they have in common is a format: a webpage with new entries placed at the top, updated frequently—sometimes several times a day. Often at the side of the page is a list of links pointing to similar sites. Some sites consist only of a weblog. Others include the weblog as part of a larger site. More than a list of links and less than a full-blown zine, weblogs are hard to describe but easy to recognize.

Personal sites and lists of links have existed since the Web was born. Indeed, the ability to link from one document to any other that existed on the global network was the great novelty that drew early enthusiasts to the Web. Like a text version of ham radio, early enthusiasts published pages and eagerly perused

the pages of others. It didn't matter what a page contained, just that it was accessible from any computer with a modem and a browser.

There has been spirited discussion in some quarters of the weblog community about when the first weblog appeared, but I think of Mosaic's What's New page, which ran from June 1993 to June 1996, as the progenitor of the format. Updated daily, it pointed Web surfers to sites they might enjoy seeing—and in those days Web surfers enjoyed looking at any page. Early adopters spent countless hours waiting for countless home pages featuring countless pictures of cats to download over their 1200 baud modems—and they liked it!

For a while, any webpage was an interesting addition to cyberspace, but then that space got crowded. Companies began advertising their products and services on the Web. More and more people put up pages about their lives and interests, and some of those interests were unimaginably arcane, esoteric, or just plain wacky. Newspapers and magazines published Web editions. The Web grew at an exponential rate and finding the "good stuff" became simultaneously more difficult and more time-consuming. But the good stuff was there, and enthusiasts enjoyed seeking it out.

And then an interesting thing happened. A few of these enthusiasts decided to put the links they collected daily onto a single webpage. Some of them had tired of spamming their friends with a constant barrage of email. Others had accumulated bookmark files that were bursting at the seams and sought a better way to organize the interesting things they found as they surfed. Whatever their reasons, for these folks it seemed the most natural thing in the world to put the record of their travels around the Web *on* the Web, and so a particular type of website was born. Enthusiastic surfers turned their home pages into a running list of links with descriptive text to inform their readers why they should click the link and wait for the page to download.

Steve Bogart created News, Pointers & Commentary (later called Now This) in February 1997, and Dave Winer launched Scripting News in April of that same year; Michael Sippey began The Obvious Filter (later Filtered for Purity) in May, and Jorn Barger's Robot Wisdom was created in December. And there were more, most of them completely unaware of the other sites that resembled theirs. Some called them "news sites" and some called them "filters," but most people didn't call them anything at all. "Links with commentary, with the new stuff on top" was the formula; for those who found them, these sites served as a welcome guide through the increasingly complex World Wide Web.

In November 1998 Jesse James Garrett, editor of Infosift, another of the original weblogs, collected a list of "sites like his" and sent them to Cameron Barrett, maintainer of Camworld. Adopting Jorn Barger's term "weblog" to describe the kind of site he maintained, Cam wrote an essay in January 1999 called "Anatomy of a Weblog," which detailed the elements of the form. He placed the list in a narrow column to the right of his weblog . . . and a movement was born. Maintainers of similar sites emailed their URLs for inclusion on Cam's list and readers suddenly had twelve, then twenty, then thirty and more weblogs to peruse in a day. No one liked the name very well, but with Cam's essay, "weblog" became the accepted term. Peter Merholz announced on his site that he was going to pronounce it "wee-blog" and it was only a matter of weeks before the abbreviation "blog" began appearing as an alternate term.

Most of the early weblog editors designed or maintained websites for a living. Even those who did not work directly on the Web knew HTML, the simple coding language used to create webpages. A few computer programmers designed systems to help them manage their sites, but most people updated their weblogs by hand.

Some Web designers created “arty” pages, but most weblogs were designed on the principle of simple functionality. A main area, wide enough for easy reading, was reserved for daily entries. Often a narrow side column echoed Cam’s original list of “other weblogs” and this sidebar persists on many weblogs today. Jesse James Garrett added a link to his personal portal, a list of news sites, e-zines, and other weblogs. Partly convenience, partly an invitation to “see where I surf,” in 2002 this convention persists even among webloggers who have never heard of Infosift.

Weblogs continued to spring up. Instead of being similar sites that had discovered a commonality, these weblogs were deliberately patterned after the weblogs listed on Camworld’s sidebar. Many of them were created by Web developers who had coding skills and presumably spent their days in front of the computer. Unlike their coworkers, who sighed that the last thing they wanted to do when they got home was look at a computer, the webloggers were excited about the Web and passionate about its potential. They eagerly embraced the global network, looking first to the Web for news, information, and entertainment. It was natural that they would see their personal websites as extensions of their day-to-day lives.

Many of the first-wave weblogs updated throughout the day, providing a sort of real-time record of their maintainer’s surfing patterns. They linked to general interest articles, to online games, and often to Web-related news. Camworld’s sidebar continued to grow as these first-wave weblogs were added to his list of old-school sites.

One of these sites, Lemonyellow, was notable for being the first weblog to gain the attention of traditional media. The *New York Times* article about the site, published in July 1999, didn’t say a word about weblogs, but it affirmed the notion that webloggers were on to something. Maintainer Heather Anne Halpert mixed links to interesting sites with esoteric entries

about information architecture and notes on going to the theater. Her engaging style inspired open admiration. Literate, personal, and undeniably “thinky” in tone, Lemonyellow is, to my mind, the prototype of the notebook-style weblog. It ceased publication in April 2001.

In July 1999, Andrew Smales, maintainer of the popular weblog *Be Nice to Bears*, created *Pitas*, a service that enabled anyone with access to a computer with a Web browser to create a weblog entry by typing into a blank box and then clicking a button on the computer screen. A month later, a startup called *Pyra* produced a similar product called *Blogger*. With the introduction of these two services and the others that appeared quickly on their heels, anyone who could type and had access to the World Wide Web could create a weblog, and the bandwagon that had been steadily gaining momentum through the summer shot through the gate.

And weblogs changed. Weblogs devoted to short personal entries appeared, usually created with one of the simple new weblog tools. When these sites included links, if they did at all, they pointed mainly to other weblogs. In public and in private, bloggers engaged in vigorous discussions over the definition of the weblog. How often did it need to be updated? Every day? More than once a week? And most heatedly: Must it include links? In an attempt to organize the increasing mass of weblogs, weblogger Brigitte Eaton created a central weblog portal for the new community. Her criterion was simple: that a site consisted of dated entries. Since the *Eatonweb* portal was the most complete listing available, by default her inclusive definition won the day.

The weblog community spread to include sites that originated in Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, and beyond. Numerous weblogs popped up in the Netherlands, which was known, for a while at least, as having the highest number of weblogs per capita in the world. Non-English weblogs proliferated, though

they remained largely separate from the original community (Americans being, overall, relentlessly monolingual).

Today there are hundreds of thousands of weblogs, and dozens of software products designed specifically to make updating them easier. They have evolved to encompass any subject matter and they reflect worldviews that range from the private world of the writer to the public world of culture and current events, and everything in between. The appeal of each weblog is grounded thoroughly in the personality of its writer: his interests, his opinions, and his personal mix of links and commentary. These links point to anything and everything, from obscure articles about artists, to news analysis concerning current events, to the sites of his friends.

Each site is different—each writer decides each day what to write—but I place weblogs into three very broad categories: blogs, notebooks, and filters.

**BLOGS:** These sites resemble short-form journals. The writer's subject is his daily life, with links subordinate to the text. Even when entries point the reader to a news or magazine article, linktext gives the feeling of a quick, spontaneous remark, perhaps of the type found in an instant message to a friend. Links, when included, seem to be almost an afterthought, pointers to friends' sites or perhaps to the definition of a word. Completely unheard of when Cameron wrote his essay, this type of site dominated the weblog universe by the middle of 2000, probably due to the proliferation of tools that made posting a quick thought so easy that the addition of a link became seen as an unnecessary and (relatively) time-consuming step.

**NOTEBOOKS:** Sometimes personal, sometimes focused on the outside world, notebooks are distinguished from blogs by their longer pieces of focused content. Personal entries are sometimes in the form of a story. Some notebooks are designed as a

space for public contemplation: Entries may contain links to primary material, but the weblogger's ruminations are front and center. Shorter than an essay, longer than the blog-style blurt, these sites are noted for writing that seems more edited than that of the typical blog. Both blogs and notebooks tend to focus on the weblogger's inner world or their reactions to the world around them; the links themselves play strictly a supporting role.

I suppose I should take a moment to differentiate both blogs and notebooks from online journals, which predate the weblog movement by many years. It is impossible to make a strict delineation; superficially, journals often contain one longer entry per day, one per page. Perhaps a deeper difference lies in the intent of the maintainer. Online journals are analogous to paper journals, with the sole difference that they are published for the world to see. Online journalers may keep a record of events, explore their inner world, or do any of the things that journalers traditionally have done with pen and paper.

Blogs tend to consist of much shorter entries, many per day, the blogger seemingly striving for communication more than self-enlightenment. Notebooks, while they sometimes use the "one entry per day" format, tend to be less a record of external events than a record of ideas, and those that focus on the personal tend to do so nonchronologically, dipping into their entire catalogue of experience to select individual stories rather than recount their journey day by day. In the end, it is the maintainer of the site who labels his work and chooses the community with whom he most closely identifies.

**FILTERS:** When I think of the classic weblog, I don't think of a short-form diary or a series of stories or short think pieces. I think of the old-style site organized squarely around the link, maintained by an inveterate Web surfer, personal information strictly optional. These weblogs have one thing in common:

the primacy of the link. Whether their editors write at length or not at all, filter editors want to show you around the Web. Some of these editors strive for pithiness, others for completeness, but even those who use links as a springboard to extended diatribes are focused primarily on the world outside their door. These sites may visually resemble the blog or the notebook, but they reveal the weblogger's personality from the outside in. The self, when it appears on a filter-style weblog, is revealed obliquely, through its relation to the larger world.

Some filter-style weblogs focus on a particular subject. The aim of these subject-specific filters is to provide their readers with a continuous source for all the available news about a given topic. Sometimes maintained by enthusiasts, sometimes by businesses or professionals, these sites are often designed to build and enhance the reputation of their maintainers.

Collaborative weblogs, as their name indicates, are maintained by a group of people instead of an individual. Usually filters, most collaborative weblogs are indistinguishable from an individually produced weblog, except that entries list several individuals as contributors. Some don't make even this distinction, and can be recognized only by reading the site's "About" page. Some collaborative weblogs are also community weblogs. These range from sites on which any member can post and comment, to those on which the site owners post to the main page and members contribute in discussion forums.

Of course, most weblogs do not strictly follow the roles I've outlined above. Blogs sometimes link to news articles or online games, notebooks sometimes contain one-line links, and filters sometimes contain linkless personal observations. It is just this variety in content and approach that makes weblogs so irresistible to many of us. Each weblogger creates a personal version of the weblog format, dictated by purpose, interest, and whim. The weblog is infinitely malleable and may be adapted to almost any end. There are travel weblogs, photo weblogs, sex weblogs,



business weblogs, wedding weblogs, historical weblogs, humor weblogs, and weblogs focused on U.S. military actions. The very best weblogs, in my opinion, are designed to accommodate unexpected turns, to allow for a little experimentation.



## Weblogs Are Native to the Web

The weblog is many things to many people, but it is, above all, a form that is native to the Web. The traditional home page can range from an online resume to an elaborate family scrapbook, but it is generally an attempt to transfer the product of an older medium—paper—into the new. Intended to be updated infrequently, these documents create a fairly static representation of their creator. The weblog, updated regularly, is designed to be visited again and again, and most webloggers make a point of giving their readers something new to read every day. In other media, this takes the form of periodical publishing: editions put out at regular intervals. The Web enables continual publishing, in which updates can occur at any time; it is this aspect of the Web that weblogs can capitalize on. Whether or not the weblogger consciously associates the process of “updating” with the idea of “publishing an edition,” the popularity of websites that track recently updated weblogs attests to this fundamental truth about the form.

The weblog points its visitors to other sites. Commercial websites spent years chanting the mantra of “stickiness”: the ability to get visitors who came to their sites to stay there, even creating policies that prohibited the inclusion of external links anywhere on their sites. Weblogs have no such aspirations. Webloggers understand that people will regularly visit any website that reliably provides them with worthwhile content, even when that content is on another site. As counterintuitive as it may seem from an

old-media perspective, weblogs attract regular readers precisely because they regularly point readers away.

The weblog phenomenon is democratic. Weblogs are generally published by a single person or a group of people who lack access to traditional means of broadcast. For this new type of publication, all that is required is reliable access to a computer with an Internet connection; free, easy-to-use services make it possible to produce a weblog without knowing HTML or spending a penny. In the weblog universe, everyone can say his piece. Produced without gatekeepers, weblogs focus on whatever topic is of interest to its maintainer: Web design, math-rock, world events, or day-to-day events. Webloggers who link to one another recognize their ability to leverage virtual social connections into ad hoc networks, enabling each of them to amplify his individual voice.

## Weblog Filter Information

We are inundated with information; literacy and electricity have added to the din of the medieval marketplace an overlay of flyers, billboards, signage, and flashing lights. The unhappy combination of technology and hyperconsumerism has rendered our public spaces nearly uninhabitable. Radios blare out of car windows, bus stops promote shoes and sweaters, and long distance services advertise on coffee cup sleeves. Email, pagers, and instant messaging have accelerated the pace of personal communications. Televisions broadcast hundreds of channels and local newsstands carry thousands of magazines.

The Web, by allowing anyone on the network to access any and all information, has increased this din a thousandfold. Hobbyists and enthusiasts have created websites about every subject imaginable, including some that previously we had not imagined at all: The new information space includes a website devoted to the adoration of Converse's popular "Chuck Taylor

All-Star" sneaker, a site detailing the exploits of two friends who photograph each other attempting to match the appearance of strangers they happen to see, and one that seeks to elucidate an artist's curious obsession with young women holding celery. Additionally, online news outlets bring us up-to-the-minute details of important events and government sites provide the details of federal policy and congressional deliberations. With these new resources, just keeping up with the news can seem to be an infinitely expandable task; becoming and staying really informed has enlarged to become a full-time job. The terrible irony is that the more information is available, the less possible it is to know everything about even one subject. Because there is always more to know, it is increasingly difficult to feel that one knows even enough.

In such a world, the last thing anyone needs is another source of information. Indeed, for some people, this truly is the case. Some of us, having already hit our limit, have resorted to "news fasts" or to canceling all of our magazine subscriptions. Many of us return to our homes nightly unable to process any information that requires real thought or evaluation. Even for those who have not given up, interesting news goes unnoticed—and occasionally world events create so much news that no one can keep up.

Immediately after the September 11 attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center, the Web exploded. News outlets around the world pumped out story after story about the attacks and their ramifications: why they had happened, how they had happened, and what might happen next. Like everyone else, I was overwhelmed with the sheer amount of news and commentary that sought to make sense of the event, its aftermath, and its causes. For several weeks I found myself getting most of my news by reading other weblogs, whose maintainers seemed to have much more time than I had to comb through the available news sources. I used my weblog to

cull from their sites the best stories they had found. I was, for a time, filtering the filters.

For everyone, the great task of the future will not be to gain access to more information, but to develop avenues to information that genuinely enhances our understanding, and to screen out the rest. For many people, weblogs provide this useful filter. Subject-specific weblogs link to the news they need in order to more effectively run their business or enjoy their hobby. Even general interest weblogs have great value for those too busy to do more than scan the headlines. When a reader shares a weblogger's general worldview, he can rely on her to point to articles and websites that will interest him.

Automated news aggregators, which collect the news on a given topic based on keywords, lack the human judgment to discern between two versions of the same story or to include a relevant story on a seemingly unrelated topic. Just as important, news selected by keyword is bound to leave a great deal of the world unheard of (and thus unconsidered) by the individual who relies on aggregators for his news. Even the man who turns first to the Sports section of the paper version of his hometown newspaper is exposed, however briefly, to the front news page; and an interesting headline in the Living section may catch his eye when he puts down the rest of the paper.

A good weblog on any subject provides a combination of relevance, intelligent juxtaposition, and serendipity. Read a good filter-style weblog for even a few days, and you will never doubt the value of an astute human editor. Because he evaluates content rather than keywords, a human editor provides his readers with more relevant information than the most sophisticated news aggregator ever can. Informed webloggers can add their own critical evaluation of the news they link, or link to someone else's opinion. More than anything else, the best weblogs create

for their readers what I call “targeted serendipity.” When a weblogger and his readers share a point of view, a weblog constantly points its readers to items they didn’t know they wanted to see.

## **Weblogs Provide Context**

One of the strengths of the weblog is its ability to contextualize information by juxtaposing complementary or oppositional documents and information. The Web allows easy access to numerous documents from a single source. When highlighting an interesting article, the weblogger can attach a primary source, a related news story, or a contrasting interpretation simply by adding a link.

Too often, mass media represent only the views of the powerful, ignore important context, or even misunderstand crucial facts. Individuals who recognize these omissions respond enthusiastically to small, noncommercial sites that aim to highlight easily overlooked stories or seek to put the news into a larger perspective.

Even the inclusion of an older news story can shed considerable light on current events, or just illustrate a shift in a news-maker’s public relations spin. Lawrence Lee of Tomalak’s Realm has made an art of this type of contextualization. He regularly places older, related news stories alongside current articles on Web strategy. His unerring sense of the most relevant contextual material demonstrates the superiority of the human editor over news aggregators and computer-generated lists of articles sorted by keyword.

Webloggers unexpectedly turn out to be experts on all kinds of topics. All too often, corporate and political spokesmen skew the facts. When they are reporting on unfamiliar subjects or facing a tight deadline, reporters may accept this information at face

value. Speaking from their own expertise or experience, bloggers frequently offer clear, cogent explanations of complicated topics. Even a blogger who is not an expert may seek out additional material in an effort to discover whether questionable reported facts stand up to closer scrutiny.

## **Weblogs Promote Media Literacy**

When a blogger focuses on current events or pop culture, he is likely to begin reading numerous accounts of the items he links, looking for the best written or the most complete accounting. This activity alone is an education in media literacy. The inclusion or exclusion of a single fact can change the entire context of a reported incident and lead the reader to draw vastly different conclusions. The same facts, presented in a different order or described using different words, can convey vastly different messages.

After a December 2001 Supreme Court decision regarding the conviction of Mumia Abu-Jamal, I linked to the story on five prominent online news sites and reproduced their headlines on my site. These headlines described Abu-Jamal in wildly different terms, ranging from “cop killer” to “former radio journalist.” The exercise was a stunning demonstration of the power of a headline—or even a short summary—to actively frame the facts and to prime the reader to draw a specific conclusion.

Composing linktext for any weblog, regardless of its subject matter, is an education for the blogger. In summarizing an article, he must decide whether to employ neutral or value-laden language. He quickly learns that he has the ability, in his brief description, to draw the reader’s attention to whichever aspect of the story he finds most compelling. Though he knows his audience will read and make their own evaluation, the blogger will discover that he conveys his point of view in

even the few words of his description. With each choice, the weblogger learns the power of a single word to affect the perception of his readers.

For the reader who follows several weblogs, the process can be equally instructive. When several versions of a popular story are linked by different weblogs, readers can easily evaluate each for themselves. And they will be unable to avoid noting the differences in tone and interpretation when different webloggers synopsise the same story.

## **Weblogs Provide Alternate Points of View**

Weblogs are produced by every kind of person on any kind of topic. Because they are primarily noncommercial efforts, they have no vested interest in pleasing stockholders and no need to avoid offending advertisers.

Motivated webloggers seek out websites and articles from all corners of the Web. Marginalized voices, dissenting viewpoints, and obscure websites all flourish in the weblog universe. The Weblogger is free to link all of these things—and to comment freely—because he is beholden to no one. Since he makes no money from his site, he need never fear the loss of revenue from linking an unpopular article or stating an unmoderated opinion. The Weblogger may not be respectful or even nice about the sites and stories he links, but readers can be sure he is not speaking to placate an important advertiser.

Many of the newer webloggers are deeply committed to promoting their own worldview. They see their weblog as a personal op-ed column, a space in which they can proselytize their own way of thinking and pronounce judgment on the news and opinions of the day. These webloggers tend to link to opposing viewpoints only to attack them, and they can be counted on to provide a wide variety of links to other webloggers and columnists who share their point of view. Whether they inhabit the

political left or right, these weblogs are reliable sources for a specifically slanted view of the world.

Other weblogs have a far less deliberate political bias. Though their sites reflect their maintainer's interests and general worldview, these bloggers may seek out unusual sources in an attempt to supplement the homogenous news that is spooned out by standard corporate purveyors. They may link to articles that go against the general political grain of their site, if they are interesting or likely to tweak their politically rigid readers. Whatever their motivations, weblogs that are maintained by information junkies are likely to bring to the attention of their readers websites and articles that would otherwise go unnoticed.

## **Weblogs Encourage Evaluation**

The value of a weblog editor is not his objectivity but his predictability. By this I do not mean that bloggers should limit themselves to an approved set of topics, or that they should write only what they believe their readers have come to expect. Rather, readers who know a blogger's biases can evaluate his writing with greater ease than they can an ostensibly objective news report. A blogger's commentary may provide insight into current events and may provoke the reader to more fully consider his own point of view.

If a blogger is inclined to be skeptical of mass media sources but accepts alternative sources at face value, his readers will quickly learn to account for that. If he is in the habit of linking to alternative sources in order to publicly discount them as nonsense, his readers will know what to expect. A corporate lawyer's weblog may provide his readers with analysis of intellectual property issues that they simply can't find elsewhere; knowing that he is deeply entrenched in the business world, they are able to evaluate his opinions on labor issues accordingly. Having learned an individual blogger's predictable biases, readers know what to



expect when they visit and can account for the assumptions that color both his choice of material and his commentary. Seeing this in the weblogs they read, readers may become more attuned to the biases that inform their other sources of information.

Webloggers naturally include links to the sites they recommend to their readers or to sites with which they agree. But when a weblogger links to a site in disagreement he invites the reader to evaluate both the link and the weblogger's opinion. In each case, the inclusion of that link profoundly changes the relationship between the writer and his readers, since the reader can easily access the primary material. The weblog audience is no longer forced to rely on the writer's synopsis of the source material—or on their own past reading; the hyperlink allows the weblog audience to read and evaluate for themselves the meaning of the source material cited. Based on that reading, it is a simple matter to decide whether the weblogger's commentary is insightful, obvious, or worthless.

## Weblogs Invite Participation

With the addition of a comment system, many weblogs actively solicit ideas and opinions from their readers. Individual readers may offer alternate readings of linked articles, supplemental material, or additional views on the same topic. Even before the widespread adoption of comment systems, most weblogs provided an email address to the site's creator. When an article piques their interest, readers respond. My readers have recommended articles and resources for inclusion on my website, tried to demonstrate the error of my thinking, and offered thoughtful commentary on articles I have linked. They have sent me links to their own essays and thanked me for mine.

It is a long-standing tradition in the weblog community to actively solicit reader input and expertise. In response to direct requests, my readers have emailed me lists of San Francisco goth

clubs, links to resources on world energy usage, and suggestions for a Subaru mechanic. At my request, they have recommended thoughtful right-wing publications and entertaining films.

Weblogs invite participation in another way—they produce bloggers. Reading the thoughts of others like themselves, ordinary individuals suddenly understand that on the Web anyone can speak their piece, and readers become writers.

## Weblog as Method

It has become highly unfashionable these days to define the weblog in any way beyond its basic format. To do so is considered an affront to the creative impulse of thousands of personal publishing mavens. But I would argue that the weblog community has developed an approach that distinguishes the weblog from traditional media forms and gives it much of its strength. This approach is so ubiquitous that it is invisible to the community at large—except when it is violated. That approach is based on the link, because weblogs link to everything.

Is there an article a blogger agrees with? He links to it. Is he acquainted with the maker of another personal site? He links it. Most importantly, is there an article, an essay, or a piece of commentary with which he disagrees? Did a politician make a speech he feels misrepresents the facts or betrays her basic immorality? If so, a blogger will tell you exactly what he thinks about it, and he will accompany that commentary with a link to the piece in question so that you may simultaneously judge the words of his ideological opponent, and his evaluation itself.

The link is the fundamental attribute of the Web, and it is the single most important thing that distinguishes blogging from traditional forms of publishing. I would go so far as to say that if you are not linking to your primary material when you refer to it—especially when in disagreement—no matter what the for-

mat or update frequency of your website, you are not keeping a weblog.

It is not required that all weblogs be centered on a list of links, only that every type of weblog, when referring to online sources, links to them.

It is the link that gives weblogs their credibility by creating a transparency that is impossible in any other medium. It is the link that creates the community in which weblogs exist. And it is the link that distinguishes the weblog—or any piece of online writing—from old-media writing that has merely been transplanted to the Web.

## **Weblogs and Journalism**

While I consider weblogs a vital component of a healthy media diet, in the end, weblogs and journalism are simply different things. What weblogs do is impossible for traditional journalism to reproduce, and what journalism does is impractical to do with a weblog. To my mind, news reporting consists of interviewing eyewitnesses and experts, checking facts, writing an original representation of the subject, and editorial review: The reporter researches and writes a story, and his editor ensures that it meets her requirements. Each step is designed to produce a consistent product that is informed by the news agency's standards. Weblogs do none of these things.

Weblogs have no gatekeepers. They are generally produced in the maintainer's spare time. Webloggers do not employ fact checkers, and they answer to no one but themselves. Neither do webloggers generally produce their own articles about the events in their community, at least not the kind of articles that newspapers and magazines produce.

Occasionally, an accident of fate will place a weblogger in the midst of a momentous event: during the 2001 Seattle earthquake,

community members posted available information on the collaborative weblog MetaFilter, keeping each other and the rest of the country informed until news organizations could catch up. Without question this is information sharing, but I think it is more closely aligned with the emergency use of ham radio than with traditional print and broadcast news.

Because the words are printed on a page, eyewitness accounts may seem confusingly similar to newspaper articles. To be sure, eyewitness accounts are the basis for many good news reports, but these accounts can offer only one perspective of an event. A good news story seeks to put eyewitness reports into some kind of order, combining individual experiences to create a larger account, one that will tell a fuller story. The juxtaposition of many eyewitness accounts is only that; it takes a skilled writer to combine those accounts into a more complete narrative.

Similarly, the attacks on the World Trade Center were followed by an intense, compelling recounting of the incident and its aftermath by dozens of webloggers who lived in New York City. These stories are important narratives that provide personal, human detail about a situation that most of us could not even have imagined. As with the Seattle earthquake, these were eyewitness accounts, and they provided their readers with a level of personal, emotional detail that is not supported by traditional models of journalism. The enormity of the situation compelled all who witnessed it to reassess their most deeply held beliefs; especially for those who lived and worked in New York City, this introspection was accompanied by gut-wrenching reflections on right and wrong, and on the very meaning of life. These vivid, personal stories transcend the bounds of news reporting; calling them "journalism" does not convey their more enduring importance as narratives of a shattering human experience.

Weblogs can perform a valuable function as critical disseminators of pertinent information. Following the attacks, webloggers combed the media, reading and evaluating hundreds of

news accounts, op-ed pieces, and magazine articles. In a world that was suddenly awash with more information than anyone could hope to process, webloggers led the way. By reading and evaluating news sources from around the world, and scouring each other's sites, webloggers provided their readers with the most pertinent information available.

Webloggers come from all backgrounds and often provide their readers with highly informed explanation and analysis of news stories that are related to their fields of expertise. But an expert is not transformed into a journalist by the simple act of writing down his response to a current news story. Similarly, some webloggers provide their audiences with news from their industry, offering both an insider look at the latest events and informed pointers to news stories that are important from an industry perspective. All of this is valuable information, but news about an industry *from* that industry—no matter how factually accurate—is public relations, not journalism, which instead seeks to put every story in a larger context than any individual perspective can provide.

When you consider that news editors build their professional reputation as much on their ability to omit the unimportant as on their ability to judge what is worthwhile, I think you might make a case for the filter-style blogger as news editor, and in fact many refer to themselves as the editors of their sites. When he takes the time to review numerous versions of the same news story, the blogger is, in effect, deciding which reporter most compellingly makes her case. However, when you consider that the blogger has no part in deciding what news will be reported, the case for the blogger as news editor falls apart.

Collaborative sites like Slashdot, Kuro5hin, and MetaFilter are often cited as examples of peer-to-peer (P2P) journalism. On Slashdot and MetaFilter, editors or members post links and participate in discussions about the posted material. Kuro5hin

goes even further: Members research and write original articles that other members discuss. At their best, discussions on these sites vastly clarify the linked articles by offering pointers to additional online material and expert information and analysis by qualified members.

Without question, these sites are fascinating examples of information sharing, analysis, and dissemination, and I believe that they may represent a genuinely new way for news to be collected, analyzed, and distributed. It is important to note, however, that the collaborative community structure of these sites is the key to this phenomenon; the weblog form has nothing to do with it. In fact, the weblog format may prevent these sites from investigating their subjects as thoroughly as they could: As material scrolls down and off the page, readers' attention is directed to other, more current matters. If these sites are examples of P2P journalism, it is because they bring many minds to bear on the news of the day; their format is, if anything, a hindrance to be overcome in order for the experiment to be carried to the next level.

I see certain weblogs as directly analogous to a form of traditional journalism: the opinion or analysis piece. For many bloggers, a weblog is above all an opportunity to pronounce their opinions on politics, world events, and the opinions of others. That they write three hundred words on six subjects every day rather than fifteen hundred words on one subject once a week is immaterial. These bloggers may not carry their ideas through as completely as the professional columnists they emulate, but their intent is the same—and I would argue that three hundred carefully selected words by a thoughtful amateur have more substance than fifteen hundred words of knee-jerk invective, no matter how much the professional has been paid. These bloggers see their weblogs less as filters and more as platforms for directed self-expression.

But none of this is unique to weblogs. Journalism's components—reporting, news analysis, news selection, and dissemination of information—have existed and thrived in other media long before the World Wide Web. Journalism begins with reporting; all of the other functions associated with the practice have been developed in support of this one essential objective. The weblog format is optimized for filtering and dissemination, but to make a case in those terms for weblogs as journalism is to confuse journalism with influence. One example will suffice: Oprah Winfrey has used her television show to educate her audience about many important issues, and a word from her can send a novel to the top of the bestseller list. Although she is an important media personality, I don't think anyone would describe her as a journalist.

Weblogs are not, as some people say, a new kind of journalism. Rather, they supplement traditional journalism by evaluating, augmenting, and above all filtering the information churned out by journalists and the rest of the media machine every day. Mass media seeks to appeal to a wide audience; weblogs excel at creating targeted serendipity for their individual constituencies. While they occasionally may even "scoop" traditional media by their proximity to noteworthy events, weblogs should not aspire to carve a place within the ranks of traditional journalism.

The weblog's strength is fundamentally tied to its position outside of mainstream media: observing, commenting, and honestly reacting to both current events and the media coverage they generate. Weblogs can function as superb digests of online material. They excel at exposing and explaining flaws in media coverage. There is no better source for finding lesser-known articles and obscure websites.

In the end, the weblog really is something new, something interesting and worthwhile in and of itself. It does not need to

ride the coattails of journalism or, indeed, any older media practice to be worthy of respect and serious consideration. Both weblogs and journalism would do well to forget about defining weblogs as journalism, or expanding the definition of journalism to include the new form. Rather, each should recognize the strengths of the other and both should move forward to further perfect their own craft.

## Referenced Weblogs

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Now This	<a href="http://www.nowthis.com/log/">http://www.nowthis.com/log/</a>
Scripting News	<a href="http://www.scripting.com/">http://www.scripting.com/</a>
Filtered for Purity (now defunct)	<a href="http://www.theobvious.com/">http://www.theobvious.com/</a>
Robot Wisdom	<a href="http://www.robotwisdom.com/">http://www.robotwisdom.com/</a>
Infosift	<a href="http://www.jjg.net/infosift/">http://www.jjg.net/infosift/</a>
Camworld	<a href="http://www.camworld.com/">http://www.camworld.com/</a>
Anatomy of a Weblog	<a href="http://www.camworld.com/journal/rants/99/01/26.html">http://www.camworld.com/ journal/rants/99/01/26.html</a>
Peterme	<a href="http://www.peterme.com/">http://www.peterme.com/</a>
Lemonyellow (Internet Archive)	<a href="http://web.archive.org/web/20000304010149/www.lemonyellow.com/archives/april99.htm">http://web.archive.org/web/ 20000304010149/www.lemon yellow.com/archives/april99.htm</a>
Be Nice to Bears	<a href="http://www.benicetobears.com">http://www.benicetobears.com</a>
Tomalak's Realm	<a href="http://www.tomalak.org/">http://www.tomalak.org/</a>
MetaFilter	<a href="http://www.metafilter.com/">http://www.metafilter.com/</a>
Slashdot	<a href="http://slashdot.org/">http://slashdot.org/</a>
Kuro5hin	<a href="http://www.kuro5hin.org/">http://www.kuro5hin.org/</a>



## Other Referenced Websites

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As We May Think, Vannevar Bush	<a href="http://www.theatlantic.com/unbound/flashbks/computer/bushf.htm">http://www.theatlantic.com/ unbound/flashbks/computer/ bushf.htm</a>
Mosaic "What's New"	<a href="http://archive.ncsa.uiuc.edu/SDG/Software/Mosaic/Docs/whats-new.html">http://archive.ncsa.uiuc.edu/ SDG/Software/Mosaic/ Docs/whats-new.html</a>
The New York Times profile of Heather Anne Halpert	<a href="http://www.nytimes.com/library/tech/99/07/circuits/articles/221emo.html">http://www.nytimes.com/ library/tech/99/07/circuits/ articles/221emo.html</a>
The Chucks Connection	<a href="http://chucksconnection.com/">http://chucksconnection.com/</a>
Blending In	<a href="http://www.deanandnigel.co.uk/">http://www.deanandnigel.co.uk/</a>
The Peculiar Art of Mr. Frahm	<a href="http://www.lileks.com/institute/frahm/index.html">http://www.lileks.com/institute/ frahm/index.html</a>
Pitas	<a href="http://www.pitas.com/">http://www.pitas.com/</a>
Blogger	<a href="http://www.blogger.com/">http://www.blogger.com/</a>
Eatonweb Portal	<a href="http://portal.eatonweb.com/">http://portal.eatonweb.com/</a>

## Why a Weblog?

*Everybody is talented, original, and has something important to say.*

BRENDA UELAND

There are as many kinds of weblogs as there are kinds of people, but I suppose there are only three motivations for keeping one: information sharing, reputation building, and personal expression. Although any one of these may be the primary reason for a weblog, no one maintains a weblog for any length of time without eventually doing all three.

Whether you write about your avocation, your day, your business, or your take on foreign affairs, when you publish a weblog you are sharing information. As you research and write, you will gain expertise in your subject (even if that subject is nothing more than what catches your eye). As you publish, you will accumulate a body of work, no matter how short the individual entries, and in this you create an online representation of your thinking. Lest you think that only blogs and notebooks foster self-expression, consider that even a highly focused subject-specific filter with no personal commentary betrays, with the choice of its links, the sensibilities of its editor.

## Weblogs Build Better Writers

It's easy to write poorly, but it's hard to write poorly every day. Wait. Let's go back a step: It's hard to write every day.

I don't believe I've read one book or interview on "being a writer" that didn't contain the same magical piece of advice: Write every day. But how hard is that? It's always been impossible for me. When I have a compelling idea or a pressing need, I write like the wind. At one job, I was known for writing lengthy, scathing letters to incompetent consultants and unscrupulous vendors. But writing every day? I wouldn't know what to say.

I created my weblog because I was finding so many interesting links, and I thought I had funny and occasionally insightful things to say about them. It was fun to surf the Web, and it was more fun to create a bit of linktext to frame the things I found. Once I started, I felt obligated to update my site on a regular basis. Usually this was easy, but on some nights I had trouble finding anything that seemed worthwhile, or I felt that I simply had nothing to say. But I had an audience, however small, and knowing that, I would dig a little harder or just keep trying until I had formed a coherent bit of linktext.

Perhaps it would be most accurate to say that when you are sincerely trying, it's hard to write poorly every day. It is possible to post weblog entries the way some people eat potato chips or change TV channels. These random bits of text will never be compelling. But if you have something to say, taking the time every day to write it down until it says exactly what you mean will make you a better writer.

After I started my site, I was surprised to discover that its very design improved my writing. I designed my site to accommodate smaller screens, and like many others, I included a sidebar, which further reduced the width of my main writing area. Forced to write in a small space, I used the fewest words that

would express my meaning, and my writing became sharper, clearer, and more economical.

Writing short is hard—and very good for you. Seeking to distill your thoughts to the fewest words, you will find out what you really think, and you'll work even harder to find the precise term to express your meaning. Paradoxically, writing short also spurred me to write longer pieces. Finding that I sometimes had more to say than I could comfortably fit in a weblog entry, it was natural to turn my comments into an essay. Rather than distill my thoughts, this longer form required that I flesh out my ideas and more fully support my conclusions.

Composing linktext has given me practice in thinking through a subject by writing it down. Composing linktext and realizing the next day that it could have been better has taught me to critically, unmaliciously evaluate my own work. More importantly, it has given me practice in performing imperfectly in public and moving forward unashamed. Updating my site daily has taught me self-discipline and given me a reason to think deeply. I am a better writer.

## Weblogs Build Self-Awareness

It is impossible to write down your thoughts every day without noticing what you are thinking.

A blogger who complains weekly that she is tired of her job will begin, eventually, to enumerate the particular circumstances that make her so miserable. Writing the same thing over and over, she will confront the problems she is not addressing and be moved to make a change. Looking back, she will find a record, however informal, of the progress of her life.

Notebooks work in a similar fashion, providing their maintainers with a place to simultaneously work out their thinking and track the course of their attention. And while it may seem that only blogs and notebooks promote self-awareness,

the effect is just as pronounced for the weblogger who maintains a filter.

After producing Rebecca's Pocket for several months, I noticed how frequently I linked to articles on archaeology and scientific discoveries. I chose them because they seemed worth sharing, and in fact they were just the sort of stories I was apt to read aloud to friends when sharing a Sunday *New York Times* over a latte. But reading aloud is even more ephemeral than writing a weblog, and if you had asked me, I would have told you my major interests lay in the arts and humanities, and that I was only marginally interested in science of any kind. Indeed, I had completely forgotten that, for a short while as a child, I had dreamed of becoming an archaeologist. Reading the record of things I deemed worth sharing reminded me of a self that I had overlooked.

No matter how random or structured or impersonal a weblog may seem, each one, whatever its nature, provides for its readers an intimate portrait of its maintainer, a portrait drawn over time. Random observations, selected links, extended diatribes—accumulated, these elements resolve into a mosaic revealing a personality, a self. The effect is more profound for the weblogger herself. The weblogger is privy to the entries she posts and those that she does not: *I think I'll blog that!* followed a moment later by *No. . . .* Acutely aware of what she does not type, the weblogger more clearly defines her own boundaries. Reviewing what she has written, she catches glimpses of her less-conscious self.

## Weblogs Build Critical Thinkers

The effort required to transform the feeling of “this is interesting” into a succinct description of why it is worth a read is the difference between knowing what you think and why you think it.

You cannot choose links for your website each day without practicing discrimination; every weblogger who maintains a filter quickly becomes aware that she is building her reputation with the links she provides, and as a result few people are willing to put just anything on their page. When a weblogger feels compelled to offer even a short comment to frame each link, she will have to decide what she thinks each article is about, or why she thinks it is worthwhile.

Webloggers committed to providing their readers with the best available links may find themselves reading and comparing two or three versions of a news story. Confronted with several versions of the same story, the weblogger will see how differently the same information may be framed and how the inclusion or exclusion of additional material can change the reader's impression of the facts. She may take the time to dig up additional material, either to support the linked article or to contradict it. Evaluating all these sources of information, the weblogger will be forced to judge the worth of each.

On the Web, information is easy to find. When a weblogger links to any source of information, she knows that her readers will make their own evaluation of the text. This is a considerable advantage to the writer who wishes to comment extensively on any document, since she can trust interested readers to have read the primary text. It may also keep her honest in her assessment of the material. If she misrepresents another writer's point of view, it will be instantly apparent to her readers, unless they are rabidly biased themselves.

Reading several webloggers' commentary on a single story, readers are bound to be surprised by the differing perspectives a single link can inspire. Webloggers often fundamentally disagree about various aspects of a current news story or event, but I think it's more interesting when three webloggers agree on the facts and interpretation but have entirely different views

on why an event is important. Watching others elucidate their thoughts, the weblog reader considers her own interpretation.

## Weblogs Build Reputations

Readers visit the sites they find to be interesting and useful. Weblogs can be both of these things. Even the individual whose weblog contains few links can, through her honesty, humor, and passion, build a devoted audience. Whether or not her audience is extensive, her words will create an online persona; and even if her weblog does not provide a tangible service, a blogger may become known as a fine writer or an entertaining storyteller.

Because they reflect individual interests, weblogs become resources for links and insight on specific topics. I may visit one weblog to see what the political right has to say, another for my daily portion of humorous news stories, and another to read the personal commentary of its maintainer.

Individuals whose weblogs focus on a particular topic become known as experts in their field. Providing a reliable resource for news about a certain topic is enough to gain you a dependable following among fellow professionals or aficionados. If you take the time to frame this information with your own remarks, you may be regarded as insightful and informed. If your subject matter tends to be particularly esoteric, you may gain a reputation as an intellectual. I have seen weblogs translate into employment, speaking engagements, and even book contracts.

Freelancers and small business owners can raise their profile by creating and maintaining a weblog that focuses on their field of expertise. Sharing information is one of the best ways to gain respect in any field. Once you would have had to publish a book or magazine article or speak at professional events, and these opportunities were rare unless you had already achieved a

certain prominence. The Web has circumvented all the gatekeepers, and now everyone with a webpage has the means to reach an audience of like-minded individuals. A business wishing to build or leverage the existing reputations of its staff may want to publish a collaborative weblog in which each person contributes and comments on topical links.

If you hope to convert this prominence into actual revenue, focus on the needs of your customers. A plumber who maintains a weblog focused on the latest pipe fittings may acquire a devout audience of other plumbers, but this may not translate so readily into sinks to unclog. But if her weblog also includes information to help the homeowner troubleshoot minor plumbing snafus and to determine which are minor repairs and which should be attended to only by a professional, it may also help attract and keep loyal customers. Customers like to feel that they are dealing with trusted experts; your weblog can be your calling card.

## **Weblogs Build Connected Businesses**

The business that can efficiently disseminate pertinent information internally will produce informed employees working toward the same goals.

Employees need help managing their time, and increasingly, managing time means managing information. No one needs more email streaming into their inbox. Companies that distribute information on changes in policy via email (or paper!) force employees to process, analyze, and file incoming notes, or risk losing valuable pointers to needed information.

A weblog is the perfect format for the top page of a company intranet. The weblog's reverse-chronological arrangement ensures that everyone visiting the page will see the newest information because it is always on top. Entries briefly summarizing each piece of content allow employees to judge whether the



information is pertinent to them and whether they must respond in a timely fashion. More detailed information is always only a click away. Carefully constructed document titles and linktext ensure that local search engines will quickly locate relevant information when employees need it.

Distance becomes immaterial when employees have access to the same information at the same time: No one is ever left out of the loop. Because all important information is located on the Web, any employee with a network connection has access to the most current company information. Paper memos may be misplaced, but the Internet never gets lost; employees save time and space when company directives are filed for them on the Web.

The weblog format efficiently addresses many audiences at once. When I worked at a large university, I used our department intranet weblog to alert researchers to grant application deadlines and procedures; division administrators to resources relevant to managing their doctors' grants; secretaries to procedural changes in submitting complex paperwork; and all employees to information concerning their benefits packages and other department-wide concerns. In my experience, the more mired an organization is in arcane procedures and exacting paperwork, the more useful a weblog can be for communicating changes in policy and providing pointers to useful resources to help hapless employees navigate byzantine processes.

When information changes quickly or when staying abreast of industry developments is critical to a company's success, a weblog can provide the means for getting new, important information to every employee. Small businesses or working groups may create a collaborative weblog that will allow any employee to post relevant information or to organize supporting documentation. Groups may want to designate one employee to create a weblog highlighting any pertinent industry news. Such a weblog, designed to keep employees informed

about their field, may serve a dual purpose as a reputation builder if opened to public view.

## Who Should Weblog?

Like everything in life, a weblog will reward you in direct proportion to the effort you expend . . . up to a point. The happiness you derive from your weblog will depend on your interest, your ability to devote sufficient time to the project, and your commitment to keeping the rest of your life in balance.

Maintaining a weblog is time-consuming. I spend two or three hours a night on my weblog, surfing the Web, composing linktext, and perusing my server logs. Not everyone spends so much time. Some people, judging from their daily output, spend much more time than I do.

You are a good candidate for maintaining a weblog if you already spend hours online every day. If you sit down at the computer only to check your email and buy the occasional book, maintaining an online record of your Web travels or daily observations would probably constitute a dramatic disruption to your schedule. If, after spending your workday at the computer, the last thing you want to do when you get home is turn on your PC, you should probably take up knitting or join a film club instead.

If you spend little time on the computer but you need a good reason to write, a weblog may be feasible, but be aware that you will be replacing one of your current activities with this one. If you are interested in starting a weblog that focuses on your current hobby, plan to set aside a portion of the hobby time you already spend for maintaining your new site.

You can use a weblog to communicate efficiently with large or dispersed groups of people. I have seen them used to manage a college class, to serve as a private family journal, or to provide an ongoing record of a planned wedding.

If most of your Web time is work-related, and you think you have a good deal of knowledge to share with others in your field, consider asking your employer to sponsor an industry-specific weblog. I would begin by creating such a weblog in my spare time, spending evenings collecting links and adding them to my site. Do this for two weeks to see if you really want to assume this new responsibility, and to give yourself enough material to really demonstrate your proposal. It can be hard to explain the value of a weblog, but if you can show your boss several excellent examples of industry weblogs before unveiling your prototype creation, she may be willing to sponsor the site. Even if she is not interested, you may find that you love updating your new site and choose to continue doing so as a hobby.

If you are comfortable sending email and enacting e-commerce transactions, you will be able to find a weblog management tool that you can understand and use. If you love to surf the Web and already—by design or by default—have time to do so, a weblog will be a natural evolution of your online time. If you are willing to devote some of your hobby time to connecting and informing other hobbyists, or if you believe a weblog will efficiently replace an activity you already spend time performing, a weblog may be for you.

No matter what your situation, you have the greatest chance of enjoying and continuing your weblog if it is an extension of one of your existing activities. By folding your new pursuit into hours you already spend on another activity, your schedule will be minimally disrupted and you will not be forced to choose between doing two things. If keeping a weblog means adding one or two more hours of “schedule” to your day, I predict that you will drop it in less than a month—the same reason many of us have difficulty maintaining an exercise program. But if, instead, a weblog is an extension of an activity you already enjoy, I think that you will find the time you spend to be very rewarding.

## **Business and Reputation Building Weblogs**

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Delaware Law Office	<a href="http://www.delawoffice.com/news.html">http://www.delawoffice.com/ news.html</a>
Librarian.net	<a href="http://www.librarian.net/">http://www.librarian.net/</a>
The Scoop	<a href="http://www.thescoop.org/">http://www.thescoop.org/</a>
x-Blog	<a href="http://xplane.com/xblog/">http://xplane.com/xblog/</a>