

**Blog Invasion!**

**What Are They? Where Did They Came From?**

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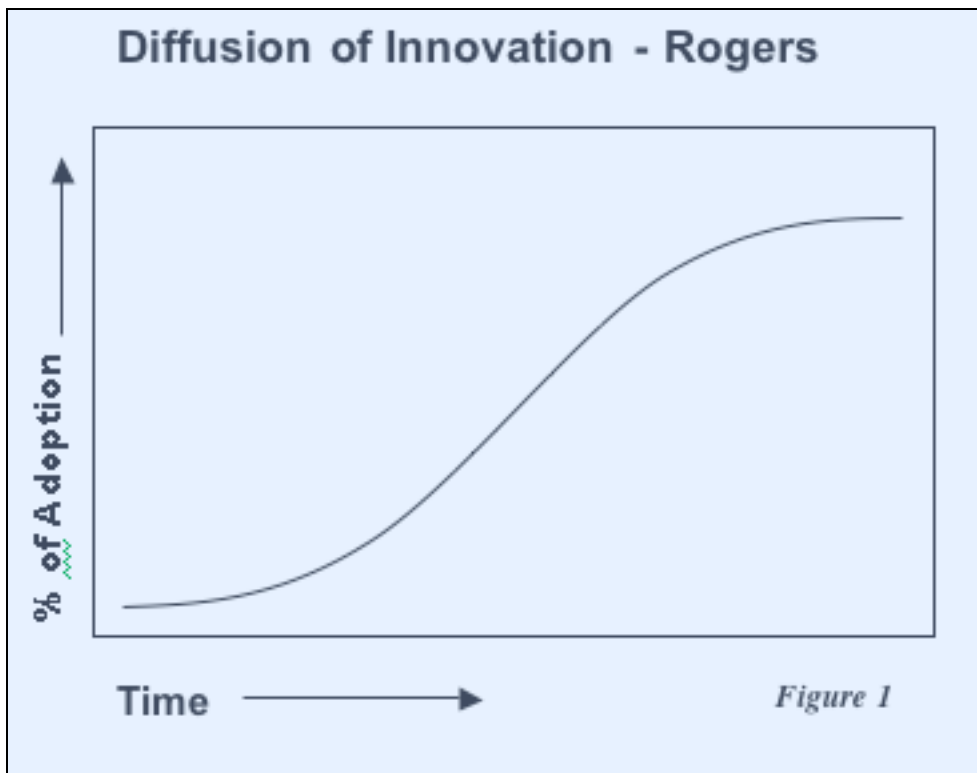
**May 26, 2004**

## Introduction

This paper presents an overview of the relatively short history of the web log, or blog, from its early prototypes to the current growth and diversity. The [elements](#) of a [blog](#) and its [posts](#), as well as notable events and persons in the developments of the medium will be addressed.

## Diffusion of Innovation

Diffusion of innovation theory draws on the work of Everett Rogers to provide a general understanding of how members of a social system communicate, appraise, and reject or accept ideas or technologies (Williams, Strover, and Grant; 1994) (figure 1).



Brian Winston's (1998) digital-media take on diffusion of innovation provides several terms this paper will utilize:

**Prototype:** Technological device that does not achieve widespread diffusion

**Invention:** Technological device that has crossed over into the social sphere

**Supervening social necessity:** A social need for a technology that transforms prototypes into inventions

**Accelerator:** A supervening social necessity that works to encourage an invention's diffusion

## What a Blog is & What it Does

The authors of **Essential Blogging** provide a very straightforward blog definition:

A blog is a web page that contains brief, discrete hunks of information called [posts](#). These posts are arranged in reverse-chronological order (the most recent posts come first). Each post is uniquely identified by an anchor tag, and it is marked with a permanent [link](#) that can be referred to by others who wish to link to it. (Doctorow et al., 2002, p. ix)

While an accurate description, it overlooks something. The significance of blogs as a medium lies not only in what they **are** but also in how they **work**. While blog prototypes used the standard design and publishing tools of their times, the **process** of blogging has become a key defining trait and accelerator of the medium. Today one can code a blog entirely by hand in a text editor and ftp it to a web server, but the true gestalt of blogging has come to include the do-it-yourself ease of creating and posting blog entries using software that requires no detailed knowledge of HTML or web publishing.

## Blog Elements

Many bloggers still debate over the precise nature and description of blogs. Several elements, however, appear in many, but not necessarily all, blogs. As Dave Winer, author of one of the longest-running blogs (**Scripting News**) and founder and CEO of **Userland**, maker of **Radio Userland** blogging software, notes, "A lot of these things are optional; none are required" (cited in Kennedy, 2004, 3).

- Title:** The name of the blog, similar to the title of a book
- Description:** Alerts readers to its area of interest, usually in brief terms to accommodate online tools such as search engine listings, other blogs, and mouseovers
- Suggest:** A form or email ink for readers to suggest content to the blogger(s)

**Mailing Lists:** A version of the blog distributed through email (possibly being supplanted by [RSS](#))

**Counters:** Display of number of site visitors

**RSS (Syndication):** Software applications that push text-only versions of posts to a blog's server for user-side versions of the software to then gather and aggregate; commonly identified by an XML button

**Archive:** Less-recent posts, grouped chronologically

**Blogroll:** A collection of links to other blogs

The following two elements may appear in the blog or the posts, usually depending on whether the blog is individually or collectively authored:

**Blogger(s):** Named, anonymous, or pseudonymous blog author(s), working individually or collectively

**Contact:** Typically an email link or online form for one-to-one communication with a blogger

## Post elements

The post is the "atomic unit" (Doctorow, 2002, 13) of a blog. Also known as an entry, it has several characteristic elements:

- Title:** Less like the title of a blog or book, more similar to a newspaper headline: a summary, teaser, or time stamp for a post
- Abstract:** Summary, subtitle, or other post commentary that is neither title nor body
- Body:** The "meat" of the post: text, hyperlinks, images, or any combination of the three
- Quote:** Direct excerpts from a referenced subject
- Link:** Hyperlink to something else on the web<sup>1</sup>
- Comments:** A public forum, such as a message board, for discussing posts
- Credit:** Where or from whom bloggers learned of a post topic (e.g., other blogs, personal email, etc.)
- Permanent Link:** A link back to an individual post, distinct from the URL for the overall blog
- Time Stamp:** Day, date, and time a post was published or updated
- TrackBack:** Tracks and notifies bloggers to other blogs referring to their posts

## Blog History

The numerous and still-evolving genres of blogs can each claim extensive lineages based on their content. Diary, watchdog, photo, and aggregator blogs can point to

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<sup>1</sup> Some feel this is a mandatory blog element (Blood, 2002, 18-19), yet this would discount the vast number of self-contained entries in diary blogs (e.g., "Not much happened today. ")

Samuel Pepys, TV consumer advocates, photojournalism, and print anthologies, respectively. This paper, however, will focus on digital technologies, divided into two rough periods: [blog prototypes](#), unsyndicated and requiring HTML knowledge, and [contemporary blogging](#), syndicated and utilizing what-you-see-is-what-you-get applications.

## Blog prototypes

**The Blogging Handbook** author Rebecca Blood calls blogs a medium "native to the web" (2002, 9). The inclusion of bloggy ideas in the writings of pre-Internet visionaries supports her. In 1945, Dr. Vannevar Bush, as U.S. Director of the Office of Scientific Research and Development, envisioned the Internet as an electronic desk (desktop) networked to trails of information (hyperlinks) and experience (web surfing, digital documentation of daily experience). In researching a trail of information, a user "inserts a page of longhand analysis of his own" (1945, section 7, ¶4). This leads to "a new profession of trail blazers, those who find delight in the task of establishing useful trails through the enormous mass of the common record. (1945, section 8, ¶2)." Such information guidance, aggregation, and commentary certainly capture the essence of blogging.

Yet, many blog antecedents existed before the web, some even before the Internet. Bill Mitchell, director of electronic publishing at the **San Jose Mercury News** and editor of **Poynter Online**, cites Doug Bailey's **The Hotline**, an essential presidential campaign briefing begun via fax in 1988, as an early example of the "weblog idea" (Mitchell, 2003, p. 66). Diary software digitized journal-writing.

Personal postings to electronic bulletin boards or mass emails of personal "form letters" can be considered early public e-diaries. The frequent, thematically organized, and often brief postings to Usenet newsgroups foreshadow the blogging process. Email newsletters and discussion lists — often similarly thematic, concise, frequent, and personal—represented one of the few popular forms of "push" technology before blogging combined with RSS.<sup>2</sup>

The World Wide Web made its true debut in September of 1993, when the National Center for Supercomputing Applications (NCSA) at the University of Illinois released a beta version of Mosaic, the first graphical-interface web browser (Glaser, 2003). Yet one contestant for first blog prototype had already been up and running for three months: Mosaic's **What's New** page, a link collection updated daily from June, 1993, to June, 1996 (Blood, 2002,2). The term "weblog" itself dates to the inception of the web. Its first, but now perhaps secondary, definition was a record of all the distinct URLs a user had visited during a session online, or until the memory containing the weblog was cleared (Jensen, 2003).<sup>3</sup>

Culling the best of their online discoveries into a Links or Favorites page was a common practice of webpage authors in the early 1990s. These developed annotation and thematic organization, and went by names such as "running online journals" (Kennedy, 2003, 2) "news sites," "filters," or "links with commentary, with new stuff on top" (Blood, 2002, 3). These sites included Dave Winer's **Scripting News**, Steve

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<sup>2</sup> Although, as technology blogger Glenn Fleishmann puts it, blogging is more a hybrid form of "push locally, pull globally" (2004).

<sup>3</sup>Perhaps this accounts for the bias of some blog authorities toward aggregation/commentary over diary blogs. Now, however, both are firmly part of the blogosphere, yet the distinction is somewhat spurious: It is a quick link from What I Did in the World Today to Where I Went Online Today.

Bogart's **News, Pointers & Commentary**, and Jorn Barger's **Robot Wisdom** (Blood, 2002).

Barger is credited with coining the term "weblog" (Blood, 2002; Doctorow et al., 2002). Blood (2002) relates that the term gained visibility in early 1999, when Cameron Barrett wrote and posted an article titled "Anatomy of a Weblog" to his proto-blog site, **Camworld**. The shortened "blog," originally coined jokingly (Doctorow et al, 2002), was quickly adopted, perhaps due to disagreements over the pronunciation of "weblog" (Blood, 2002).

Protoblogs continued to appear, although as a medium, they were limited to those with enough knowledge of HTML coding to be able to regularly update their pages. Nevertheless, the phenomenon grew enough to garner the attention of **The New York Times**, which, in July of 1999, wrote on the Heather Anne Halpert's **Lemonyellow**.

## Contemporary Blogging

Two technological developments accelerated the rapid adoption of blogs, or, in Winton's sense, the **invention** of blogging: point-and-click software that required no knowledge of HTML coding and RSS applications for content syndication and personalized aggregation. Together, these technologies define contemporary blogging.

The applications that accelerated blogging adoption were not only easy to use, they were also inexpensive or free (reminiscent on both points of web browsing applications) (Lasica, 2003). The release of Pyra Labs' **Blogger** in September of 1999

is frequently credited as blogging's "big bang," creating a rapid increase in the number of blogs and bloggers (Welch, Jensen, & Reeves, 2003; Jensen, 2003; Kennedy, 2004), although Andrew Smales had released **Pitas** two months prior. Meanwhile, Netscape had already been offering RSS 0.92, an early syndication tool, for a couple of years (Fleishmann, 2004), although the first RSS reader software would not appear until 1999 (Lasica, 2004).

**Blogger** brought blogging to the surfing masses, enabling anyone with an Internet connection and web browser to create and quickly update a blog. The concept was imitated and improved in desktop, hosted, and server-based incarnations such as **Movable Type**, **Radio Userland**, **iBlog**, and **Slug**. By early 2002, **Wired News** estimated 500,000 blogs had been created (cited in Rheingold, 2002). That same year **Blogger's** registered users reached over 970,000 (Kennedy, 2004) and search engine behemoth **Google** acquired the company (Gill, 2004). A 2003 survey put the number of blogs at 4.12 million and estimated 10 million by the end of 2004 (Gough, 2003).<sup>4</sup> Group-authored blog **Slashdot** commands such an audience that a link in one of their posts drives enough traffic to frequently crash the referent's server. Current events, such as the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and the war in Iraq, accelerated the adopting of blogging as well, creating a supervening social necessity for more and faster information about those events (Kennedy, 2004; Whelan, 2003).

The growth of blogs created a supervening social necessity of their own: that for tools to manage them, such as RSS. This was a more significant development than merely another example of the increasing need for online content guides (Forrester, 2001; Lasica, 2004). RSS lets bloggers create feeds of their blogs – increasingly with a

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<sup>4</sup> Although also finding that almost 3 million current blogs had not been updated in two months.

simple one-click preference setting — **and** lets readers create custom news feeds from blogs, mainstream news outlets, and any other source offering RSS. With **FeedDemon**, **NetNewsWire**, or combined blogging / RSS readers such as **Radio Userland** and **iBlog**, users can simply scan down headlines in a single application window rather than surfing from site to site and clicking from section to section (Lasica, 2004).

Winer views RSS as the most exciting new development in online journalism (cited in Glaser, 2003). A recent article in **Online Journalism Review** opined, "RSS may be to the Web what TiVo was to TV" (Lasica, 2004).

## **Conclusion**

The combination of simple blogging and RSS applications, fueled by current events, has led to the current buzz around blogs and blogging. Blogs and blogging are the subject of conferences, university courses, and several books. They have spawned their own celebrities such as **Baghdad Blogger** Salam Pax, whose collected postings Grove Press published as a book, Glenn Reynolds, whose **Instapundit** draws an estimated 50,000 people each weekday (Kennedy, 2004), and blogtrepreneurial posterboy Nick Denton, whose blog empire grosses an estimated \$250,000 a year (Lindsay, 2004). The list of situations in which they have in some way influenced, supplanted, or scooped mainstream media is growing long enough to resist dismissal as anecdotal or atypical:

- The Trent Lott scandal (Gill, 2004; Kennedy, 2004; Glaser, 2004)
- Microsoft's deceptive "Switch" campaign (Gill, 2004)

- The Iraqi prison abuse scandal (Richards, 2004)
- E-voting risks
- The September 11 attacks
- Defense Policy Board Chairman Richard Perle's resignation
- The State of the Union Iraq-Africa uranium retraction (all Andrews, 2003)
- The Santa Monica Farmer's Market car crash
- **New York Times** Executive Editor Howell Raines' resignation (both Regan, 2003)
- The Rhode Island nightclub fire (Lennon, 2003)
- The downfall of Qwest Communications CEO Joe Nacchio (Gillmor, 2003)

Industries such as library science (Thomsen, 2002), education (Embrey, 2002), journalism (Lasica, 2003), medicine (Brown, 2003), and politics (Mack, 2004) have all begun to note, debate, and harness blogging. Blogging itself is growing to incorporate photography, video, audio, satellite positioning, and mobile technologies (Lasica, 2003; Glaser, 2004). The number of visitors to moblogging (mobile blogging) sites increased 80% from early 2003 to early 2004 (Moblogging on the rise, 2004).

This is an exciting time at the beginning of a medium. Blogging has potential to play a key role in emerging media environments —not simply ubiquitous computing, but the pervasive surveillance, documentation, and reporting such computing can facilitate. As blog scholar Alex Halavais recently said, blogging "hasn't even come close to a tipping point yet" (quoted in Glaser, 2004, last ¶).

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