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Internet research tools: Discourse on the blogosphere

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Abstract. Internet-based and conventional research tools undeniably co-exist in a shared media space. Based

on this premise, this paper discussed whether blogs can be viewed as a source for issues identification in a research study. The authors discuss blogging as indicator of social thought and practice, the increased credibility of bloggers' discourse within cyber communities, and the reliability of blogs as an Internet research tool.

Keywords: blogs, Internet research, discourse analysis, online discourse

1. Introduction

Recent years have seen unprecedented interest in social networking and in the impact of blogging on cyber communities. Although many researchers have focused on studying blogging as a communication or learning activity, few studies have discussed weblogs as a research source. This area of research needs to be further explored as the blogging phenomenon has expanded to the extent that ideas in blog forums are currently viewed as public opinion or popular trends of perceptions on particular issues.

2. Critical discourse analysis: blogs as indicators of social thought and practice

Discourse analysis as a methodology can be viewed at different levels. Linguists conventionally look at language use in context and study discourse units by reviewing the relationships between them or between the interlocutors. By viewing blogging as social practice, language researchers are saying that this practice engenders a new form of social interaction on the web. Weblogs (or web-based journal logs) are one of the latest forms of computer-mediated communication technologies where users log on primarily to socialize online. This was the initial intent of people who start writing blogs. However, over the years, this electronic communication means carry more than just this social intent. Blogs are now seen to possess a "socially transformative, democratizing potential" (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus & Wright, 2005, 143). In fact, journalists now view blogs as intense competition for their readers' attention as blogs provide alternative sources of

news as well as serve as public opinions. In the same way, educators see them as providing a platform for communication; business managers realize their potential for knowledge sharing and increasingly so, for marketing; politicians and celebrities now seem to view the blogosphere as their personal play-rooms for self-promotion; the list of uses and users goes on and on.

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Over the years, blogging is increasingly used as immediate and accessible vehicle for self-expression.

In 2005, Herring et al pointed out journalists and scholars had exaggerated the extent to which blogs are

actually linked to outside larger worldly events; the authors perceived blogs as individualistic, intimate forms

of self-expressions. Less than five years later, this perception is no longer accurate. Weblogs and blog

forums are no longer regarded as private space; rather this medium of self-expression is now an expansion of

the private sphere into the public. A blog expresses the conviction of its author, but while it is strictly

subjective, it is not necessarily intimate. In fact, more and more blogs are now in what is considered the

public domain and bloggers are increasingly concerned about issues that fall within the domain of public

authority. Many current events are examples of how personal opinion (or experience) merged with animated

discussions with interested fellow bloggers: the September 11th attack, foreign protests during the Beijing

Olympics, and governments' censorship actions on the Internet.

In a nutshell, blogosphere offers the man on the street a voice on any topic deemed worthy of discussion. According to Blood (2002), people view their blogs as a vehicle for self-expression and selfempowerment.

The fact is, just being able to blog and having this facility at their fingertips make people more thoughtful and more articulate observers of the world around them. Indeed, Mortensen and Walker

(2002) claim that how we express our feelings in a blog reveals something about the way we think, which

would not be as explicit when done in another medium. As a social practice, the significance of blogging can

be, as Herring et al. (2005) put it - "socially-transformative, democratizing".

While journalists are convinced that good information leads to public opinion and argument, bloggers on the other hand think that good argument and strong opinion cause people to seek

and possibly

verify information. Both are legitimate arguments and hence online reporting and blogging have their place

in the shared media space known as the World Wide Web.

3. Blogs as research tools

Jones and Alony (2008) present strong arguments for using blogs to elicit data for research studies.

Some benefits include the abundance of rich data in a print format which makes coding processes manageable. In addition, writings are often connected, which makes arguments more substantiated and easier to follow. As the need for introspection or reflection is a strong motivator for bloggers to start writing or contribute to blog forums, contents are often candid, intense and thus provide valuable insights into the issues present on the minds of blogging individuals.

The role of the blogger is a controversial one when it concerns the credibility of blog contents and it is expected that blogs will contain contents both genuine and biased. Viewed in this regard, blogs present a persuasive source of qualitative data from an immeasurable number of people, many of whom are keenly interested in the discussion topic at hand and are eager to carry on a continuous discussion with different- as well as like-minded individuals. The main argument against using bloggers' contents is that blogs as personal accounts contain biases stemming from some sort of endorsement or grievances. Also, as attaining exposure and high readership are often goals of many bloggers, this leads to some writers creating fictitious information or sensationalizing news to attract more reactions from those logged on to the blogosphere.

However, Jones and Alony (2008) argue that the blogosphere actually has the potential and the mechanism to limit these biases, for instance, having other bloggers challenge posted contents and threatening to alienate those who give bloggers a bad name. These measures are often bloggers' community-guided and can be effective in making sure bloggers toe the line to some acceptable extent.

As blogs contain mainly first hand personal information, they should be viewed as a source of primary data. Individual personal accounts can be used as a source for first level analysis in many ways. To begin with, data collected from blogs can be used to expand the researchers' understanding of a social phenomenon or complex situation, such as divorces or family abuse. These instances would normally yield very few willing respondents and even less informative details. At the start of a research project, the researcher can access a blog discussion and review blog entries to do some start-up work, for example, determine key issues and subsequently key concepts, develop research questions, and identify trends or patterns that can be further explored. Other uses of blog-based research include these: using blogs to obtain reactions on preliminary findings; using blogs to share preliminary findings and stimulate discussion among interested discourse communities. As focus groups go, the opportunity to seek initial opinions, to challenge

ideas and to follow up on rich data in unprecedented ways of data collection is immense from investigating blog discourse. Discourse on the blogosphere provides an abundance of raw materials for discussion, comparison, analysis and interpretation for different kinds of research studies at various levels and stages. For instance, an analysis of blog contents normally reveals some prevalent trends concerning issues that hold the interest of a blog community at certain points in time. This may result in a longitudinal study where several trends of discussions on the blogosphere can be analyzed and compared to indicate various development points of a social phenomenon and what public opinion is at various junctures. Alternatively, on the same research topic, the study can focus on contents of different blog communities and discuss which issues appear significant and why these are viewed differently by various sectors of the blogger communities or even by society at large.

4. Conclusion

Internet research and conventional research undeniably now co-exist in a shared media space. As researchers who are in touch with current communication modes, we have no desire to compromise true conventional research standards with research tools found on the Internet. Instead, we hope to find ways to identify valid blog-based research approaches and take into account their strengths and limitations when planning research studies. It is predicted that the development rate of blogs and bloggers will continue to grow exponentially over the next few decade. The potential to tap into this available and rich database is truly profound and deserves more attention from researchers as an accessible tool and useful source of information.

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