

UCI study sheds new light on habits, roles of blog readers

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In a first-of-its-kind study, UC Irvine researchers have provided new insight into blog readers' online habits and experiences, as well as how they perceive their roles in blog-based communities.

The research, led by Eric Baumer, doctoral candidate at UCI's Donald Bren School of Information and Computer Sciences; Mark Sueyoshi, international studies and East Asian cultures undergraduate student; and Bill Tomlinson, informatics professor, is the first to focus primarily on blog reading. Previous studies about weblogs, or blogs, typically have centered on blog writers, largely overlooking those who go online to read, comment and participate.

A better understanding of the reader-blogger connection could lead to new, advanced features that would enable richer interactions between the two groups. For readers, an installed add-on could enrich their experience by tracking blog habits of which they might not be aware. For bloggers, a logging tool could help them easily distinguish between different types of readers and allow them to better connect with audiences.

The UCI study examined in-depth the blog-reading habits of 15 participants of various ages to determine how they consume content and interact with blogs and blog writers. The research found that some readers frequently post comments, while in others "lurk," or visit without commenting. Among the findings:

- Readers have diverse opinions of what makes a blog a blog. Academic definitions generally refer to blogs as frequently modified Web pages with dated entries listed in reverse chronological order. But study participants identified a wide variety of characteristics in what they considered to be blogs. These included both technical aspects like RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds and trackback links, as well as social aspects, including the presence of conversation or personal content.

- Regular blog reading often becomes more habitual and less content oriented. Similar to e-mail checking, blog reading can become ingrained into users' online routine. Sometimes, even the usefulness of the blog content itself can be less vital than the activity of reading or skimming the blog to fulfill a person's particular routine.

- The timing of a blog post is not nearly as relevant to readers as its position among the other entries. Readers are more likely to read the most recent posts at the top of the screen, and are generally less concerned with the exact age of a post. A vast majority of participants said they were not bothered when they were not able to read each and every blog post, challenging a common theory that users tend to feel overwhelmed by the need to remain constantly up to date.

- Blog readers feel a responsibility to make insightful contributions. While past research noted readers expect bloggers to deliver frequent, high-quality posts, the UCI study found readers also place pressure on themselves to produce coherent, worthwhile comments in response to good blog posts.

“With the increased popularity of blogs, various tools like Blogger and Movable Type have made writing a blog easy for a wide audience,” said Baumer, who studies informatics – a discipline that focuses on the use of information technology in real-world settings. “But, until the technology embraces the role of the audience, the full social potential of blogging

remains untapped.

“One of the goals of this research is to stimulate the development of tools to foster that social potential in terms of both readers and bloggers.”

The researchers hope their work will prompt further studies about the roles of blog readers and how features such as commenting and linking create new ways to interact with authors and text.

This potential change in research approach would be similar to a shift that occurred in literary theory in the 1960s and 1970s, when scholars began taking into account readers’ responses when studying literature.

“This study is really just the beginning,” said Tomlinson, an ICS professor and affiliate of the California Institute for Telecommunications and Information Technology. “With the rapid expansion of online social media such as Flickr and YouTube, understanding how people consume these media will be vital to understanding their broader social impacts.”

Source: University of California - Irvine

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