

History of Blogs

I was a history teacher for nearly 10 years, and this fact may have some bearing on including a chapter on the history of blogs. Still, the history of a technology is important, if we are to present this new and cool avenue of communication to students, who are often more tech-savvy and in some ways more information literate than we are.

In researching the history of blogs, I found that many references pointed to the 18th century as the beginning of the practice. There were not any computers, the Internet ran on horseback, and electricity was little more than an object of parlor tricks. Yet something equally important was happening. A new class of literate citizens was rising in parts of Europe and in the American Colonies. Coupled with the fact that paper was suddenly cheap to produce and plentiful, thinking people began to report their views in print and publish them to wide audiences as *pamphlets*. Perhaps the most famous of the revolutionary pamphleteers (in U.S. recollection) was Thomas Paine, whose publication of Common Sense had an enormous influence over my country's move toward independence from England.

With the advent of electronic media, a schism occurred between the production and consumption of information. To produce information required hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of equipment and highly trained technical staff. The rest of us worked our industrial age jobs so that we could afford the technology that enabled us to receive and be entertained by the growing electronic media industry.

Then things began to change during the last years of the 20th century. Personal computers appeared that dealt with information as coded strings of ones and zeros, binary code*. This *digital** information could be processed in powerful ways with computers, and ultimately communicated globally and compellingly, first through dial-up modems and then through increasingly ubiquitous broadband Internet.

In the early days of the World Wide Web, content publishers used arcane markup languages in order to format the information for effective reading. Later, more

* Binary Code – Information that is expressed as numbers on a base-2 scale. Our math is based on ten digits (0,1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9). Binary is based on two, (0,1). Still, it works the same way. Counting to five in binary would read: 1,10,11,100,101. The new language also converts text to binary making the letter “a” a 65, “b” a 66, etc. Computers operate very efficiently using binary, and information is expressed very clearly.

* Digital refers to information that is coded in binary form, using ones and zeros. Any information can now be expressed as digital: numbers, text, images, sound, animation, and video.

WYSIWYG* tools arrived enabling them to publish content in much the same way that we were using programs like Pagemaker™ to accomplish desktop publishing. However, these publishing tools were expensive and still required a learning curve in order to master the increasingly complex interface.

Finally, Content Management Systems* (CMS) appeared. These simple web management tools enabled publishers to add and edit information on their web pages merely by editing the text in a web form. Upon submitting the form, the content of the page was immediately updated. Many teachers and school administrators are using content management systems to maintain their classroom and school web sites. The important point is that communicators can now publish their ideas to a global audience with only the most basic web navigating skills and any basic web browser. The stage was set, and waiting only for the visionaries to take hold.

It began with web pages that were created and maintained by individuals who made it their practice to monitor the Web, identifying new sites of value to their readers, and posting links and short descriptions in their web pages. Justin Hall started his “Filter Log” (<http://www.links.net/vita/web/original.html>) in 1994. Four years later, Jorn Barger coined the term “weblog” and Peter Merholz announced that it should be pronounced “wee-blog”, later shortening it to blog, with weblog editors referred to as “bloggers.”

In 1999, Blogger (<http://blogger.com>) and Pitas (<http://pitas.com>) launched free web sites that enabled anyone to establish a weblog account and start their own weblog pages, simply by filling in web forms.^{i ii}

The rest is fairly common knowledge, except for the degree to which blogging is beginning to be integrated into the work place. Microsoft’s premier blogger, Robert Scoble, freely talks about the Microsoft culture and links to other

Notable Blog

ITConversations
<http://itconversations.com/>

employee blogs which talk about their world. Peter Quintas (CTO of Silkroad Technology) and Peter Kaminski (CTO of Socialtext), recently attended the American Cancer Society’s Innovation Summit, where blogging was one of the major topics of discussion.

Quintas and Kaminski reported in a recent broadcast of ITConversations (<http://itconversations.com/>) that although most of the attendees were relatively inexperienced in the blogging process, there was an overwhelming sense that they recognized and were planning ways to use this new avenue for communication – to help them accomplish their goals. Consider the effects of

* WYSIWYG stands for *What You See Is What You Get*. It refers to software that enables content producers to structure information on their computer screens to the look that they hope to accomplish in the final published work.

* A Content Management System enables web site managers to control the content of their site using web forms to enter and edit the text.

encouraging colon cancer survivors to blog about their experiences, and linking their statements from official Cancer Society sites.ⁱⁱⁱ

Finally, consider the growing gaming industry, now drawing more revenue than motion pictures. People, especially the young, are being drawn away from the passive consumption of information from TV and radio, by more interactive forms of entertainment. The player is telling the story through his interactions with the game's information environment. Teenagers are actually beginning to play their games with other teenagers over the Internet and recording the game play using video editing software that came preinstalled on their computers. Then they edit the captured game play into stories that they share as video files over the Internet. J. Allard, Corporate Vice President of Microsoft, calls this generation the *ReMix generation*, because they access, select, and capture content, and then remix the content to suit their needs^{iv}. It is a generation who wants control over the information and to use it to accomplish their goals. Blogging is a sublime expression of this mode.

ⁱ Zuiker, Anton. "Blogs - A Short History." Blogging 101 - An Introduction to Reading & Writing a Weblog. 27 Feb. 2004. University of North Carolina. 27 Mar. 2005 <<http://www.unc.edu/~zuiker/blogging101/>>.

ⁱⁱ Blood, Rebecca. "Weblogs: A History & Perspective." Rebecca's Pocket. 7 Sep. 2000. 27 Mar. 2005 <http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Quintas, Peter, and Peter Kaminski. "True Voice." Non-Profits Blogging. ITConversation, . 25 Mar 2005. Audio Archive. 27 Mar 2005 <<http://www.itconversations.com/shows/detail439.html>>.

^{iv} Allard, J. "The Future of Games: Unlocking the Opportunity." 2005 Game Developers Conference. Moscone West Convention Center, San Francisco. 9 Mar 2005.