

By Rebecca Blood

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*Spurred by easy-to-use commercial software, blogging is less about creating links and references to sites and sources, and increasingly about bloggers' own comments and personal interests.*

# How *Blogging Software* RESHAPES THE ONLINE COMMUNITY

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**W**eblogs have become so ubiquitous that for many of us the term is synonymous with “personal Web site,” though many commercial sites now incorporate them, too. For others, they are “sites made with blogging software,” which seems obvious, except that some of us still update ours by hand. In either case, the form is familiar: frequently updated, reverse-chronological entries on a single Web page.

When I started mine in 1999, no tools had yet been designed specifically for creating Weblogs. Some programmers created or adapted their own software. The rest of us hand-coded our sites. HTML is simple enough for any motivated amateur to learn, so the bar wasn't very high. When I started there were already dozens of Weblogs, and I felt a bit late to the game.



ILLUSTRATION BY GARY CLEMENT

Back then, Weblogs were about links. When Jorn Barger, editor of one of the original Weblogs, Robot Wisdom ([www.robotwisdom.com](http://www.robotwisdom.com)), coined the term “Weblog” in 1997, he defined it as “A Web page where a Web logger ‘logs’ all the other Web pages she finds interesting.”

Weblogs were distinct in both form and content from the Web journals that had preceded them. At the time, journals were personal accounts chunked into individual pages—one entry per page, one page per day, as if a paper diary had been transplanted to the Web. By contrast, Weblog entries were short, usually containing links to the larger Web and appearing together on one long page. Many were updated throughout the day.

Weblogs were also distinct from e-zines, which were published on a schedule, like paper periodicals, and contained longer original articles and artwork. E-zines required planning, organization, and a certain level of skill in layout, typography, and the other elements of Web design. By contrast, Weblogs were rudimentary in design and content. Indeed, many zinesters disdained the new form, arguing that the Web would soon be filled with pages of links, all pointing to one another—with no original content anywhere.

But we thought we were doing something interesting and important, so we kept at it. We pointed out especially good entries on other Weblogs, usually adding our own thoughts. We credited other Webloggers when we reproduced links they had found. We announced new Weblogs to our readers. Critics called us incestuous for linking so frequently to one another, but, lacking access to major broadcast channels, we instinctively knew that we amplified one another’s voices when pointing to other Weblogs.

Our community grew. We worked hard to become dependable sources of links to reliably interesting material. We learned to write effective link text, experimenting with the elements that would impel readers to click to other sites. Conciseness was admired. So was the ability to root out obscure material, by search or by surf. Some of us directed attention to notable but overlooked news stories; others provided professional information or links to the weird and wonderful Web, which we combed and filtered for our readers. Then everything changed.

In late 1999, several companies released software designed to automate Weblog publication. One was Blogger ([www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com)), and the press couldn’t get enough of it. Blogger epitomized the dot-com era; founders Meg Hourihan and Evan Williams were in their 20s, their free, wildly popular product had no discernible business plan, and their tagline, “Push-button publishing for the people,” promised

to revolutionize the Web.

Blogger really was easy to use. When news stories began defining Weblogs as “a Web site made with Blogger,” it quickly became the most widely used blogging tool—and changed Weblog culture.

An interface decision did it. Consider Pitas ([www.pitas.com](http://www.pitas.com)), another early Weblog updater that provided users two simple form boxes: one for a URL and one for the writer’s remarks. Hitting the “post” button generated a link followed by commentary.

Blogger was simpler still, consisting of a single form box field into which bloggers typed whatever they wanted. I sometimes wonder whether the new bloggers knew enough HTML to construct a link. Whether they did or not, Blogger was so simple that many of them began posting linkless entries about whatever came to mind. Walking to work. Last night’s party. Lunch. Users who kept Blogger open all day may have found searching the Web for links to be a nuisance. It was much easier to reference friends’ sites or omit links altogether.

So, with the overwhelming adoption of Blogger, and without an interface that emphasized links as the central element of the form, the blog-style Weblog was born. Much controversy ensued in the original Weblog community: These are diaries, not Weblogs; Weblogs are about links.

Evan Williams has said that he understood early on that Weblogs are about the format, not the content [4]. I think he would say that those who objected to linkless blogs didn’t understand something fundamental about the form, and I think he’s right. But I would add that perhaps he didn’t understand something about the filter-style Weblog, and the aims of the community that invented it. At least some of us thought that through the careful selection and juxtaposition of links, Weblogs could become an important new form of alternate media, bringing together information from many sources, revealing media bias, and perhaps influencing opinion on a wide scale—a vision I called “participatory media” [1].

The message began to shape the medium. In early 2000, Blogger introduced another innovation—the permalink—that would forever change the face of Weblogs [2]. From the start, Webloggers had frequently referenced other blogs. It was awkward (“Scroll down to the third entry on September 12th ...”), but this crossblog talk was so compelling it became a primary focus of entire Weblog clusters. Permalinks gave each blog entry a permanent location—a distinct URL—at which it could be referenced. Previously, Weblog archives had been navigable only through browsing. Now, bloggers could reference specific Weblog entries as elegantly as they referenced

any online source. The feature was so useful it became a canonical component of the standard Weblog entry [3]. In a medium whose currency is links, Weblogs without permalinks were suddenly at a disadvantage. Handcoders had to invent ways to reproduce this feature if they wanted to be referenced on other blogs.

To some extent, the permalink also elevated Weblog commentary to a legitimate form of discourse. A link is, after all, a link. Whether it leads to a Weblog entry or a syndicated column, each link on a page has equal weight. If the nature of Weblogs is to democratize publishing, perhaps the nature of hypertext is to equalize influence, at least within the context of the page.

Crossblog talk also inspired development of yet another innovation: comments. For those whose software did not provide this capability, enthusiastic hackers, created remote systems. Invariably, these early systems—hosted, perhaps, in somebody’s basement—would quickly bog down, slowing load time to a crawl. Bloggers would change services or abandon comments altogether. But the lure of public conversation is so strong that as early as 2001 Blogger was the only major blogging tool without commenting capability. For many, Weblogs are unthinkable without comments and the community of readers that comments make visible. Indeed, some have criticized comment-free Weblogs as an inferior form of broadcast media. Commenting has meant a further democratization of publishing, further lowering the bar for readers to become writers.

Trackback, introduced by Movable Type ([www.movabletype.org](http://www.movabletype.org)) in 2001, automated crossblog talk itself. Trackback allows bloggers to ping other Weblogs, placing a reciprocal link—a trackback—in the entry they have just referenced. Previously, bloggers scoured referrer logs to discover references to their sites. Trackback has made these formerly invisible connections visible, inviting instant response. Trackbacks, often interspersed among site comments, emphasize the conversational nature of the Weblog form while collating for readers all available responses to an entry. Like permalinks and comments, trackback has raised the bar for software vendors and handcoders alike.

This pattern—development of free tools in response to widespread practice—continues to shape Weblogs and blogging. Services now automate everything from site syndication to the display of reading lists. Web sites rank the most popular Weblogs and list recently updated blogs. When any sizable number of bloggers start doing something, someone, it seems, will construct a tool to automate it—further popularizing the activity.

Bloggers themselves are experimenting with ways to leverage the existing elements of Weblogs into

more formal social networks. Some are working on methods to attach “friend of a friend” metadata to blogrolls; others have added “BlogChalk,” a notation indicating their age, gender, and geographic location, to their sites.

When I began blogging, I imagined that someday there might be hundreds of Weblogs, with tens of thousands of readers. Instead, the availability of often free and easy-to-use tools overturned that broadcast model. Instead of dozens of Weblogs with a million readers, there are now well over four million Weblogs worldwide—most with only a few dozen readers, according to studies by Blogcensus ([www.blogcensus.net](http://www.blogcensus.net)) and Perseus Development Corp. ([www.perseus.com/blogsurvey](http://www.perseus.com/blogsurvey)). New Weblogs are created—and abandoned—every day. Meanwhile, dozens of pre-Blogger sites still update regularly, most using one of the excellent tools introduced in the last five years.

And me? I still handcode my site, though doing so is more difficult to justify with each new technological advance. Meanwhile, software connects Weblogs with Weblogs, and writers with readers, knitting together the community. Every element that I can’t reproduce leaves me invisible.

In 1999, Weblog software automated a process that was so simple any Web generalist could do it by hand. Since then, toolmakers have introduced such complexity into the Weblog form that only a programmer is able to reproduce their results. Like a 1930s automobile mechanic contemplating a fuel-injected engine, I can only scratch my head. Modern Weblog technology accompanies each post with such a conglomeration of pings and scripts that I can never hope to keep up.

With the wide adoption and innovation of Weblog software, the age of the generalist has given way to the age of the amateur. Long live the Weblog. ■

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