

The Practices and Popularity of British Bloggers

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Abstract

A snapshot of the British blogosphere focusing on the blogging habits and technical abilities of a sample of British bloggers. Most of the academic research that has so far been published on blogging behaviour has been based on US bloggers. By investigating British bloggers, who are relatively late in the field as a group, we hope to clarify the role of gender, as opposed to early adoption or subject matter, in the popularity of blogs. Analysis of the blogs has so far focused on technical information such as technical ability of the blogger, which software used, analysis of the blogroll, enhancements to the blog and use of images. This sample suggests that male and female bloggers in the UK approach the construction of their blogs differently. However, the finding that women tend to have more outward links means that the facile ‘men-filter’ and ‘women-journal’ distinction should not be made.

Keywords: blogs; blogging; British; computer-mediated communication

1 Introduction

This paper is based on a survey of the habits and technological ability of 48 British bloggers, undertaken in the winter of 2005-06. The aim of the survey was to produce a snapshot of the British ‘blogosphere’, bearing in mind that the majority of published academic research on blogging has been based on the practices of US bloggers. It is hoped that this pilot study can now go on to be used to investigate differences and similarities between UK and US bloggers.

What is a blog? Blogs – or web logs – have been a feature of the Internet since the late 1990s. In April 1997, Dave Winer, a software developer, started ‘Scripting News’, a record of his reflections on a number of topics, which is currently described as the longest-running blog on the Internet (<http://www.scripting.com/>). The term ‘blog’ is commonly agreed to have been coined by Peter Merholz in 1999, although Jorn Barger was the author of the word ‘weblog’ in 1997. In 1999, Jesse James Garrett’s ‘page of only weblogs’ listed the 23 blogs known to be in existence at that time. At first, the use of blogs was restricted to those who had the necessary programming skills. Early filter blogs were very much link-driven with limited editorial commentary on the material to be found through the links plus comments from readers. Many such blogs focus on a particular interest of the blogger, whether that is politics, information technology or historical bibliography, ‘pre-surfing’ the Web for material on such topics for their readers. The great explosion in the number of blogs occurred when ‘build-your-own-blog’ software such as Pitas, Blogger, Gropo and Pyra was launched and it became extremely easy for anyone with access to the Internet to establish their own blogs [1]. In April 2004 it was estimated that there were over 1.3 million sites on the web calling themselves blogs, of which about 870,000 were actively maintained [2]. By February 2006, Technorati, a leading blog-tracking engine, was monitoring 27.2 million blogs.

The basic model for a blog is short, dated posts, collected on one web page and ordered chronologically. Bloggers may link to other blogs or other publicly accessible websites. Many participate in blog rings linking themed blogs – for example, blogs with a home education, knitting or English nationalist theme. Later bloggers did not always conform to the filter model. So-called ‘journal blogs’ are characterised more by the frequently updated text in the blog rather than links to other webpages and are more likely to be focused on the blogger’s life and experiences. Indeed, Herring et al sampled 203 US journal blogs and discovered that only 31.8% contained any links at all [3]. Research into journal blogs suggests that most have low interactivity and a fairly

small set of readers, many of whom might be known by the blogger in real life. Journal blogging appears to be particularly attractive to women and teenagers. However, Herring et al suggest that media representation of blogging focuses on filter blogs, produced mainly by adult males, thus giving an artificial and incorrect image in the media of bloggers and blogs [4].

Popularity in blogging is usually defined in terms of the number of incoming links. In this context, there have been concerns that the upper echelons of blogging, and especially the so-called 'A list', or top 100 blogs (in terms of inward links), and the 'B list' or top 1000, are dominated by white males, and that they form a self-replicating clique, who link mainly to each other [5]. Recently, American feminists voicing these concerns have been joined by black spokespersons. Jenkins fears a reversal of the gains made for equal opportunities in mainstream publishing [6]. Shirky has argued, however, that the exponential curve seen in the distribution of links, with a tiny number of blogs receiving very high linkage, and a vast tail receiving none, is the inevitable outcome of free-market choice. He argues that the small number of blogs at the top have effectively become mainstream publications, unable to reciprocate the enormous numbers of links that are made to them. At the bottom end of the scale, most bloggers can expect to be read by only a few known others while in between is a middle section who compete for market share, often in very specialised niches [7].

It has been argued that men attract larger readerships, and therefore more kudos, because they benefit from other factors that happen to align with gender, such as early adoption, technical expertise or choice of subject matter. Most of the academic research that has so far been published on blogging behaviour has been based on US bloggers. By investigating British bloggers, who are relatively late in the field as a group, we hope to clarify the role of gender, and possibly nationality, as opposed to early adoption or subject matter, in the popularity of blogs. It is accepted that, by measuring success in terms of popularity, we are implicitly accepting the culture of links measurement that is prevalent in the blogosphere.

2 Methodology

Data was collected by use of a questionnaire survey and analysis of 48 British blogs. An online questionnaire was completed by a quota sample of 24 men and 24 women, aged over 18, resident in Britain (and not obviously transient), and contactable by email. These were selected using the blog-tracking websites globeofblogs.com and [Britblog: the Directory of British blogs \(http://www.britblog.com/\)](http://www.britblog.com/). These sites were chosen for the research because they offered bloggers registering there the opportunity to identify themselves by the country in which their blog was based. In February 2006 Britblog listed 3881 British blogs and [globeofblogs](http://globeofblogs.com) 1129 UK blogs, plus 1019 English, 66 Welsh, 128 Scottish and 132 Irish blogs (obviously not all of these would be British and therefore bloggers identifying themselves as Irish rather than British were not included in the survey). Since the study was conducted as a pilot, and the sample was not random, no statistical significance tests have been done on the results. With equal numbers of both sexes, women may be somewhat over-represented in the sample, which should be borne in mind when generalising across both sexes. The decision to exclude from the sample any teenage bloggers was made on the grounds of possible ethical complications plus an acknowledgement that teenage blogging and use of the Internet is a separate and complex subject [8]. Analysis of the blogs has so far focused on technical information such as technical ability of the blogger, which software used, analysis of the blogroll, enhancements to the blog and use of images.

3 Results

3.1 Demographics of the Sample

There was a surprisingly even spread of ages within the sample, with women respondents aged between 19 and 65 and men between 20 and 64. The average age for women was 34 and men 35. The spread of educational attainment was broadly similar for the two sexes, with 79% of the women being graduates and 75% of the men. This is compatible with the findings of US researchers such as Herring et al whose research suggests that bloggers are primarily current or former students. A first degree is the modal value for both sexes, but there are more research degrees amongst the men. Half of the women and 62.5% of the men are in full-time employment (including self-employment) while 17% of the women and 21% of the men are in either full or part-time education.

Although a range of sexual orientation was not a selection criterion, three women and three men bloggers in the sample identified themselves as gay.

3.2 Blogging – When and Where?

How long had the sample been blogging? Since blogging originated in the US, we were interested to see whether British bloggers were relative newcomers to the blogosphere. There appears to be an interesting difference here between men and women. The distributions of length of time blogging are different between the sexes with the majority of men sampled having blogged for between 1 and 3 years. The women are normally distributed around the modal value of 1-2 years, with an average of 3.1. Men have an upward cline, with an average of 3.8.

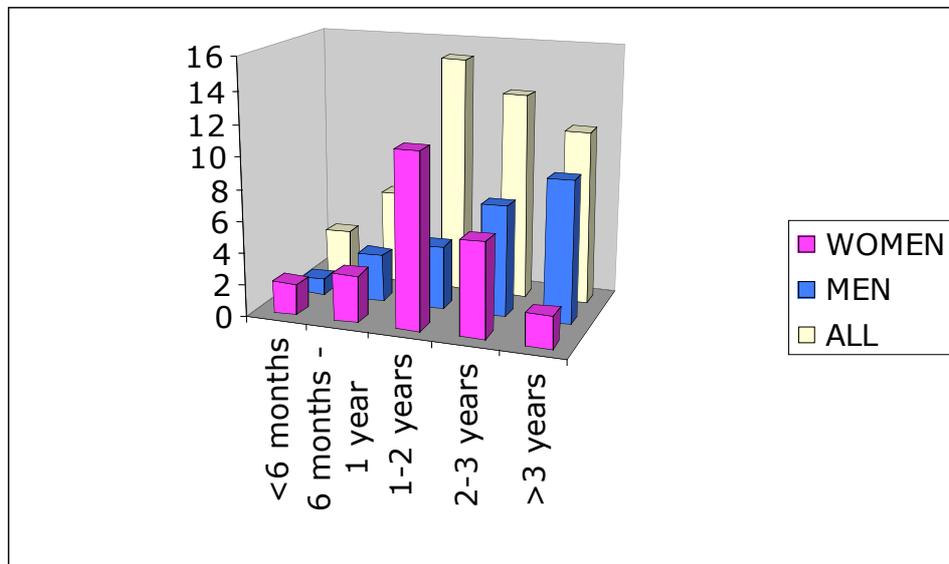


Figure 3.21: Length of time blogging

The majority (60%) of the specific blogs in the sample had been started in the second year of their author's blogging. More than half of each sex – 14 women and 13 men – had more than one on-going blog with different blogs having different purposes. For example, one blogger explained that his first blog was for everyday thoughts and the second was specific to a topic. Another had one blog under her real name and another under a pseudonym where she felt she could moan and whinge more.

The great majority of both sexes have a high-speed connection to enable their blogging. Most use their own computer for blogging, but a few, especially men, use a computer at work. This is an interesting finding considering the high-profile media cases in the past year concerning bloggers being dismissed for blogging at or about their employment. For example, in January 2005, a Waterstone's employee was dismissed by the book chain for blogging about his employment at their store in Edinburgh. In the US, an airline attendant calling herself 'Queen of the Sky' was dismissed for 'inappropriate images' on her blog that showed her in her airline uniform. There is even a new word for such dismissals – according to UrbanDictionary.com, to be 'dooiced' is to lose your job for something you wrote on your blog: Heather B. Armstrong was one of the first bloggers in the US to be sacked from her job for making derogatory comments about her fellow workers in her blog, dooce.com. Two of the British bloggers reported being warned not to blog at or about work and one admitted that she had been sacked after bitching about work colleagues on her blog. Perhaps surprisingly, given the dominance of students in the early development of blogging in the US, only two of our sample blog at an educational institution.

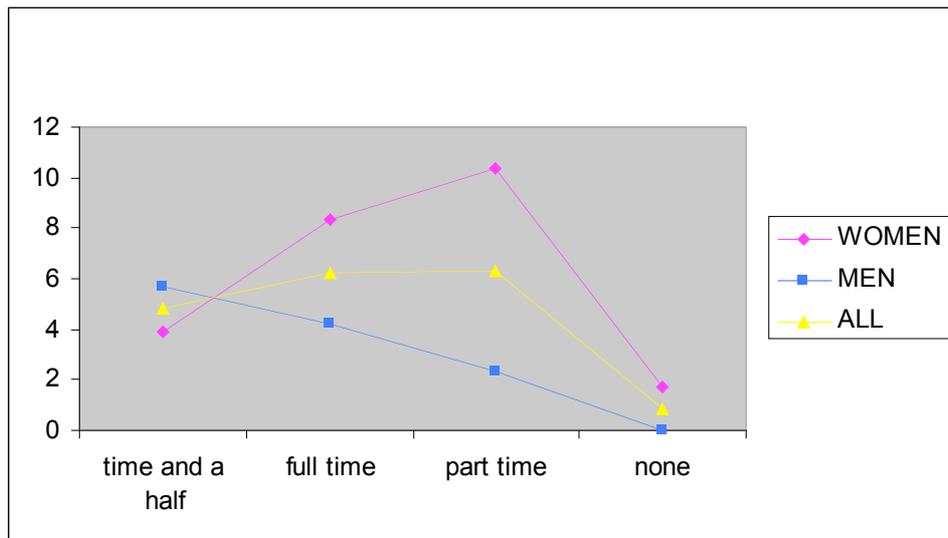


Figure 3.22: Average hours spent blogging in the previous week compared to employment and education commitments

Fig. 3.22 compares the average hours spent blogging in the previous week to bloggers' education and employment commitments. The women, by their own estimates, had spent an average of 7.1 hours blogging in the week prior to completing the questionnaire while men estimated an average of 4 hours. However, there was enormous variability within each sex. On average, long hours spent blogging appear associated with economic or educational activity. If we treat a combination of full-time work and part-time education, or vice versa, as 'time and a half', then for men there is a direct relationship between the amount of their time that is occupied and the hours spent blogging. On the other hand, women who were involved in both education and paid work spent fewer hours blogging than those in full-time or part-time paid work, but still more than those in neither education nor work. The sampled bloggers were asked where they did most of their blogging. A higher proportion of women than men blog from home as their place of employment. It is of course possible that blogging might be intrinsic to a person's work, which is the case for the two women bloggers, working from home, who had spent 35 and 40 hours blogging in the previous week.

Neither sex tends to feel guilty about the time spent blogging and both felt an obligation to their readers to communicate regularly. This agrees with the findings of Nardi et al who suggest that most personal blogs receive comments from and are read by only a few friends and that bloggers have 'regulars' who they know are reading their posts [9]. This keeps them writing since they know that people are anticipating their posts. A small minority of both sexes (6 women and 8 men) agreed in the survey that they use blogging as a way of sending messages to known others, either real-life friends or e-friends. More women (21) than men (17) reported interactions between blogging and real life, but more men (14) than women (11) reported meeting new people through their blogging.

3.3 Blogging Technology

Blogs can have many different themes, looks and writing styles, but most bloggers use, unaltered, the standard templates provided by the blogging software. As far as choice of blogging software is concerned, Blogger is overwhelmingly preferred in this sample by both sexes. MovableType and Wordpress, which offer advanced technical control, have mainly male subscribers, but two each of the men and women appear to be blogging from adapted websites, rather than using off-the-shelf blogging software. Bloggers using Livejournal, the basic level of Typepad subscription, or MSN, do not have the facility to paste code into the template and are therefore more limited in their scope to enhance their blogs. They can, however, add images easily.

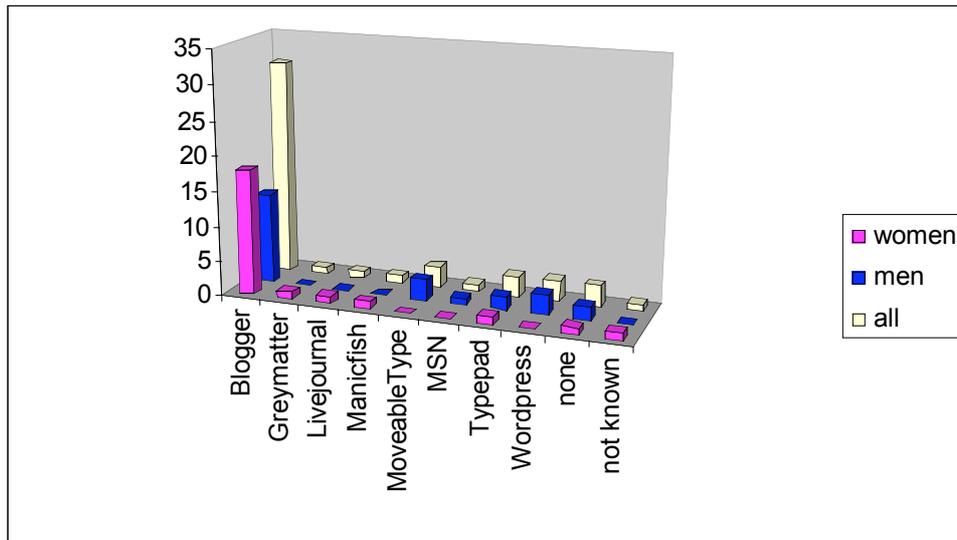


Figure 3.31: Chosen blog host

The sampled blogs' technical sophistication was assessed on a five-point scale:

- 1 *Unmodified template*
- 2 *Pasting into template (Blogger), adding images (Livejournal)*
- 3 *Adding artwork/deleting or modifying 'about me' (Blogger)*
- 4 *Template redesigned*
- 5 *Custom design*

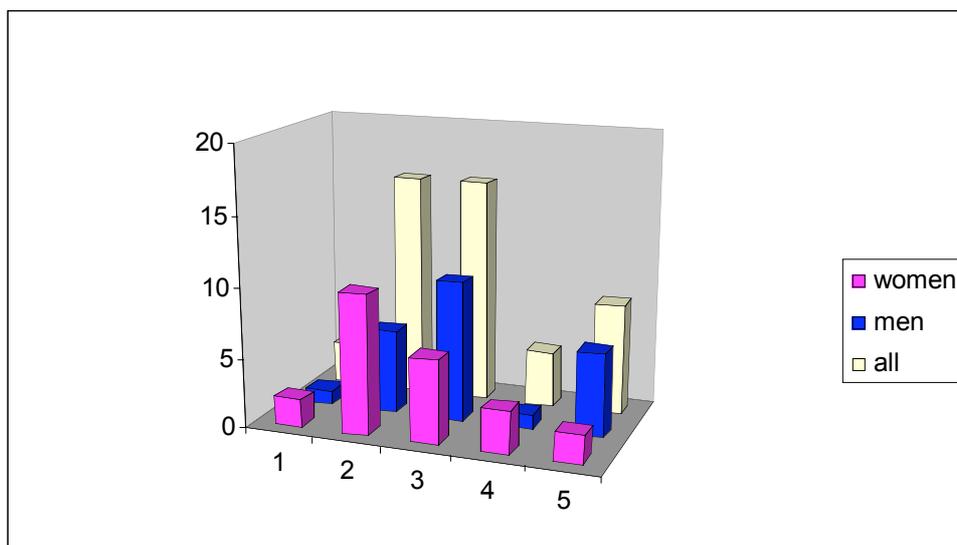


Figure 3.32: Sophistication of blog design

On average, the men sampled tended to produce more technically sophisticated blogs, using more advanced blogging software (MovableType, Wordpress, for example), or making greater changes to the templates provided by the blog hosts. This agrees with findings elsewhere that men tend to be more confident than women with the technical aspects of Internet use. For example, the Pew Internet and American Life Project, based on the findings of a variety of tracking surveys on Americans' use of the Internet between March 2000 and September 2005, suggested that men are more interested in the world of computer and Internet technology and how their own gadgets and systems work. They are more adept at dealing with, and more confident about using, the technology [10].

When customising their blog, the surveyed men were somewhat more likely to discard the 'about me' section or to give self-consciously minimal information about themselves. Comments such as 'I am me' or 'That's enough

about me. Any questions?’ could be found in these sections. The self-proclaimed gay male bloggers take the gender trends even further in their limitations on the amount of information they provide. However, gay male and women bloggers were more likely to provide a photograph of themselves on their blog. Gay women, however, were less likely to provide a photograph. The willingness of some bloggers, in particular women, to provide a photograph but not a name suggests that they do not mind being recognised by people who already know them in real life, but are wary of strangers identifying them. This might link with the slight minority of both sexes who reported problems as a result of blogging, some of which were very serious and included a sacking, a cyber-stalker and damage to relationships. Again, the Pew Internet and American Life Project reports that women express more fears than men about the Internet as a vehicle for criminal activity.

For most of the sampled blogs (20 women and 24 men) a snapshot of the number of images used is available from SurfWax (<http://www.surfwax.com/>). The number of images per 1000 words can also be calculated. Women have a mean of 19.9 images overall or 6.1 per 1000 words while men have a mean of 22.4 images overall or 9.3 per 1000 words. The averages conceal the fact that the most intensive users of images are all male.

Bloggers are now offered a variety of ways of customising their blogs, managing visitor interaction and even making money through advertising. While advertising on blogs has not yet taken off in the UK, indications from the US are that there is a growing interest in blog advertising on the part of media agencies. Blogs can deliver extremely focused audiences in terms of interests and demographics and some of the more popular bloggers are now reporting substantial incomes from advertising sales. The sole income of the Armstrong family of dooce.com., for example, now comes from advertising space sold on Heather B. Armstrong’s admittedly very popular blog.

Nine main types of blog enhancement were identified on the British sample. These were: membership of rings and directories; search sites; ranking sites; links management sites; blogroll management; advertising; feed, aggregator or update tools; other visitor interaction management and site meters. It should be noted that, with advertising in particular, it can be difficult to decide whether a badge for a service, such as a spam killer, is merely a personal endorsement. It is also possible for a blogger to subscribe to an advertising agency but receive no advertising.

Bloggers using Livejournal, Typepad or MSN do not have the facility to paste badges into the template. Others may have chosen not to display badges advertising services they are using. However, to access services that upload information to the blog (such as site meters, comments management, feed management, blogroll management and advertising) it is necessary to paste code into the blog template, and mandatory to display the provider’s badge or link.

As far as the British sample is concerned, rings or directories and site meters were the most popular enhancements used, and blogroll management and advertising the least popular. There are some small differences between the sexes, with women favouring site meters more than men, and men favouring visitor interaction tools (such as comment management beyond that provided by the blog host) and specialised blog-search sites (such as Technorati) more than women.

Most of the sample (12 women, 16 men) display badges or links for between one and five blog rings or directories, with a maximum of 15. Of course, since the sample was obtained from a blog ring and a directory, it is known that all the bloggers belong to at least one of these. Nevertheless, 9 bloggers displayed no badge or link for these. In the survey, 20 women and 15 men admitted belonging to blog rings, all of which were British based. No blogger belonged to a non-British blog ring. One explanation for such a national focus was revealed when the bloggers were asked why they used blog rings: explanations included the ability to ‘find local blogs’ ‘read other blogs relevant to this country’ and to ‘increase the readership of people like me’. Other bloggers used blogrings to ‘keep in touch with like-minded bloggers’ – one gay blogger pointed out that there is an entire sub-culture within the blogging community of gay bloggers which was helped by the use of blog rings.

A large minority of bloggers of either sex display badges or links to between one and three blog-ranking sites, such as Technorati. However, women are more likely than men to have a site meter and they are also more likely to have a site meter without making the statistics visible to visitors. There appears to be no correlation between the length of time blogging and the range of enhancements used. Nor is there any correlation between the age of a blog and its range of enhancements. However, men are somewhat more likely than women to introduce a wide range of enhancements early in the life of a blog. Again, this agrees with the Pew finding that men tend to be more confident than women with the technical aspects of the Internet.

3.4 Popularity and Blogging

The number of inward links is important to bloggers both as an indication of the size of the blog's readership and as a public measure of its popularity. In the latter capacity, it is also important to advertisers, although, as we have seen, only a small number of our sample is as yet attempting to make money from their blogs by subscribing to advertising agencies. There is a very long tail of blogs – the figure of 95% has been mentioned – that have no inward links at all [11], though as many as 45% of blogs are inactive and an increasing proportion – 9% by February 2006 – are fake or spam [12]. However, all but two of our sample blogs have inward links. As can be seen in Fig. 3.41, the sample included one blog in Technorati's top 10,000, with some of each sex in the 100,000 and 1,000,000 bands, and the majority unranked. Nevertheless, with 40% of the sample ranked and such a large majority containing inward links, we appear to have a large skew towards the more popular end of the blogosphere.

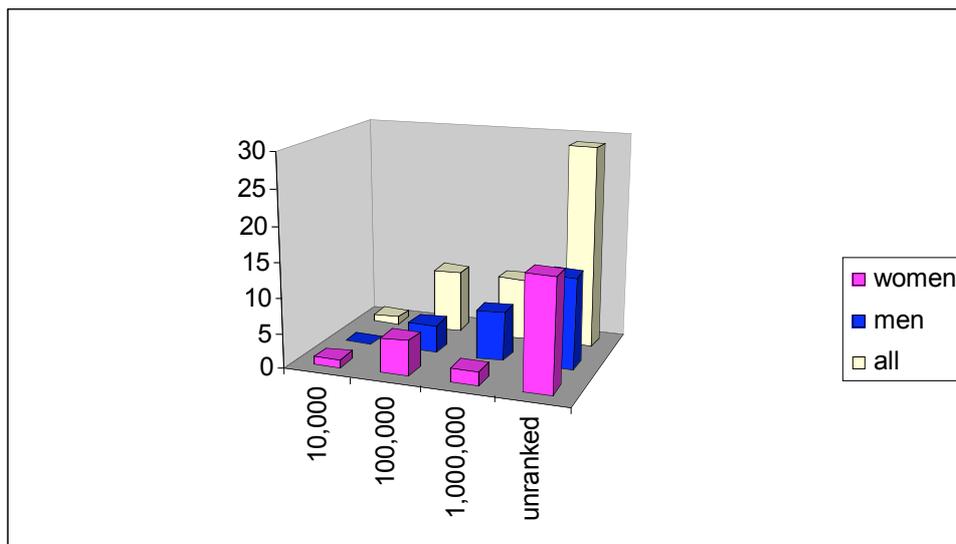


Figure 3.41: Number of blogs in technorati top ranks

Two search sites were used to find the numbers of inward links: Technorati and Blogpulse, both basing their figures on feeds with varying time depth of content. Women and men have similar distributions of inward links, using averaged Technorati and Blogpulse figures. They are mostly in the long tail of an exponential curve, apart from the one woman with a very high number of inward links, who is also in Technorati's top 10,000. The average figure for inward links for women is 25.77 and for men 23.98. There seems to be no correlation between the age of a blog and its number of inward links. Nor is there any correlation between the length of time blogging and the number of inward links. However, there is a tendency for the range of figures for inward links to widen with the length of time blogging.

Interestingly, there is also little or no correlation between blog ring or directory membership (as displayed on the blog) and the number of inward links. However, it does seem that, as the number of rings rises, the gap between the blogs with very high numbers of links and the rest widens.

There were other indications that our sample was skewed towards the more popular end of the British blogosphere. In November 2005, Friday Books published an anthology of British bloggers. Four of the bloggers selected for this study were included in the book – two male bloggers who write link-filled blogs focusing on politics and current affairs, a third who reports on his experiences as an emergency medical dispatcher for the London Ambulance Service, and a woman blogger who writes about books and culture [13].

3.5 Analysis of Outward Links – The Blogroll

As well as inward links, each blog's standing outward links in the form of the blogroll was analysed. The blogroll is a collection or list of favourite links to other blogs and is a common feature on blogs. They are sometimes referred to as link lists or bookmarks. Of the 48 blogs analysed, 30 presented readers with a blogroll. At 62.5%, this is a much higher percentage of blogs with outward links than Herring et al's sample of US blogs.

14 female and 13 male bloggers offered their readers a blogroll. All blogroll links were followed and analysed in terms of who was writing the linked blog (man, woman or a group of bloggers).

A comparison of Figures 3.51 and 3.52 below shows a distinct difference between our sample of male and female bloggers. Either blogs written by men have a more general appeal or women bloggers have a much more even-handed approach to the blogs they recommend to their readers in terms of gender than the male bloggers, the vast majority of whom preferred to link to blogs written by other men.

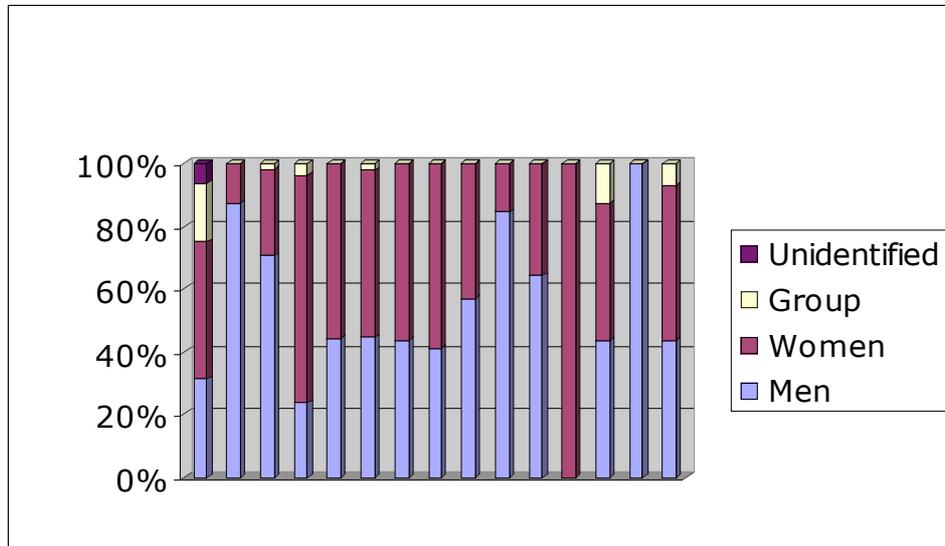


Figure 3.51: Women bloggers' blogroll links analysed in terms of gender

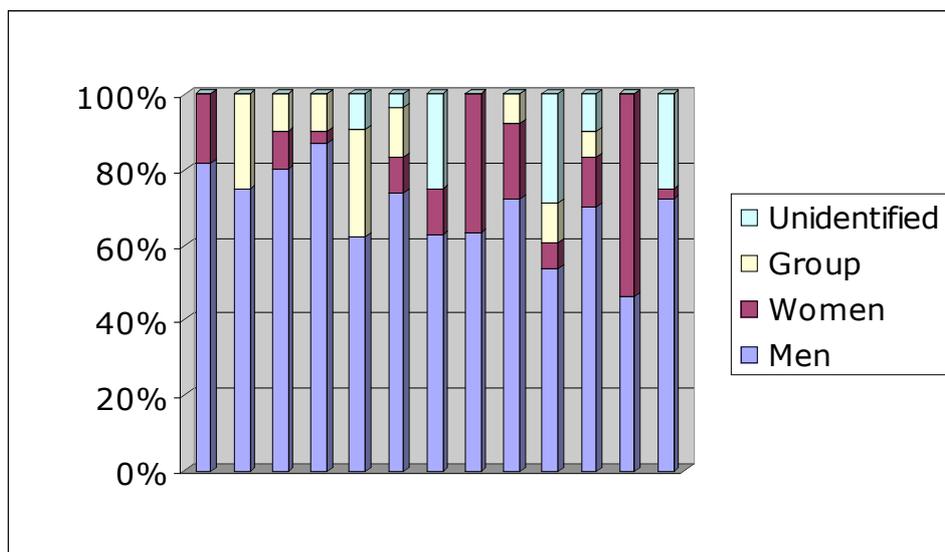


Figure 3.52: Male bloggers' blogroll links analysed in terms of gender

4 Conclusions

The aim of this research was to establish a snapshot of the current British blogosphere and to clarify the role of gender in such matters as habits of blogging, popularity and technical expertise. In general, this sample of British bloggers appear to be a diverse crowd in terms of age, time spent blogging and technical ability. Their comparatively high educational attainments may suggest that, as in the US, blogging is predominantly the pursuit of those who are or have been students. The majority of our sample blogged from their own home rather than from work or at their place of education. One of the reasons for this might be a concern about possible repercussions from employers following the high-profile dismissals linked to blogging about one's place of work. However, the dominance of home-based blogging should also be attributed to the spread of high-speed

connections to the Internet over the UK in the past few years, thus making home access to the Internet cheaper and faster.

This sample suggests that male and female bloggers in the UK approach the construction of their blogs differently. While women are more interested in monitoring the numbers of visitors they receive, the men prefer to retain control over their interactions with such visitors, using more comments management tools. The men also tend to produce more technically sophisticated blogs, leading to the conclusion that they are more comfortable with the technology available and perhaps also more concerned with creating a blog that perfectly reflects them. Although Blogger is the overwhelming choice of both sexes, and only a minority of the sample rely on their own web-design skills, it is men who account for the small numbers using the more technically sophisticated blogging software. Men are more prolific posters of images but appear to spend less time blogging than women. This might lead to the suggestion that women write longer blog entries than men and this is an area that requires further research. However, the finding that women tend to have more outward links means that the facile ‘men-filter’ and ‘women-journal’ distinction should not be made. In comparison to earlier research into US blogs, the vast majority of the sampled British blogs, male and female, contained outward links and most bloggers in the survey recommended other blogs to their readers via a blogroll. However, men were far more likely than women to recommend other male bloggers. This suggests that the ‘gender ghetto’ phenomenon, which has led in the US to the creation of the BlogHer community, which aims to evangelise blogging by, for and to women, is also current in the UK [14].

It was not the purpose of this study to gauge whether British men and women are equally likely to achieve a given level of popularity. What we can say is that the sample includes some of the leading British bloggers: two displayed awards on their sites, and four were included in Worstall’s anthology. Nevertheless, only one has made it into Technorati’s global top 10,000. This would tend to confirm that the British, as relative latecomers, do indeed have to work hard for global recognition.

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