Blogging across Borders and Cultures

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The editor is pleased to introduce a special issue of the *International Journal of Interactive Communication Systems and Technologies* (IJICST). As a transdisciplinary scholarly forum focused on a broad spectrum of existing and emerging interactive communication systems and technologies, IJICST brings together international experts from a wide range of academic disciplines and fields to broaden the interdisciplinary body of knowledge pertaining to various aspects of interactive communication systems, platforms, applications, components, devices, interfaces, tools, and techniques. This special issue—*Blogging across Borders and Cultures*—aims to explore the multidimensional and interactive nature and characteristics of blogs as communication systems and provide readers with a thorough examination of blogging in diverse contexts and at various levels of communication.

During the last decade, blogging has witnessed astounding growth and became firmly entrenched into the fabric of human communication. With overall Internet penetration totaling 2 billion people (InternetWorldStats, 2011), the number of Internet users reading and writing blogs has skyrocketed. In China, for example, 90% of all netizens read blogs and 81% write and submit comments (The Nielsen Company, 2009). According to a comparative study of social media adoption in 38 countries, South Korean blogs are read by 88% of local Internet users. In India, 79% of active Internet users read blogs, and over 50% write blogs (Wave 4 Social Media Tracker, 2009). Currently, the global blogosphere encompasses 167.5 million blogs and over 1 million new blog posts are indexed every day (BlogPulse, 2011). Blogging offers people ample opportunities for communication, interaction, sharing, and collaboration. Time spent on the Internet becomes an indispensable part of an individual's personal and social life regardless of the socioeconomic status, cultural background, ethnicity, religion, age, or gender.

A blog is an amazingly simple and at the same time extremely versatile interactive communication system. Multiple levels of interactivity are enabled in blogs through a set of built-in tools and plugins including comments, trackbacks, pingbacks, blogrolls, permalinks, feeds, archives, excerpts, bookmarklets, and tags, which extend the functionality provided by the hypertextual nature of this web-based medium. As an interactive communication system, a blog may serve a vast array of functions ranging from personal journaling and self-expression to message relaying, public discourse, and citizen journalism (Dumova, in press). In addition, blogs are widely utilized for carrying out educational as well as professional functions. The score of interactive features, and

the richness and flexibility of functions make blogging one of the most ubiquitous and easily recognizable examples of social interaction technologies (Dumova & Fiordo, 2010).

The locus of attention in the current issue spans across geographical, national and cultural borders, from North America to Europe and to the Mediterranean. The contributions to this volume provide a cross-cultural account of similarities and differences in blogging practices around the world, including the diverse blogging communities of the United States, Germany, Canada, Russia, and Turkey. The following statistics can draw a useful backdrop to the articles featured in this issue. Two thirds or 66% of all social media users in the United States read blogs and 33% write blogs (Wave 4 Social Media Tracker, 2009); however, research shows that in the U.S. blogging activity in general has reached saturation, especially among young audiences (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). The statistics also tell that Germany still remains "a cautious adopter" of blogging, given that only 57% of online users read blogs, and even less (28%) contribute to them. In Russia, 28% of Internet users maintain blogs and 71% read them. A survey of over 10,000 respondents conducted in Canada discovered 58% of blog writers among all Internet users. It also found that the majority of Canadian bloggers (74%) keep blogs for personal reasons, 57% blog for work, and 35% do both (6S Marketing, 2009). Finally, Turkey is particularly known for its dedicated online audience with a total of 25 million (ComScore, 2009) Internet users, 39.2% of blog readers, and 4.6% of users who post to blogs (Wave 3 Social Media Tracker, 2008).

Much of the focus of the present issue is on bloggers' motivations, personality traits, the connection between online and offline activities, as well as attitudes towards larger social, cultural, and political issues. While research suggests that individual differences such as gender can predict general patterns of Internet use, little is known about the role of other personality moderators in blogging behavior. For example, are men and women high in openness, self-consciousness, loneliness, or neuroticism more likely to blog? Bradley M. Okdie, Rosanna E. Guadagno, Daniel M. Rempala, and Cassie A. Eno (USA) re-examine the validity of previous research at a time when multiple online communication channels have became readily available. Specifically, the authors replicate and expand prior analyses to examine the individual differences that may predict who is likely to keep a blog. Participants reflected on their blogging behavior (e.g., writing blog entries and reading blogs), which was compared with multiple personality measures. Results of a series of regression analyses supported prior research, indicating that openness predicts blogging to a greater degree than any other trait. The study also found that individuals high in self-consciousness and those who see more of their "true self" on the Internet are more likely to blog. The authors suggest that in addition to openness, self-focus and personality can provide a key for decoding blogging motivations.

In many parts of the world, blogs have become a popular medium for communicating personal thoughts, opinions, interests, and ideas. Nina Haferkamp, Anh D. Lam-chi, and Nicole C. Krämer (Germany) report on the results of an online survey of German, American, and Russian bloggers aimed to examine whether the bloggers' cultural backgrounds have an impact on the individual patterns of blog use. The authors seek to assess the degree to which intercultural differences determine the specific reasons for individuals to maintain a personal blog, as well as to examine their attitudes and reactions towards received feedback. Applying Hofstede's cultural dimensions of social interaction in organizations (such as individualism/collectivism, power distance, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation), the analysis indicates that American blog writers place a higher priority on self-presentation than Russian blog authors, while German bloggers can be placed in between. At the same time, Russian bloggers tend to be more reserved towards documenting their personal lives and feel more apprehensive

about comments than American and German bloggers. The study utilized several statistical methods, including the analysis of variance (ANOVA) and factor analysis.

The political blogosphere offers a highly interactive environment where beliefs and judgments clash with political perspectives and partisan viewpoints. Although, many scholars have examined the structure and content of political blogs, relatively few studies concentrated on the offline political engagement of bloggers, their community-building initiatives, as well as other civic activities. The article by Thierry Giasson, Vincent Raynauld, and Cyntia Darisse (Canada) offers a detailed account of the sociopolitical profiles of a sample of A-list political bloggers from Quebec. More specifically, it details their demographic background, the motivations for blogging, forms of online and offline political participation, as well as perceived impact of blogs on traditional media. Based on the data collected through an online survey, the study finds that Quebec political bloggers are mostly men, 18 to 35 years old, college educated, and residing in urban areas. The most important difference between Quebec bloggers and members of other blogging communities is their ideological preference: the majority of respondents hold left-wing political views.

Robert Andrew Dunn (USA) explores the professional function of blogging by scrutinizing journalist-run political blogs maintained by large and small newspapers. In particular, the author examines the relationships between newspaper circulation size (large vs. small), blog post focus (national vs. local/state), topic (political vs. government), and whether reporters who blog break with gatekeeping routines of print journalism. The results of a content analysis suggest that smaller newspapers are more likely to publish blogs that break with everyday journalistic routines, intrinsic norms, values and judgments of the journalistic profession than larger newspapers. The study finds evidence that blog postings about political news are more likely to break with professional routinization and include references to personal experiences. The author concludes that the purpose of the newspaper blog remains a matter of debate and that professional blogging is not exempt from its own routinization. Given that blogging has become commonplace in most newsrooms, it is reasonable to assume that the routines of the profession will be applied to online journalism and its many facets as journalists continue to adopt social interaction technologies.

Mehmet Yilmaz and Umit Isikdag (Turkey) present the results of research into the role of political blogs in the international political communication by focusing on the 2008 U.S. presidential election and its reflection in the Turkish blogosphere. Their study examines how Turkish bloggers followed and evaluated the two main candidates, Barack Obama and John McCain during the presidential election campaign in August-November 2008. The authors hypothesize that the key motivation that shaped the attitudes of Turkish bloggers towards the candidates (in favor of a particular candidate, neutral, or in opposition) was driven by the alignment of the content of electoral discourse with Turkish national interests; this hypothesis was supported. The researchers find a direct association between the level of online activity of the candidates and the number of blog entries and comments in the Turkish blogosphere. This study testifies that blogs in Turkey are increasingly becoming a means of facilitating political communication. It is evident that the Turkish blogosphere is evolving and has the potential in the future to function as a platform for political deliberation.

The issue concludes with a conference report and a book review. The conference report by Bryan Alexander (USA) focuses on the 4th Annual International Symposium for Emerging Technologies for Online Learning held in San Jose, California on July 11-13, 2011. Finally, Jasmine Harvey (UK) offers a review of "The Use of Technology in Mental Health: Applications, Ethics and Practice" by Kate Anthony, DeeAnna Merz Nagel, and Stephen Goss, which highlights the professional use

of technology, including blogs, as a tool for mental health therapy and peer support.

As the practice of blogging continues to disseminate throughout geographical regions and across political and cultural divides, the answer to the query about the future of this medium is grounded in specific local contexts and patterns of use. With this special issue, the journal aims to open a wide discussion of the blogging phenomenon and engage its international audience in an exploratory dialogue that will identify new research questions, theoretical and methodological approaches, and future areas of investigation.

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