Chapter 15
Social Interaction Technologies and the Future of Blogging

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ABSTRACT

In an age of user-generated content, multimedia sharing sites, and customized news aggregators, an assortment of Internet-based social interaction technologies transforms the Web and its users. A quintessential embodiment of social interaction technologies, blogs are widely used by people across diverse geographies to locate information, create and share content, initiate conversations, and collaborate and interact with others in various settings. This chapter surveys the global blogosphere landscape for the latest trends and developments in order to evaluate the overall direction that blogging might take in the future. The author posits that network-based peer production and social media convergence are the driving forces behind the current transformation of blogs. The participatory and inclusive nature of social interaction technologies makes blogging a medium of choice for disseminating user-driven content and particularly suitable for bottom-up grassroots initiatives, creativity, and innovation.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

As we move into the 21st century, a new generation of Internet technologies transforms the information landscape and previously established media usage patterns. Social interaction technologies, or Internet-based tools and techniques designed to

initiate, share, and maintain interactive and collaborative activities online (Dumova & Fiordo, 2010), have penetrated multitudinous aspects of people's lives. When applied to the realm of media and communication, these technologies are commonly referred to as social media and include weblogs, microblogs, social networks, wikis, discussion forums, audio and video podcasts, Web feeds, social bookmarking services, and virtual

worlds. The term "blogging" refers to the practice of publishing user-generated content on the Web in a journal-type format that can be easily updated and commented on. Blogs permit people to engage in social interactions, build connections, maintain conversations, share ideas, and collaborate with others. Above all, blogs and blogging advance the creation of user-centered, user-driven, and user-distributed content.

Social media development concurs with the grand vision of the World Wide Web as "more a social creation than a technical one" (Berners-Lee, 1999, p. 133). To draw attention to the paradigm shift in how Internet users collaborate and share content online, the concept of Web 2.0 was introduced (O'Reilly, 2005). However, there is no separation barrier between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0; rather, there is a symbiosis of emerging and already-established Internet technologies. There are many definitions of social media and most of them emphasize the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Powered by new technologies with blogging at their core, social media are taking the world by surprise. A recent worldwide poll conducted by a global media planning and marketing company, Universal McCann, demonstrates that the social media universe is growing exponentially. The primary adopters and participants of social media are more than 600 million active Internet users who go online every day in various parts of the world (Wave 4 Social Media Tracker, 2009). Reading and writing blogs remain the most common social media activities, along with managing personal profiles, visiting friends' social network pages, sending and reading short messages, sharing photos, and watching and uploading video clips (Wave 5 Social Media Tracker, 2010). It is not accidental that the website hosting the popular blog service Blogger (blogspot.com) is the world's fifth most visited site after Google, Facebook, YouTube, and Yahoo.[1]

In just one decade, blogging has taken off and become nearly omnipresent with millions of blogs published worldwide. There are numerous blog classifications: public blogs and those hidden beyond the intranet firewalls (private or limited access), single-authored blogs and multi-authored, or collective blogs. Blogs differ by ownership (personal, organizational, or corporate), by genre (political, educational, sports, military, law, current events, fashion, "mommy" blogs, etc.), by multimedia type (photo, video, and audio blogs), and by platform (moblogs). The origin of blogs as communication systems is mired in the history of Usenet groups and the Bulletin Board Systems of the 1980s, as well as the first World Wide Web communities of the1990s. Early self-expressive websites gave birth to a well-known dimension of blogs as a cyber-equivalent of a personal diary. The adoption of WWW brought popularity to the collections of hyperlinks, which users composed, updated, and shared with one another. These linklogs became common and there was just one step from a linklog to a linkblog (link plus commentary) and finally to a weblog.[2] In essence, "personal foraging sites" (Blood, 2000, p. 20) merged with personal Web pages, and the rest was history. Ultimately, hyperlinks and self-expression defined the nature of blogs and turned blogging into the medium that we know today.

The concise history of blogging pioneers still has to be written by Internet historians.[3] However, there are several innovations that separate modern blogging from the early days. Among them, the incorporation of trackbacks by the MovableType blog publishing platform and the introduction of the commenting feature in the Open Diary blog hosting service. On its first day of operation Open Diary had twelve visitors; three of them started their own diaries. One of the three users happened to be from Turkey (Locken & Loughnane, 2005, p. 291), an early signal that blogging was destined to become a global enterprise. In 1999 the introduction of Pitas.com's and Blogger.com's easy-to-use and free blog hosting and publishing services made the blogging revolution inevitable. Interestingly enough, its vanguard was located in

the Netherlands with "the highest number of we-blogs per capita in the world" (Blood, 2002, p. 5). Recognizing the international flavors of blogging, the first Weblog Awards in 2001 included such categories as best American, Canadian, European, Asian, Australian, and New Zealand blog.[4]

Bloggers have created a new world—a global blogosphere—populated by technology and lifestyles gurus, heads of state and multinational corporations, politicians, celebrities, opinion leaders, information purveyors of all kinds, activists, volunteers, human and animal rights defenders, civil liberties experts, corruption fighters, and truth seekers. It appears that the "noosphere" imagined by Vladimir Vernadsky as a special realm of existence for human thoughts has been finally located. The global blogosphere, as well, reflects the contradictory nature of humanity since it not only accommodates the human need to communicate, connect, and share, but also encompasses some questionable and even antisocial practices. Nonetheless, blogging has firmly entered society's everyday existence and has become an essential part of politics, business and marketing, public relations and advertising, social and public services, nonprofit organizations operations, various professional activities, as well as other political, social, economic and cultural dimensions of life. However, the greatest impact of the blogging revolution can be seen in the domain of human and media communication.

In 1999 one technology enthusiast characterized weblogs as: "the pirate radio stations of the Web, personal platforms through which individuals broadcast their perspectives on current events, the media, our culture, and basically anything else that strikes their fancy from the vast sea of raw material available" (Katz, 1999). Since that time blogging has evolved into an industry. Thus Rick Calvert, founder of the BlogWorld & New Media Expo, a major international social media event, thinks of blogs as the center of the social media universe. Calvert elaborates, "The blog is the hub and all these other things—Facebook, LinkedIn,

Twitter, Flickr, YouTube—are spokes that lead back to the center" (as cited in Black, 2011, p. 14).

This chapter aims to evaluate the future direction of blogging as a social media phenomenon by surveying the global blogosphere landscape for current trends and assessing their implications and potential impacts. It should be noted, however, that the author considers the shoes of H. G. Wells too large to step in, and therefore avoids the promise of drawing a vision of the blogosphere's future; rather, she sees her task as alerting the scholarly community and interested readers about the important transformations that herald challenges and opportunities for blogging. Blogs can provide fascinating insight into the functioning of human communication in the digital age, and the author hopes that the current study will encourage students of media and communication to continue pursuing this line of research.

LITERATURE

Even though blogs are a newborn medium—if one compares their short existence with more than a 300-year history of newspapers—political commentators, social observers, and cultural critics have all praised the value and impact of blogs on society and culture. Among social scientists, blogs have received general acclaim for raising the levels of political participation (Kaye, 2005; Pole, 2010) and serving as gatekeepers in campaigns and elections (Garris, Guillory, & Sundar, 2011); empowering citizens (Papacharissi, 2007); encouraging civic engagement (Rheingold, 2008); fostering public discourse (Benkler & Shaw, 2010; Etling et al., 2010); creating a new form of journalism (Johnson & Kaye, 2004; Wall, 2005); building community (Kervin, Mantei, & Herrington, 2010); harnessing collective intelligence (Gregg, 2010); and rendering knowledge (Park, Jo, & Moon, 2010). What's more, blogs have been viewed as one of the most striking developments of the early twenty-first century (Sunstein, 2009, p. 138).

In addition, the study of motivations for blogging has turned into an interdisciplinary area of inquiry of its own, providing insight into bloggers' individual differences and reasons for blogging (Guadagno, Eno, & Okdie, 2010; Herring, Scheidt, Kouper, & Wright, 2007; Hollenbaugh, 2011; Kaye, 2007). A recent study by Larsson and Hrastinski (2011), "Blogs and Blogging: Current Trends and Future Directions," utilized a sample of 248 scholarly articles indexed in an academic citation database, ISI Web of Knowledge. The study documents an increase in scholarly interest in blogs within the social sciences and the humanities: from 2 articles appearing in 2002 to 101 articles published in 2008. Overall, the existing research indicates that blogs are a highly multifunctional and versatile medium of communication and allows to identify the following major functions of blogging: (1) personal narrative and self-expression, (2) information sharing and message relaying, (3) public discourse, (4) citizen journalism, (5) educational, (6) business and professional, and (7) entertainment. Blogs are playing an increasingly influential role in politics and civic engagement. Musing on the future of political blogs, Farrell and Drezner (2008) predict that they will continue to maintain their pervasive role in public discourse as a tool "through which politicians and others will seek to influence political debate" (p. 29). Pole (2010) similarly draws the conclusion that political blogs "will remain prominent" (p. 138). In the journalism realm, Tremayne (2007) seems to agree that blogs are altering the nature of journalism and that collectively blogs can affect mainstream news coverage of politics. Thriving in the new media environment, blogs make the old model of mass communication, "which allowed little voice for the audience" (p. 271) obsolete. Tremayne believes that although blogging will not replace the functions of traditional journalism, blogs on politics, war, sports, technology, health, entertainment, and the like will continue to occupy important niches and present serious competition for mainstream media.

Focusing primarily on personal journals, Barlow (2008) confirms that blogs are changing people's individual relationships with technology, particularly in the areas of politics and journalism, and that bloggers do not live in a virtual, make-believe world, but deal with real-world problems around them. "Technology is part and parcel of the cultural whole" (p. 124), argues Barlow, who is optimistic about the changes that blogs, as a new public sphere, are bringing with them. Raising the question, "What's next for blogging," Bruns (2006) presciently writes that technology itself "does not guarantee the eventual success of a blogging genre" (p. 251) and places the future of the medium into the hands of bloggers.

While scholarly research on blogs is growing, addressing the future of blogging as a medium presents a motivating challenge. Thus, Jensen and Helles (2011) believe that "the future of many-to-many communication on a massive scale, across different groups, institutions and sectors in society, is still in the process of taking shape" (p. 529). They posit that the specific potentials of the so-called "many-to-many" forms of communication, such as blogs, can be evaluated only in relation to future outcomes.

Harold Lasswell, one of the founders of communication science, emphasized that any communication process can be examined in "two frames of reference, namely, structure and function" (1948, p. 38). To address the question of the future of blogging, the author of this chapter uses a structural-functional approach and focuses on the place of blogs among social media. The underlying premise of the chapter is that unlike the traditional "Big Four" media (i.e., print, film, radio, and TV), blogging should not be analyzed in isolation and should be viewed holistically, as an integral part of the social media cluster that function together to sustain the whole.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Despite a large body of empirical research delineating the growth of specific social media applications, there is still a lack of theoretical conceptualizations of these developments that can help identify the role and place of blogging as a communication channel within the greater context of modern society and estimate its future. Two theoretical frameworks are particularly relevant to this task, specifically: *media convergence* developed by Henry Jenkins of the University of Southern California Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism, and *cultural technology* proposed by James Lull of San Jose State University.

Most generally, media convergence can be viewed as the integration of multiple media types meant to enable technological innovations, produce better content that can be disseminated more effectively, and to facilitate two-way communication between content producers and consumers. Many authors have discussed the idea of media convergence through digital technologies. In the 1990s, "convergence" was defined as "the coming together of all forms of mediated communication in an electronic, digital form, driven by computers" (Pavlik, 1996, p. 132). The term "digital convergence" is frequently used to imply that not only new and emerging media, but also traditional media (such as newspapers, books, magazines, radio, TV, film) are part of the process (Pavlik, 2008). With the proliferation of social media applications on mobile platforms, it became apparent that media convergence ultimately blurs the boundaries between traditional media formats allowing them to flow across platforms and multiple media channels (Jenkins, 2001, 2006a). A key characteristic associated with the process of media convergence is the participatory nature of convergent media. From the user perspective, convergence provides new levels of engagement with mediated realities. Users are learning to master the attributes of new and enhanced technologies "to bring the

flow of media more fully under their control and to interact (and co-create) with others" (Jenkins & Deuze, 2008, p. 6). "Consumption becomes production; reading becomes writing; spectator culture becomes participatory culture," explains Jenkins (2006b, p. 60), and this trend has been noted by many observers. For instance, Bruns (2009) emphasizes the birth of a new culture that supports active user participation in the creation and distribution of content—participatory culture. Lull (2007) similarly indicates, "consumers are producers; audiences are authors; users are developers" (p. xii). At the global level, however, because of the international flow of information and media content, convergence routinely results in the "cultural hybridity" of the mediated environment (Jenkins, 2001).

Media convergence dramatically expands opportunities for social interaction, improves access to distant cultural resources, and diversifies cultural experiences. Lull (2007) introduces the notion of cultural technology, given the enormous popularity of the Internet around the world and its profound impact on culture. As articulated by Lull, the key principles of cultural technologies entail: (a) "blurring the distinctions between social life and technology," (b) "convergence of technological components and functions," and (c) "melding of normative social behaviors" facilitated by technology (p. 61). Echoing Jenkins, Lull stresses the interconnectedness of technological mechanisms that enable the production of user-generated content and support the social dimension of cultural technologies. To Lull, these mechanisms involve the full spectrum of media, with social networking, blogging, photo and video sharing, and instant messaging to name a few. As a cultural technology tool (Lull, 2007), blogging lets users obtain cultural knowledge (p. 65), participate in the global public sphere (p. 75), foster shared public communication, and promote global consciousness (p. 157). Cultural technologies also allow for the routine blending of traditional cultural influences such as language

with the attitudes and behaviors generated in the Internet's cultural spaces. However, Lull cautions that universal values broadcast in mediated forms can "clash with actual practices in many parts of the world" (p. 63, 68). Overall, the theoretical frameworks of media convergence and cultural technology allow for a better understanding of the dynamic interrelationship between blogs and other components of the social media cluster.

METHOD

To answer the question of what the future holds for blogging, this chapter utilizes the method of environmental scanning drawn from the methodological toolbox of futures studies. Futures research is a fast growing, multi-disciplinary field of knowledge which builds on the foundation of management, economics, political science, sociology, and human ecology to address pertinent problems associated with the growth of a modern industrialized society (see Ackoff, 1974; Dator, 2002; Fowles, 1978; Morrison, Renfro, & Boucher, 1983). Samet (2009) distinguishes between three types of futures research: (a) projective futures and forecasting; (b) prospective futures and scenarios; and (c) evolutionary futures. Applying evolutionary futures research approach to the global blogging environment, this chapter critically analyzes the current issues, trends, and their implications with the purpose of identifying important challenges and opportunities facing blogging.

The method of environmental scanning (ES) originates from the business world where it is imperative to analyze competition and the overall market for tactical and strategic purposes (Aguilar, 1967; Kroon, 1995). Currently, it is frequently utilized for a thorough and comprehensive examination of emerging technologies (Alexander, 2009). This type of analysis is done through a wide-angle lens and allows mapping of the dynamic interplay of many technological and societal factors and identifying the driving forces behind

them, both centripetal and centrifugal. In sum, the technique of environmental scans "provides a macro-image of the environment and indicates how different environments function" together (Kroon, 1995, p. 77).

As it applies to blogging, the key elements of ES utilized in this chapter include evaluating statistical data, events, industry reports, white papers, survey results, expert reviews along with a wide range of ideas, issues, and perspectives originating from the scientific community. The author also considered views and opinions expressed in top technology blogs and forums, such as: ReadWriteWeb, Mashable, Slashdot, TechCrunch, Wired, Engadget, and Ignite Social Media. Advantages of the environmental scanning method come from the use of multiple and diverse sources of information (Alexander, 2009) as well as the interdisciplinary nature (Morrison, Renfro, & Boucher, 1983) of inquiry that it provides. Finally, the method utilizes a systems approach that allows focusing on the entire cluster of social media and tracing the interaction between the platforms and tools that operate as a whole.

A broad and all-inclusive environmental scan can be realized through an exhaustive review of different factors and components such as social, economic, technological, political, regulatory, and cultural, and it can be conducted as a stand-alone examination or a series of analyses. The current study utilized processed-form scanning relying on existing secondary data. Ideally, however, ES should be supplemented by gathering new data (through surveys or other means), systematic longitudinal scanning, or ad-hoc scanning of issues under investigation. To minimize the subjective factor, further investigations may apply a series of environmental scans or combine ES with other techniques such as the Delphi method, alternative futures scenarios, or prediction markets (Alexander, 2009).

BLOGGING AS A GLOBAL PHENOMENON

After the appearance of the first English-language weblogs in the 1990s, blogging has quickly turned into an international phenomenon: over 60% of all blogs are written in a language other than English (Wyld, 2007, p. 52). Internet users across the world are utilizing blogs as one of the most ubiquitous social media tools to establish human contacts, build connections, share opinions, follow conversations, collaborate, and interact with others. According to the *State of the Blogosphere* report (Technorati, 2010), two-thirds of all bloggers are male, and 65% are between ages 18 and 44.[5] Another study shows that worldwide, women bloggers prevail despite the fact that women occupy 46% of the global Internet population. In addition, the share of women's online time spent on blogs is greater than men's (ComScore, 2010). The prevalence of women among blog users is also evident from the analysis of user demographics for specific blogging and microblogging services, for example, LiveJournal, Xanga, Twitter, and Tumblr (Ignite Social Media, 2011). It should be noted, however, that global statistics of blog authorship and readership can be misleading and

regional, geographic, and cultural differences should always be considered (see Table 1 for top ten global blog markets). In India, for example, women compose only 20% of all Internet users while North American online population is split evenly (ComScore, 2010).

The author would like to draw the attention to the intricacy of assessing the overall scope of the blogging universe because of the incomplete and sometimes conflicting estimates provided by Internet metric services, social media monitoring companies, blog search engines, and bloggers themselves. According to BlogPulse (2011), an automated trend discovery system for blogs owned by the Nielsen Company, there are currently 168 million blogs. In comparison, in May 1999 there were only 23 known weblogs (Blood, 2000. p. 70). EatonWeb, one of the earliest blog directories on the Web and Technorati's predecessor in blog indexing, listed less then 50 blogs in the same year. After the year 2008, Technorati's annual *State of the Blogosphere* analysis no longer reported a total number of blogs in the global blogosphere, and the latest available estimate was 133 million blogs (Technorati, 2008). Other specialized blog search engines and directories (such as Google Blog Search, IceRocket, Regator, and

Table 1. Top ten global blog markets by country (average minutes per visitor and percent reach)

Top Markets by Average Minutes per Visitor on Blogs	Average Minutes per Visitor	Top Markets by Percent Reach of Blogs	Percent Reach
Japan	62.6	Taiwan	85.5%
South Korea	49.6	Brazil	85.2%
Poland	47.7	South Korea	84.9%
Indonesia	33.1	Turkey	81.9%
Brazil	32.5	Japan	80.5%
Vietnam	30.3	Peru	77.3%
Sweden	29.2	Portugal	76.0%
Malaysia	26.6	Argentina	73.3%
Portugal	24.8	Singapore	73.2%
Taiwan	24.1	Chile	72.3%

Source: Adopted from ComScore, 2011.

Bloglines) do not disclose the overall number of blogs that they index. According to WordPress. com (2011), there are 57.8 million WordPress sites in the world, with 294 million people reading blogs hosted and published by this service. Finally, BlogScope (2011), a research project of the University of Toronto, tracks 56 million blogs. However, there has been a paucity of inquiries into the blog abandonment rate and the proportion of active and inactive blogs. In addition, the issue of spam blogs cannot be ignored.

Even though the adoption of blogging in Western countries might have reached a critical mass and is decelerating, it demonstrates a rising trend in many other parts of the world. As evident in Tables 1 and 2, blog reading and writing are popular in such diverse geographies as Japan, China, South Korea, U.S., Poland, Sweden, India, and Brazil. China's blogging community is by far the largest in the world. While instant messaging and social networking compete with blogging to become "the social glue" of the Chinese Internet, which currently encounters about 485 million users (Internet World Stats, 2011), blogging remains one of the most popular activities for online audiences in China. According to the Nielsen Company (2009), 90% of Chinese netizens read blogs and microblogs and 81% write and post comments, a much higher percentage than in the U.S. or Western Europe. The state-run China Internet Network Information Center (2010) gives a more modest estimate of the total number of net citizens in

China as equal to 420 million and the number of blog users as nearing 231 million or 55%. South Korean blogs are read by 88% of active Internet users. In Brazil, 62% of online users read blogs, and over 50% write them (Wave 4 Social Media Tracker, 2009).

At the same time, Western countries display a different and more complicated picture. For example, only 57% of Internet users in Germany read blogs, and even less contribute to them (Wave 4 Social Media Tracker, 2009). The Pew Research Center reports that blogging in the U.S. displays a downhill tendency among young adults but remains steady among the older population. Currently, one in ten American adults maintains a blog, and this trend has been fairly consistent during the past five years (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). It is possible that blogging in the U.S. has already reached saturation levels and is giving way to more popular activities such as social networking. Yet, the world's blogging community is expanding as Internet users discover and adopt blogs in various geographical areas such as Central and South America, Eastern Europe (including Russia), the Middle East, and Africa. Thus, in the five years after the appearance of the first Russian-language post on LiveJournal in February 2000, the number of Russian bloggers grew to 235,000 (Gorny, 2006, p. 335). The Berkman Center for Internet & Society estimates that there are about 35,000 active Arabic-language blogs (Etling et al., 2009), and this number continues to grow. Multi-language

Table 2. Blogging and other types of social media activity by country (percent of online users)

	U.S.	U.K.	Germany	Brazil	India	China	South Korea
Blog Readers	66	58	57	62	79	90	88
Blog Writers	33	25	28	51	54	81	61
Create Social Networking Profiles	59	64	47	69	78	70	62
Visit a Friend's Social Network Page	67	71	53	84	82	82	76
Video Watchers	83	79	74	93	87	89	83

Source: Adopted from Wave 4 Social Media Tracker, 2009.

support is already increasingly incorporated into blog software. It is possible that bloggers will enjoy "on-the-fly" translation services with embedded automated language detection in the near future, an upgrade that will turn blogs into versatile cultural technology tools.

The following example demonstrates the immense power and potential of blogging as a cultural technology in promoting a social cause such as global education. In 2009, Rania Al Abdullah, the Queen of Jordan, launched a fundraising campaign in support of primary education in developing countries. An active social media user, she began the campaign by addressing bloggers gathered at LeWeb'09, the leading Internet forum in Europe. Due to the support of the blogging community, the campaign was joined by 18 million people and was successful in raising global awareness of the issue (1GOAL, 2011). One participant noted:

Finally, the Internet is breaking the cultural barriers and history heritage that for so long has separated people in Europe. Finally, different cultures are working together to keep those links alive. Finally, we are starting to be one, and not many. (Guest post, 2009)

While the practice of blogging permeates the barriers of space and time, the worldwide trajectory of blog penetration depends on many socioeconomic, cultural, technological, and demographic factors. The overall spread of blogging and other social media is tied to the global efforts of bridging societal divides.

BLOGGING: TRENDS AND IMPLICATIONS

Evolution of Blogging Platforms

Early blogs were crafted manually as simple Web pages with hyperlinks. Thus, blogging at the early stages required basic knowledge of HTML programming, which created entry barriers for potential bloggers. The appearance of free blog hosting and publishing services made blogging available to anybody with a computer and an Internet connection. The pivotal role in the blogging revolution belongs to Blogger.com, a web-publishing service launched in 1999 by San Francisco-based technology startup Pyra Labs, purchased by Google, Inc. in 2003. It offered ready and easy-to-use, customizable templates for blog entries that could be updated from any stationary computer or mobile device. The Pyra Labs software was a breakthrough in the complexity typical of early Web programming; it allowed ordinary Internet users without intimate knowledge of computing to effortlessly publish content and incorporate links and multimedia. In addition, Blogger quickly developed a range of enhancements: such as the commenting feature, permalink, blog roll, trackback, calendar, archive, and RSS feed. According to Alexa Internet, U.S.-based Blogger and WordPress are among the most popular weblog publishing platforms in the world (see Table 3), while Twitter and Tumblr are the most popular microblogging services.

Despite the dominance of large players, there is healthy competition among the providers of blog hosting services and software. As a technological innovation, blogging originated in the United States; however, in many countries domestic platforms and services also appeared, for example Weblog.nl, BlogNL, and Blogeiland in the Netherlands. LiveJournal, developed in 1999 in the U.S. and purchased by the Moscow-based company SUP Fabrik in 2007, powers the Russian-language blogosphere (Alexanyan & Koltsova, 2009). To attract new users, LiveJournal continuously experiments with new features, for example voice posts, and emphasizes the creation of communities of bloggers. Even in the U.S. there are functioning communities of bloggers gathered around small providers (e.g., Open Diary and DiaryLand) that compete with giants such as Blogger and WordPress. Edublogs is the biggest

Table 3. Top ten popular blog publishing platforms by Alexa Internet ranking

Blog Publishing Platform	Alexa Global Traffic Rank
1. Blogger	5
2. Twitter	9
3. Tumblr	46
4. WordPress	75
5. LiveJournal	79
6. TypePad	201
7. Webs	355
8. Weebly	362
9. Drupal	390
10. Posterous	479

Source: Alexa Internet, The Web Information Company, August 12, 2011.

Note: The rankings were generated by Alexa Internet search analytics based on a three-month comparison of the number of daily visits to the site and the number of page views.

international provider of educational blogging, and operates from Australia. It is likely that this trend will persist in the future, and the diversity of blogging platforms and services will be sustained. The Dutch blogosphere presents a case of such diversity. Weltevrede and Helmond (2011) utilized an innovative approach for examining "the nationality" of blogs through URL, source code, and link analyses, as well as the use of the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine. They discovered that there is a growing preference for domestic platforms in the Dutch blogosphere. Perhaps this can be explained by certain centripetal sociocultural tendencies in the national blogosphere that counterbalance the centrifugal forces of cultural globalization. Such an assumption also concurs with Lull's (2007) notion of cultural technologies which points out that technology is merely a tool in people's hands.

Network-Based Peer Production and Blogging

As blogging platforms continue to evolve, new participatory modes of content production dem-

onstrate their growing power with the emergence of widely accessible online distribution channels. At its core is the user-driven nature of convergent media where traditional distinctions between consumers and producers of information and content have started to dissolve. Viewing the Internet as a platform for human connection, Benkler (2006) draws attention to the new ways of citizen engagement enabled by participatory media leading to the "social production" of content (p. 91) or "commons-based peer production" (p. 60). Bruns (2009), who has coined the term "produsage," emphasizes the blending of the roles of producers and users of information. In this new information landscape, a new culture that supports active user participation in the creation and distribution of content is being born (Jenkins, 2009).

The ongoing evolution of networked technologies supports effective interaction among communities of interest allowing them to participate in public discourse, negotiate agendas, and voice opinions at previously unknown levels of engagement (Benkler, 2006). "The value of any bit of information increases through social interaction," writes Jenkins (2006b, p. 140). Indeed, the value of social interaction technologies in fostering a participatory culture can hardly be negated. A recent London-based study of the social impact of citizen-run neighborhood websites and blogs found that these sites play a critical role in the local communication ecosystem (Harris & Flouch, 2010). They cultivate information sharing, raise awareness of local issues, reinforce local identity, stimulate the growth of social capital, strengthen social cohesion, and contribute to citizen empowerment. Established through free blog services, social networks, and discussion forums, these websites effectively function as public social third spaces (e.g., Whampstead), local agoras (e.g., Stroud Green), or civil social networks (e.g., Harringay Online). They can also operate as blogazines (e.g., Transpontine) or placeblogs (e.g., Brockley Central). Scientists (Gordon & de Souza e Silva, 2011) emphasize the importance

of Web 2.0 tools (including blogs for community engagement), but warn that adding a networked component to neighborhood life cannot be viewed as a universal remedy for urban ills. Merely having access to technology is not sufficient for bridging the "participation gap" in a modern industrialized or developing society (Jenkins, 2006a); knowing what to do with technology is what really matters.

Researchers have already pointed out a recent massive growth of information startups such as the online community and neighborhood based publications often discussed in the context of Internet-based participatory media, citizen media, or alternative media (e.g., Carpenter, 2010; Metzgar, Kurpius, & Rowley 2011). These publications focus on small geographical areas and aim to fulfill the information demands of niche groups of people at the local and hyperlocal, or neighborhood, level. "Hyperlocal blogging" refers to blogging about issues, people, and events that affect local communities, neighborhoods, and suburban areas that do not find adequate coverage in "big" media. Well-known hyperlocal blogging and news sites—such as Baristanet (Montclair, New Jersey), NEastPhilly (Philadelphia), Live Here Oak Park (Chicago), Monroe Scoop (Monroe, North Carolina), Greensboro101 (Greensboro, North Carolina), Next Door Media (Seattle, Washington), and Capitol Hill Seattle (Seattle, Washington)—have been at the forefront of the hyperlocal news explosion. Numerous other lesser-known locally focused blogs, called "placeblogs," have also emerged to meet the needs of local audiences.[6]

Driven by the demand for local news, participatory community news sites, such as the community oriented blog Frankford Gazette (Philadelphia), bridge the gap between mainstream media and innovative grassroots initiatives by identifying new modes of gathering and disseminating information and giving voice to ordinary people. Blogazines and placeblogs actively solicit feedback and contributions from the public, and establish easy mechanisms for distributing user-generated content. The Huffington Post founder Arianna Huffington reflects:

The content provider is no longer at the center of the universe. … At the center of the universe is now the news consumer. People want to be part of the story of their time. They want to participate—both in small ways and in big ways, both in small issues and in big issues—with what is happening in our world. (as cited in McMains, 2010)

Despite the fact that hyperlocal blogs provide content of interest to relatively small audiences, when compared with such Internet giants as Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube, they still attract sizeable readership. For example, Next Door Media, a local news portal and a network of North Seattle neighborhood blogs, attracts 200,000 visitors monthly.[7] Baristanet, a grassroots blog based in Montclair, New Jersey, receives 9,000 visits per day and 80,000 unique visitors every month (as cited in George & Peters, 2010). Launched in 2004, Baristanet targeted three communities in New Jersey and quickly established itself as one of the national forerunners in hyperlocal blogging. The site presents an innovative mix of community news, original reporting, video interviews, and readers' comments. Baristanet has served as a model for other hyperlocal sites in these locales: Pittsburgh, PA; Brooklyn, NY; New Haven, CT; Watertown, MA; and Red Bank, NJ. Analysis of "mentions" by Regator.com, a specialized cross-platform blog directory and search engine, shows that local topics can receive more interest than national news.[8] The emergence of networks of hyperlocal news sites and blogs similar to Greensboro101 or "Next Door Media: Seattle Neighborhood Blogs and Hyperlocal News" demonstrate a growing trend. At the international level, full-fledged participatory news sites—such as OhmyNews (South Korea), NowPublic (U.S.), and ThirdReport (U.S.)—already feed the blogosphere with local news generated by citizen journalists. Although the business model

of hyperlocal blogging at the time of writing is still uncertain, some hyperlocal sites (for example, Greensboro101 or Baristanet) are able to sustain themselves through a combination of community fundraising and advertising.

Social Media Convergence and Blogging

According to Jenkins, media convergence is more than another technological shift, for it alters the relationship between "existing technologies, industries, markets, genres and audiences" (2004, p. 34). To take this further, convergence encompasses not only legacy media, but also the social media cluster. Notably, social media convergence speaks to the principle of the interconnectedness of technological mechanisms that underlie the operation of cultural technologies conceptualized by Lull (2007). For example, convergent media become part of Internet products and services, as is the case with China's Tencent Holdings, which operates one of the biggest Web portals in the country and provides blog hosting and publishing services. Known mostly for its instant messaging (IM) service, Tencent's QQ, the company gradually added a lineup of innovative products. Three examples follow: (1) Tencent's Qzone, a pseudonym general-purpose social networking service (SNS); (2) Tencent's PengYou ("friends" in Chinese) with the real-name SNS; and (3) Tencent Weibo microblogging service. In Tencent's corporate philosophy, the Internet is viewed as a utility similar to electricity,[9] and for many people in China, Tencent has indeed become a daily necessity. Tencent Qzone, which accounts for 26% to 28.7% of the SNS market in China, also allows its members to create and maintain blogs (Cheung, 2011, p. 28-29). On Qzone, subscribers can update their status, post blogs, pictures, and video, play social games, receive the latest news, and chat with their friends. This trend of re-bundling existing social media tools is likely to continue.

In contrast, social media convergence can take completely new directions, as with the short-form blog or microblog, which allows users to share text (originally limited to 140 characters),[10] hyperlinks, pictures, and re-post quotes from other sources. Unlike traditional blogging, microblogging presents a unique format that is hard to classify under the existing categories; it merges synchronous ("push") and asynchronous ("pull") communication models, utilizing the best of both realms. Microblogs become effective catalysts of online communities which then tend to merge into networks. It is because of this effective convergence of blogging and social networking functions that Twitter and similar platforms substitute other online communication channels such as instant messaging, chat, and discussion forums.

There is yet another trend; currently, many microblogging sites have shifted their emphasis from simple message relaying to providing more opportunities for interactivity. For example, Tumblr offers a balanced combination of short-form blogging (allowing users to post messages that are longer than 140 characters) and options to integrate multimedia content. Tumblr's re-blogging feature (a blend of reposting and forwarding) has become especially popular. Perhaps due to its distinct versatility, four-year-old Tumblr already has 25 million subscribers (Tumblr, 2011). Generally, while the traditional format of blogging places emphasis on self-expression and content sharing, microblogging encourages conversation, interactivity, and user engagement and thus can be categorized as *social blogging*.

At present, microblogging is the fastest growing social media platform (Wave 5 Social Media Tracker, 2010). It originated as a crossover between instant messaging, chat, and traditional blogging tailored to teenage audiences. Because microblogging offered a shorter and faster format for exchanging blog posts, it was quickly adopted by Internet users of different age cohorts worldwide. Launched in 2006, Twitter allowed users to quickly post short text entries about their daily

activities over the Internet or a cellular network. Immediacy, simplicity, and constraint were at the core of Twitter's original concept (Sagolla, 2009). Twitter gained nearly instant popularity in the United States and around the world and currently has 100 million active users (Sysomos, 2011). Approximately 140 million short messages or "tweets" are sent through the Twitter network every day (Sysomos, 2011). According to a Pew Research Center's report (Lenhart & Fox, 2009), by the year 2009, one in five Americans between 18 and 24 years of age had used Twitter or similar services. Twitter redefined short-form communication in the age of information overload but, paradoxically, there are now complaints about "Twitter overload."

Twitter's success brought to life other similar microblogging services around the world. Jaiku, based in Finland, and Soup.io, operating from Austria, are popular in Western Europe. The Plurk network is widespread in Taiwan, the Philippines, and Indonesia. A special version of Twitter has been created for Japanese users. Tencent's and Sina's Weibo ("weibo" stands for "microblog" in Chinese) dominate the Twitter-like scene in China. Sina Weibo is China's biggest microblogging network with 200 million registered users (Dayal & Liu, 2011).[11] Tencent Weibo claims to have 160 million registered users and 93 million active users; however, it is common for Internet companies in China to inflate their statistics (iChinaStock.com, 2011). Analysts report that compared to Twitter, Sina Weibo provides more opportunities for interaction: it allows for commenting on other users' posts and sending audio, images, video, and emoticons as attachments (Zhang, 2011). In response to a post, Twitter users can create a new tweet, re-tweet, or reply using a private message function. Uploading and sharing images on Twitter have become a popular pastime. A number of specialized microblogging platforms dedicated to education have also been developed, for example, Edmodo and Twiducate. Regardless of their geographical origin, microblogging

platforms provide rich opportunities for content sharing and peer interaction.

One of the reasons behind the immense popularity of Twitter, Sino Weibo, and the like is the fact that in addition to providing an innovative blog platform for sending and receiving short messages in a near real-time mode, microblogging performs a social networking function. Having gained a critical mass, Twitter-like microblogging platforms are evolving into social networks of their own, although they remain in the shadow of Facebook which has more than 500 million users (Sysomos, 2011). Energized by the shift in functionality from relaying messages and content to maintaining connections, microbloggers engage in creating small and big networks of followers (Twitter) or fans (Sina Weibo). The user-centric and many-to-many nature of microblogging offers bright prospects for its adoption in many walks of life.

Twitter has turned into a global cultural phenomenon; among its converts are 35 heads of state and nearly half of the world's top religious leaders including the Pope and the Dalai Lama (Twitter blog, 2011). Twitter's international success became possible after it integrated multi-language support: microblogs can now be written in 17 languages. Sina Weibo also announced plans to attract more subscribers from across the globe, and we may witness the appearance of an intercultural bridge that will meet halfway between the West and the East in the near future. Recognizing the cultural significance of microblogs, the Library of Congress has begun archiving Twitter content. In addition, along with Facebook and YouTube, Twitter remains the primary source of online referral traffic (see Table 4).

There is no limit to the creative adaptations of new media technologies, and blogging is no exception. For example, live blogging allows for posting real-time updates to a blog during an event while it is taking place rather than blogging about it after the fact. Live blogging is particularly effective for covering meetings, conferences, key-

Table 4. Top ten sources of website referral traffic (percent of all referrals)

Source of Referral Traffic	Percent of All Web Referrals
1. Facebook	0.64574
2. YouTube	0.28394
3. Twitter	0.11363
4. StumbleUpon	0.06609
5. LinkedIn	0.03062
6. Reddit	0.00534
7. Google+	0.00354
8. Del.icio.us	0.00097
9. Mashable	0.00071
10. Flickr	0.00057

Source: NetMarketShare, 2011.

note speeches, and community or sporting events. It can be done by using specialized services (such as CoverItLive) or by adding a plugin to an existing blog publishing platform (as with WordPress). Live blogging allows end-users to create a single blog post that can be updated without reloading the browser window. CoverItLive streams live content directly into a blog homepage. To view the stream, blog visitors do not need to register at the site or download any additional software. The console window displays: writers' entries, readers' comments, graphics, photographs, video, quick polls, and a range of ready-to-use messages, such as "Be right back in 5 minutes." The WordPress live blogging plugin uses AJAX technology and supports integration with Twitter: if activated, the first 139 characters of each live blog entry will be posted to the Twitter network. ScribbleLive is another platform designed specifically for collaborative live blogging. Live blogging merges the functions of instant messaging, chat, e-mail and online video conferencing, and seamlessly integrates Web searches to navigate to YouTube and other multimedia sites.

Video blogging also utilizes the Internet to deliver entertainment content, news, and commentary that can be viewed in a Flash video format (FLV), or downloaded as WMV and MP4 video files. Capitalizing on the ideas behind Internet TV and video streaming, video blogs (vlogs) deliver local news, investigative reporting, and video footage from citizen journalists. Video blogging can serve other purposes, for example, provide intracasts through organizations' intranets. To make video distribution services even more effective, video blogs often utilize RSS or Atom syndication formats which allow for automatic aggregation and playback on personal computers and mobile devices. Examples of video blogging are abundant on YouTube and vary in formats. For example, a weekly talk show, "The Partners Project," features interviews of YouTube stars whose videos have attracted millions of global viewers (Stelter, 2011). Unedited transcripts of all interviews are published on a complimentary blog.[12] Some popular video blogging channels like Bloggingheads.tv record dialog matchups between the hosts, conducted via webcams, and post them for viewing and commenting. These discussions often involve scientists, writers, journalists, and A-list bloggers. One could argue that we should expect new innovative forms of video blogging to materialize in the future. Accordingly, the *State of the Blogosphere* analysis (Technorati, 2010) indicates that in the next five years, more people will receive their news and entertainment from social media than traditional media. Interactive features of social media create particularly fruitful grounds for future innovative developments.

DISCUSSION

During the last decade, blogging has witnessed remarkable growth around the globe, having wide-ranging implications for many people regardless of their geographical location, socioeconomic status, age, gender, education, or cultural background. Yet the future of blogging cannot be assessed without taking into account the critical voices

questioning the impact of Web 2.0-associated media on the written word, reading, and culture in particular (Carr, 2010; Keen, 2007; Lanier, 2010; also see Andersen & Rainie, 2010). Sunstein (2008), for example, emphasizes that "a dramatic increase in individual control over content and a corresponding decrease in the power of general interest intermediaries, including newspapers, magazines, and broadcasters" (p. 95) should not be automatically viewed as a step towards deliberative democracy. Since social media allow for an unprecedented level of control over the selection of content, such control can lead to a dramatic reduction of the political horizon for a given individual and thus "reduce the importance of the 'public sphere' and common spaces in general" (p. 96) since these individuals are exposed only to partisan points of view. Goldman (2008) similarly remarks that blog readers prefer to seek out those blogs that adhere to their own political views, which can negatively affect the blogosphere's role in fostering citizen involvement. Others note that blogging is particularly suitable for disseminating "exaggerated, distorted, incorrect or downright deceitful" information and rumors (McNair, 2006, p. 131) and for spreading "mean-spirited, overtly personal" attacks (Powazek, 2002, p. 6).

In 1995 in his seminal book "Being Digital" Nicholas Negroponte, the MIT Media Lab founder, envisaged a customized online news channel—*Daily Me*. Hardly could Negroponte predict that highly personalized news aggregation could produce the so-called "echo chamber effect" leading to political polarization and cultural tribalization of the news media. The media echo chamber is characterized by social scientists as a "bounded, enclosed media space that has the potential to both magnify the messages delivered within it and insulate them from rebuttal" (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008, p. 76). Jamieson and Cappella, unlike Sunstein, find that this phenomenon has not only negative, but also positive effects, since it "encourages engagement and increases the audiences' ideological coherence" (p. 247). Alter-

nately, they point out that media echo chambers have the potential "to undercut individual and national deliberation" (p. 247).

Despite mainly positive accounts of user-generated media (Bruns, 2009; Bruns, & Jacobs, 2006; Jenkins, 2009; Russell & Echchaibi, 2009), Shirky (2008) thinks that most user-generated content is not content at all and that the blogging phenomenon is completely misinterpreted. Shirky argues that most blogs are public only in appearance since they are usually intended for small audiences with close social ties. He uses a metaphor of a person sitting in the mall's food court next to a group of youth communicating with each other: The person can hear what they talk about, but that doesn't make him a part of their group. Shirky also claims that blogs confuse broadcasting and communication functions: "dozens of weblogs have an audience of a million or more, and millions have an audience of a dozen or less" (p. 84) and that weblog world is not universal and cannot be viewed as such. Pioneer technologist and computer scientist, Lanier (2010) uses harsh words to describe the "open culture" of Web 2.0:

Anonymous blog comments, vapid video pranks, and lightweight mashups may seem trivial and harmless, but as a whole, this widespread practice of fragmentary, impersonal communication has demeaned interpersonal interaction. (p. 4)

Most of the attempts to define the future for blogging view blogs either from the technological determinist or the social construction of technology point of view. Both of these approaches represent the extreme ends of the pendulum by overly emphasizing either the role of technology in shaping people's values, attitudes, and behaviors or the degree of human control over technology. No one would deny that media technology affects people, as it is the case with television. However, there are reasons to believe "that the hysteria over the dangers of the online extensions of our world will begin to die down" (Barlow, 2008, p. 159).

Despite the warnings of cultural critics, empirical research does not provide evidence of the social isolation of Internet users. Recent Pew Internet Research Center's polls show that Internet usage does not reduce real-life social interactions as it is commonly assumed. One such survey (Rainie, Purcell, & Smith, 2011) found that the majority of Internet users (80%) are engaged in real-life social groups, as compared with 56% of non- users (p. 2). Interestingly, micro-bloggers turned out to be the most social (85%).

While new information and communication channels continue to emerge, social interaction technologies make it possible for global citizens to obtain and share information in a variety of formats and forms that are crossing the traditional divides of time, location, and geographical borders. Some refer to the plethora of emerging online participation channels as *Web 3.0* and even *Web 4.0*, or the *Semantic Web* to emphasize the unprecedented level of interactivity the new generation of Web-based technologies and applications brings with them. An industry analysis of semantic Internet technologies documents that the old information-centric patterns of media consumption have reached their limit, giving way to the "ubiquitous Web of connected intelligences" (Davis, 2008, p. 4). Mills Davis, the author of the report, elaborates:

The semantic wave embraces four stages of internet growth. The first stage, Web 1.0, was about connecting information and getting on the net. Web 2.0 is about connecting people—putting the "I" in user interface, and the "we" into Webs of social participation. The next stage, Web 3.0, is starting now. It is about representing meanings, connecting knowledge, and putting these to work in ways that make our experience of internet more relevant, useful, and enjoyable. Web 4.0 will come later. It is about connecting intelligences in a ubiquitous Web where people and things reason and communicate together. (2008, p. 3)

As with every new technology, in blogging, humans face the dilemma of maximizing the positive effects and minimizing the potential negative impact. The future of blogging, therefore, depends on whether or not people will be able to overcome the challenges associated with "the dark side" of this communication technology and put it to work to fulfill legitimate human needs. Overall, the proliferation of blogging provides testimony to humanity's continual desire to maintain the free flow of information and to advance innovative means of social connectedness and engagement across the barriers of geographical space, cultural preferences, and political divides.

STUDY LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In this chapter, the author concentrated on blogging as an integral part of the overall cluster of social media. This study is not free of limitations. The author utilized a wide-angle view adopted from evolutionary futures research which provides a broad perspective but might leave aside some of the aspects that would emerge in a narrowly focused analysis. Future studies could focus on women's blogging activities across different social and cultural environments, and blogs as a tool to promote gender equality. According to the results of one analysis co-sponsored by BlogHer and Ketchum, 55 million American women or 63% of all female Internet users in the U.S. read blogs on a monthly basis (Collins, 2011). "Mommy" blogging, niche blogging, blog-based brand communities, professional blogging, and collaborative blogging could also be analyzed in detail.

Moblogging, or the ability of users to engage in blogging via a mobile device, promises to become the next big trend and is already predicted to become "the wave of the future" (Wave 5 Social Media Tracker, 2010). Mobile blogging, therefore, is another important venue for future research. According to Technorati (2010), one

fourth of all bloggers are already engaged in mobile blogging using a smartphone or a tablet device, and this shift needs further investigations. Another limitation of this study that could be addressed in future analyses is a more in-depth focus on negative forms of blogging (such as spam blogs), as well as the downsides of blogs which may include: inaccuracy of information, subjectivity, bias, lack of credibility, breaches of the unwritten ethics code, and issues associated with intellectual property rights.

CONCLUSION

Aimed to assess the future direction of blogging, this chapter surveyed academic and professional literature and examined the status quo of the global blogosphere in the context of the contemporary information landscape. Two theoretical frameworks, media convergence and cultural technology, provided a useful approach to understanding the phenomenon of blogging and its place among other social media viewed through the lens of social interaction technologies. The method of environmental scanning shed light on the current state of the information ecosystem and helped evaluate the direction that blogging, as an evolving social media phenomenon, might take in the future. The analysis of a wide range of data obtained from scholarly research, industry statistics, white papers, polls, and expert reviews indicates that the worldwide trajectory and specific patterns of adoption depend on a combination of socioeconomic, technological, political, cultural, and demographic factors.

The global blogosphere does not recognize national borders and easily transcends geographical constraints. The international adoption of blogs has been slowly eroding North America's status as the center of the global blogosphere. Currently, the growth of blogging continues in Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and the Arab world. However, international bloggers are still impeded by language barriers, the digital divide, and state firewalls in their attempts to turn the global blogosphere into "the fourth estate" of the digital age. Simultaneous translation services embedded into blog software are foreseeable in the future and promise to turn blogs into ultimate cultural technology tools. Currently, language-bound blog galaxies in the blogging universe are connected through systems of so-called "bridge" blogs, run by bloggers with the knowledge of two or more foreign languages. Global bloggers gravitate towards others through common interest and passion and create international communities such as Global Voices, a nonprofit group that with the help of volunteer translators connects 30 national blogospheres.

The results of the analysis confirm that network-based peer production and social media convergence are the driving forces behind the current transformation of blogs. Taken as a whole, the social media explosion symbolizes an important shift from the user vs. producer paradigm to the social production of content. From Barista-net to Plurk to Bloggingheads.tv, the diverse implementations of the social Web uncover the emergence of a new wave of user-centric, user-driven practices: producing, searching, sharing, publishing, and distributing information at all levels and in various modes, from synchronous to asynchronous. Advantages of participatory modes of content production have become especially visible in hyperlocal blogging which meets the demands of local communities, neighborhoods, and small groups of people. Hyperlocal news sites, for instance, present a new model for gathering and disseminating information and bridge the gap between mainstream media and grassroots initiatives. Hyperlocal blogging demonstrates a lasting trend as it reinforces the social dimension of technology through community building.

Social media are in constant Brownian motion, giving life to new features, genres, and forms. At first glance, it may resemble a random mingling of elements. However, if one takes a closer look,

there are distinct patterns that become visible in the overall development of the social media cluster. Currently, social networking is flourishing among all social media platforms, which affects all other types of social media (Wave 5 Social Media Tracker, 2010). Such developments, however, do not seal the fate of other social media applications; due to their digital nature, they easily morph and merge with one another. Online social networks compete with blogging for users and increasingly integrate new features, including growing multi-language support and higher levels of interactivity. In turn, microblogging, currently the fastest growing social media platform, is incorporating social networking aspects and evolving into social blogging.

The convergence of various social media formats such as blogs, social networks, podcasts, forums, and online chat blurs the boundaries between platforms and tools and greatly expands their overall functionality. Short-form blogs successfully merge synchronous ("push") and asynchronous ("pull") modes of communication. While Twitter leans towards social networking, Tumblr focuses on multimedia-rich content. Although it may still be too early to predict the results of the "platform wars," the convergence of social media is likely to persist in the near future. At the same time as traditional weblogs incorporate audio posts, video blogs experiment with adopting TV formats such as talk shows. Photo, video, and audio blogs converge into new types of blogging with rich multimedia features. Many hybrid forms have already emerged: for example, hyperlocal blogs and live blogs. Even though cultural critics diverge in their predictions of the future of blogging, innovative implementations of social interaction technologies offer positive prospects for further adoption of blogs in many walks of life. The participatory and inclusive nature of the underlying social interaction technologies makes blogging especially suitable for bottom-up initiatives, creativity, and innovation.

Yet, despite newspaper claims about the waning of the blogs, bloggers themselves stay optimistic about the future prospects of their favorite medium, since they believe that blogging will continue to have a lasting impact on political and social life. In fact, many bloggers plan to blog more frequently in the future (Technorati, 2010). With the world population approaching 7 billion people and the total number of blog posts nearing 1 million per day (Technorati, 2009), there is sufficient room for blogging to expand. It would be reasonable to conclude that blogging, whether in its standalone or convergent form, is here to stay and that its outlook aligns with the Internet's overall prospects. What the future holds for blogging depends on whether or not humanity will be able to solve pressing societal issues and whether or not the functionality of social media will continue to increase social capital, build community trust, and help people to advance towards the "good society." However, blogs should not be viewed as the cure-all for societal ills. The blogging revolution will continue to face the challenges of "the dark side" of human nature and inappropriate uses of technology, whether it is a propensity for gossip, spreading falsehood, defamation, cyberbullying, trolling, sock puppetry, or comment spam. Overall, the results of this study concur with the conclusion made by the McKinsey Global Institute (2011): The Internet has become an essential part of the global modern economy, society, and culture, and the way to move forward involves embracing new technologies. Among the variety of online channels powered by social interaction technologies, blogging has the potential to perform as a means to generate societal benefit, improve community, build cultural bridges, and create a more connected world.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Blogging: (a) The practice of publishing user-generated content on the Web in a journal-type format that can be easily updated and commented on; (b) The act of creating, writing, maintaining, and/or contributing to blogs.

Blogosphere: A metaphor relating to online environments that equal the sum of all blogs and the interactions between blog creators and an audience.

Blogazines: Websites similar to placeblogs but having a greater focus on human-interest stories and neighborhood profiling.

Hyperlocal Blogging: Blogging about local issues, people, and events that affect local communities and neighborhoods.

Linkblog: Links plus commentary.

Live Blogging: Posting real-time updates to a blog by a participant in or witness to an event.

Microblogging: An act of sending and receiving short (usually under 140 characters) messages over the Internet or a cellular network. Also known as short-form or mini-blogging, an example being Twitter.

Moblogging: The ability of users to engage in blogging activities via a mobile device or a tablet computer.

Noosphere: In Vladimir Vernadsky's vision, a special realm for human thoughts existing along with the geosphere and biosphere.

Participatory Media: Refers to bottom-up, grassroots ways in which media consumers are involved in the production of media content.

Placeblog: A local weblog covering social, cultural, political, and other news of a place.

Social Interaction Technologies: Internet-based tools and techniques designed to initiate, share, and maintain interactive and collaborative activities online.

Social Media Convergence: Refers to the convergence of various social media formats which blurs the boundaries between individual platforms and tools while expanding considerably on their functionality.

Web 2.0: Refers to a broad spectrum of second-generation service-oriented Internet applications, platforms, and tools.

Weibo: Microblog in Chinese.

ENDNOTES

[1] The popularity ranking was retrieved from Alexa Internet traffic measuring company (http://www.alexa.com/topsites) on August 12, 2011. The ranking was established through a three-month comparison of the number of daily visits to the site and the number of page views.

[2] Today's popular Delicious social bookmarking service is in fact an old practice that has flourished in the broadband age.

[3] BlogWorld, an official blog of the annual BlogWorld & New Media Expo, provides an illuminating timeline of major events in the history of blogging complied by Allison Boyer (2011). Available at: http://www. blogworld.com/2011/08/24/the-history-of-blogging-12-years-of-blogs/comment-page-1/. Another helpful blog entry, "A short history of blogging" written by Duncan Riley and published by The Blog Herald (March 6, 2005), is available at: http://www. blogherald.com/2005/03/06/a-short-history-of-blogging/

[4] The Weblog Awards, also known as Bloggies, were first introduced in 2001 and turned into an annual event. The Bloggies represent one of the longest running blog contests decided by public voting (http://2001.bloggi.es).

[5] These results are based on a survey of 7,200 English-language bloggers with 33% of them from the United States.

[6] Placeblogger.com offers a directory of local weblogs.

[7] The numbers are provided by the Next Door Media blog at http://www.nextdoormedia. com/.

[8] The creation of a specialized search engine, Bloglines Local (www.bloglines.com), focused on hyperlocal blog content is also indicative of a growing demand in hyperlocal blogs.

9   See Tencent corporate website at: http://www.tencent.com/en-us/cc/culture.shtml.

10 This limitation (140 characters) is due to the fact that the protocol for sending text messages over cellular networks was standardized in the mid-1980s. The length of the message was kept at 160 characters. Bearing in mind primarily mobile users, Twitter developers limited the length of tweets to 140 characters leaving the remaining 20 for the unique address and username.

11 China's Sina Weibo achieved an unprecedented level of adoption over the period of two years. Such rapid growth can be partially explained by the fact that access to Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter is currently denied to the Chinese netizens by Internet governing authorities in China. An interesting fact il-

lustrates how people in China regard this ban. In December 2010, Fang Binxing, the developer of China's Internet filtering system dubbed "the Great Firewall" and the president of Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications, started a microblog on Sina Weibo. Flooded under the wave of angry comments by the Chinese netizens, it lasted only a few days. One comment said: "Before, the GFW deprived people's right to freely access the Internet, now people will deprive your right to use a microblog. You should not regret this, should you?" (Sino Daily, 2010). For more details about the Great Firewall of China, see Tai (2006), p. 102-103.

12 The videos and transcripts are available at: http://partnersproject.com/.