Academics online: Their interests and foibles

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ABSTRACT

Faculty and staff are participating in blogs and online discussions in greater numbers, but this involvement is poorly understood. This study used content analysis to evaluate 40 online discussions hosted on The Chronicle of Higher Education website. The majority (n = 22) of discussions had as their main topics the personal and professional lives of faculty, 80% (n = 32) of the discussions did not last for more than one month, and 15% (n = 6) of the discussions experienced hijacking. Fifteen of the discussions (37.5%) had evidence of the "online disinhibition effect," with negative comments about authors, mild comments about other posters, and personal and rude comments about others in the discussion.

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1. Introduction

Given the explosion of web-based communications, what can we say about academics who engage in online discussions and blogs? What do they write about? What do they reveal about themselves? Do they have some odd quirks? And, given the time demands on faculty, what does participating in online discussions reveal about them? Fortunately, we can look into the phenomenon of academics online by reading the public forum at *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and watch what is happening.

2. Literature review

2.1. The blog phenomenon

While web-based communications have many forms, blogs and blogging have garnered the most interest and literature. The history of blogging is relatively short, having begun in 1997 by John Barger as a way to present his favorite web sites, much like social bookmarking sites do today. In 1999, Brad Graham coined the "portmanteau" word (when two words are fused into a new one) of "blog" from the two words, "web log." Despite their fairly recent creation, blogs have exploded in popularity. There were 83.1 million blogs in May 2007 (Baron, 2008) and the number had risen to 133 million blogs by January 2009 (Singer, 2009). In 2005, the number of blogs doubled approximately every

6 months, the number of posts per day totaled 1.2 million, and the number of individual postings were 50,000 per hour (Sifry, 2006). In 2007, 175,000 new blogs were added each day (Baron, 2008).

Who is blogging? The Pew Internet and American Life Project (Lenhart & Fox, 2006) found that in July 2006, 12 million American adults blogged while 57 million American adults read blogs. By January 2009, 346 million people worldwide read blogs, translating into approximately 77% of all Internet users (Singer, 2009). In a survey of U.S. bloggers, 58% were over age 35, 56% were employed full time, and 51% had household incomes over $75,000 (Technorati.com, 2008). Blogs came to the attention of many in the U.S. during the 2008 presidential election, when reports from the blogosphere were regularly included in mainstream media stories.

The forms of blogs have diversified over time. The form that is most popular is the blog maintained by a single individual who posts thoughts in reverse chronological order; this is the common perception of what a blog is. As blogging software developed, more models of blogging became possible, including personal blogs that allow others to comment, blogs that link to other blogs, joint blogs, and blogs that read more like an online discussion (called "conversational blogging"). In fact, some blogs appear in chronological order, so that the development of thinking can be appreciated. So perhaps blogs are developing in such a way as to be indistinguishable from online discussions, which this study explores as it applies research on blogging to the online discussions at the *Chronicle*.

Interestingly, the number of studies done on blogging has also exploded in number and variety. In a study of blogs during 2003 and 2004, Herring, Scheidt, Kouper, and Wright (2006) used content analysis to identify structure, content, and changes to blogs over time. Not surprisingly, the number of words posted increased over time; those posts were largely text-based and only 38% linked to other sites. Content analysis is a popular analytical tool for investigating blogs (Herring,

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Scheidt, Bonus & Wright, 2004, 2005; Papacharissi, 2004) and is also used to answer several research questions in the current study.

2.2. Online discussions in higher education

How has blogging and online discussion been used in higher education? Faculty have adopted online discussions and blogging in coursework as a way to encourage collaboration and/or involvement of students and expand opportunities for discussion (Ferdig & Trammell, 2004; Williams & Jacobs, 2004; Xie, Ke & Sharma, 2008). Research on use of blogs in higher education's arsenal of pedagogical tools is in its nascent stage, although research on the instructional use of online discussions is well-established (Meyer, 2006). However, this study focuses on faculty and staff use of online communications, rather than the instructional uses of them.

Scholars use blogging to "muse aloud about their research" (Glenn, 2003, 2), comment on a news article or indulge in "self-therapy" (Tan, 2008, p. 143). Scholars like its freedom and speed, interactions with audiences within and outside academe, playfulness and immediacy (Glenn, 2003). One scholar claimed it had some of the "best aspects of peer review built into it" (Glenn, 2003, 11). Such online communications allow students, adjuncts, and full professors to converse together and bring individuals of diverse political views together. Such positive views are not universal; a more negative view asserts that those who post to online sites indulge in "talk-radioization … [which is] personality-driven, very combative, very adversarial" (Glenn, 2003, 19). It is important to know that while originally blogs were written by a single author, blogs are increasingly authored by groups who comment on other posts.

Academic bloggers have different goals (Farrell, 2005, 3): airing grievances, pursuing nonacademic interests, expressing ideas, swapping views about their disciplines, and connecting to others at different institutions or the general public. Blogging sacrifices depth of thought for flexibility, freedom, and circulation of ideas; this is in contrast to academic publishing with its rigid requirements for prescribed research methods and long turnaround times. Blogs are an "exuberant debate of ideas" which is "sometimes signal, sometimes noise" (Farrell, 2005, 15). However, the signal may be sporadic. Efimova and de Moor (2005) investigated the rhythm of conversational blogs prepared by students and found that the first week of a discussion is active, but then it goes silent. It remains to be seen if exuberance among academics is demonstrated by a high number of posts early in the discussion (which then declines), whether posts build in number (and then continue growing or start declining), or whether the number of posts are consistent across the timeframe of the blog. Answering this question may give us the first picture or profile of the usual life of blogs.

Internet use can be like play where new personas and ideas can be tested, online community complements one's face-to-face community, and online community makes up for deficits in one's face-to-face community. Glenn (2003) and Farrell (2005) proposed that faculty who blog do so to express other parts of their personality rather than their academic persona, to discuss ideas with other academics they see only at an annual conference, to engage in a whole range of civic issues, and to explore their voice and identity as a public intellectual (Harrison, 2008). And as faculty express themselves online, it seems likely that their attitudes will — whether intentionally or not — be expressed as well. This study investigated evidence for attitudes about students, administrators, or legislators to see if these individuals revealed their attitudes in the language they used to write about these others.

2.3. Research on academics online

Meyer (2010) undertook a study of the individuals who participated in the Forums section on *The Chronicle of Higher Education* website. This study used 10 different discussions — chosen to provide different topics for analysis — to answer questions about the posters

and their writing. It used discourse analysis to investigate the "conversational scaffolding" of the postings, including identifying how frequently posters used less formal writing. In fact, given the lack of acronyms, contractions, and emoticons, these posters were likely applying formal writing skills to their postings. However, given the high concentration of the usage of "I" in the posts, it was concluded that they were writing about personal perspectives, as if to a diary, but using formal writing. The majority of posters did not use their first or last name as part of their screen names, and only a few used a screen name that was associated with their occupation ("ScienceProf"). There were only minimal occurrences of what might be construed as political views (equally divided between traditionally liberal and conservative positions), and few instances of inaccuracies that were not subsequently corrected in a later posting.

The posters in this study seemed seriously intent on discussing some topics in light of their disciplinary expertise, evaluating the worth of Wikipedia, and discussing the appropriate "discourse" — including both content and process — for an online discussion of this type. Others were playful in their word choices and wrote poems or coined new words. And yet there were also occurrences of "hijacking," where a poster would bring up ideas or topics that were not germane to the original topic, as well as personal and even rude attacks, including surprisingly derogatory remarks (surprising for persons who may have just met online). The reason for these attacks may have been the "online disinhibition effect" (Suler, 2004), which is encouraged by the freedom of online communications and the lack of inhibition created when one does not deal face-to-face with the effects of one's rudeness. In fact, when individuals played a game against a computer, brain scans revealed that the players were treating the computer as if it had intentions, goals, and feelings (Lehrer, 2009). This is because "human minds are so eager to detect other minds that they often imbue inanimate objects … with internal mental states" (Lehrer, 2009, p. 183).

These results are intriguing and worthy of further investigation. Therefore, this study identified the frequency of two behaviors (hijacking and disinhibition) in a larger sample of online discussions.

And finally, even though much of the research literature reviewed earlier was about academics who blog, Meyer (2010) concluded that the results seem to apply to the posters involved in the *Chronicle* online discussions. Although the format of online discussions is different from blogs, perhaps the research captures more information about individuals who choose to go online to communicate than about the specifics of the format through which they communicate.

Although we still have much to learn about online discussions and blogs, the present study limited its focus to answering the following research questions that are largely descriptive of this new phenomenon:

1. Which topics are represented in the discussions? Which topics garner the most and least posts? Which topics have "legs" or last a long time? Which topics have the most and least "lurkers," or readers who do not post?
2. Is there a common profile of discussion activity?
3. What attitudes do these posters display about students, administration, public, legislators, etc.?
4. How often does "hijacking" occur?
5. How often does "disinhibition" occur and can such instances be categorized?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

Qualitative methods were chosen for this study. Because online communications of academics are a relatively new area of study, our understanding is largely incomplete. This is only the second attempt to investigate this new phenomenon as it occurs on the website of a popular news source about higher education, *The Chronicle of Higher*