

Blogging Agricultural News: A New Technology to Distribute News Real-Time

Blair L. Fannin and Edith A. Chenault

Abstract

Web logging—or blogging—is gaining popularity on the Internet. Much like online diaries, blogs are short-text entries posted to a Web site in reverse chronological order. Writers can also include digital photos, audio, and video on their blogs. That popularity has not gone unnoticed. Several national publications including the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* have adopted blogs on their news Web sites. The main attraction of blogs is their immediacy—readers do not have to wait for the morning newspaper or the news on the hour. As soon as news breaks, the information can be posted to the blog. Having studied this technology's growing popularity, communications specialists at Texas A&M University Agricultural Communications decided to experiment with blogging. The 2004 Beef Cattle Short Course at Texas A&M in August 2004 presented the perfect opportunity to try Web logging and to gauge interest from journalists and nonmedia consumers. The three-day short course annually draws more than 1,000 ranchers to Texas A&M to hear presentations about developments in cattle research, technology and equipment. In the past, the volume of presentations and information at the short course limited the number of timely news stories generated and distributed from the event. The blog was used to gauge the amount of news generated by the two communications specialists assigned to cover the event and to see if it would attract journalists and nonmedia consumers. The experiment included laptop computers and wireless Internet access. Select journalists were asked to participate in the experiment. They were asked to view the blog and offer feedback. A site meter also kept statistics on the number of visits to the blog.

Introduction

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reverse chronological order. Writers can also include digital photos, audio, and video on their blogs.

That popularity has not gone unnoticed. Several national publications, including the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, have adopted blogs on their news Web sites. Lev Grossman of *Time* magazine said, "Over the past five years, blogs have gone from an obscure and, frankly, somewhat nerdy fad to a genuine alternative to mainstream news outlets, a shadow media empire that is rivaling networks and newspapers in power and influence" (as cited in Grossman, 2004).

Blogs were in the spotlight for the first time at the 2004 Democratic National Convention as media credentials were issued to 35 bloggers. These bloggers, some who had no journalistic background, offered opinions, facts, and other relevant information posted to their Web logs instantly.

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Having studied its growing popularity, Texas A&M University Agricultural Communications specialists decided to experiment with blogging. Coauthor Fannin had begun a personal blog in January 2004 at blogger.com, a free blogging provider.

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Select journalists were asked to participate in the experiment. They were Karl Wolfschohl, *Progressive Farmer*; Richard Smith, *Waco Tribune-Herald*; Beverly Moseley, *Land & Livestock Post*; Lori Cope, *Country World News*; Donnis Baggett, *The Bryan-College Station Eagle*; and Joe Roybal, *BEEF magazine*. They were asked to view the blog and offer feedback. A site meter also kept statistics on the number of Web visits to the page.

Methods/Process

To blog the event, the authors established a blog at a free service: <http://agnewsblog.blogspot.com>. Also, a free site meter—made available by <http://www.sitemeter.com>—was added. This tool helped track site visitors, domain registrations and time zones. A link to the blog was also placed on

the official beef short course Web site. The beef short course conference logo was added to the site to enhance the blog's identity.

The blog was edited to include a schedule of events and a link to the site's Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feed. An RSS feed is an eXtensible Markup Language file (XML) that includes a site's news content. Consumers who have RSS news reader software programs running on their desktops can subscribe to the RSS feed, receiving notifications when fresh content has been added to a site.

Equipment used included two departmental laptops with wireless capabilities, PC (IBM ThinkPad) and Macintosh (Apple Powerbook) platforms, and an Olympus digital audio recorder.

A campus map helped locate the several wireless hotspots at the location of the short course. The bottom floor site was a student dining area. Wireless signal strength was strong throughout the event. Blogging could be done quickly and efficiently, without a long walk back to agricultural communications offices for access to computers and the Internet.

The authors picked short course presentations to cover and met during midmorning breaks to edit and post content. The authors took turns editing each other's copy and then posted their entries.

Blogger.com offers a simple Web interface to post entries. Once the user has entered the correct login identification and password, another Web interface appears. The user is given an option of entering a subject title and alternate link. A text area is provided for writing the body copy, with options given for bold, italic and hyperlinking text.

The user is allowed to preview the entry before clicking the "submit" button to post the entry to the Web site.

At least one external Web link was included in a blog entry. According to Mark Glaser in an article on Web logs in the newsroom, "... news sites should not fear that they'll lose tons of traffic by linking to outside sites from their blogs. Keep the readers in mind, and try to be of service to them. That will bring them back on a regular basis" (*Online Journalism Review*, 2003).

Audio interviews were imported from the digital audio recorder to iTunes loaded on the Apple Powerbook. The audio file was then compressed from an .AIFF file to an .mp3 file. The audio files were all captured in one take with the subject. The interviews typically were six to 14 minutes in length. The audio interviews were hosted on an alternate server, which is an Apple Macintosh G3 computer used in coauthor Fannin's office for development exercises.

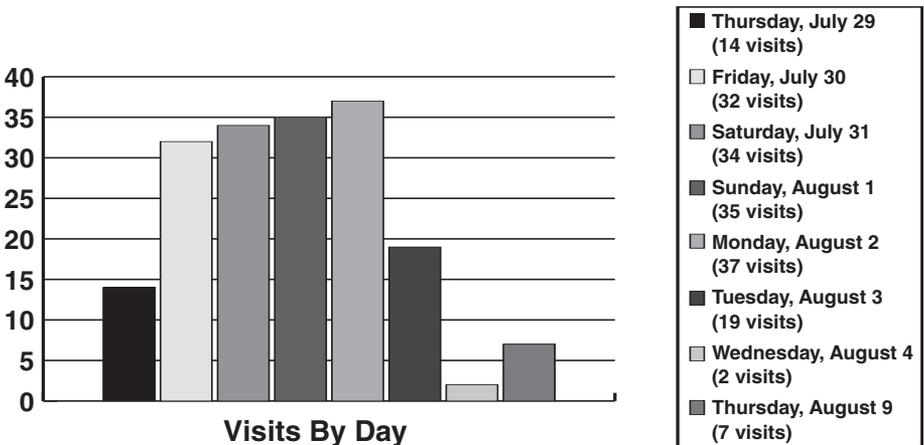
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Results/Outcomes

Little advance publicity of the site was done except for personal contacts with journalists and coworkers and the link on the Beef Cattle Short Course Web page. The initial idea was to use blogging only as an experiment and test the new technology before trying it on a larger scale.

A free site meter, provided by <http://www.sitemeter.com>, kept track of site visits. It tracked 187 visits and tabulated 245 page views. There were 37 site visitors on August 2, the first day of the short course. Of those visits, 4% were from Germany and 1% from Australia, indicating our audience reached internationally. (See Table 1.)

Table 1. *Visits by Day*

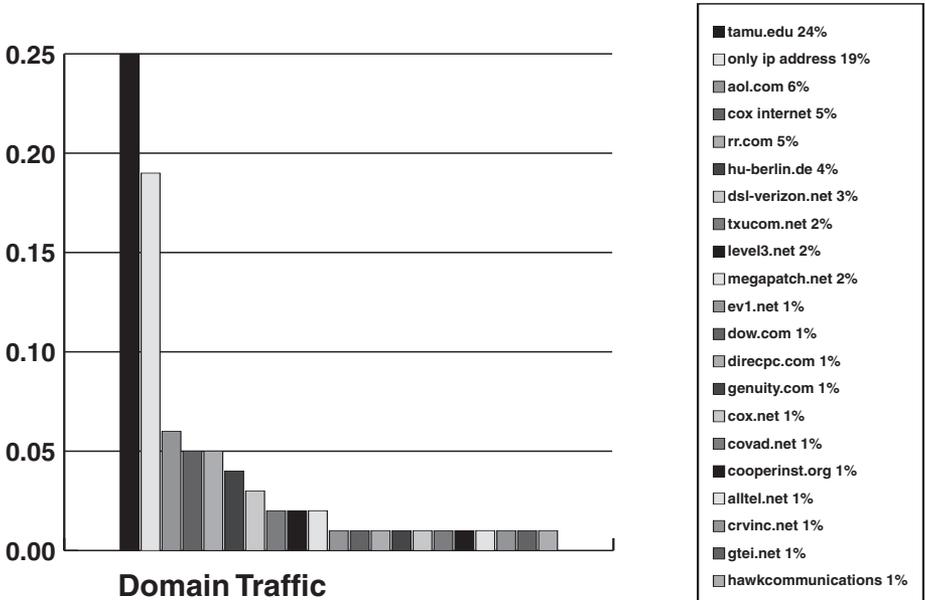


The site meter also tallied visits by domain. In addition to the invited journalists, agricultural communications writers were asked to monitor the site and offer feedback. Site visitors also included those redirected from the short course Web site.

Twenty-four percent of the domain traffic was from tamu.edu, but also included visitors from the university's animal science department. Nineteen percent of the site visitors were external visitors with their own IP addresses.

AOL.com represented 6% of the domain traffic, while Cox Internet and Roadrunner Internet service providers represented 5% of the domain traffic. (See Table 2.)

Table 2. Domain Tracking



The site meter also tracked operating systems. Fifty-seven percent of the operating systems were Windows XP, while 18% were Windows 2000. Windows 98 represented 8%, while Windows Millenium (5%), Windows NT (4%), Macintosh Power PC (4%), Mac OS X (2%), Windows Server 2003 (1%), and Windows 95 (1%) rounded out the list. (See Table 3.)

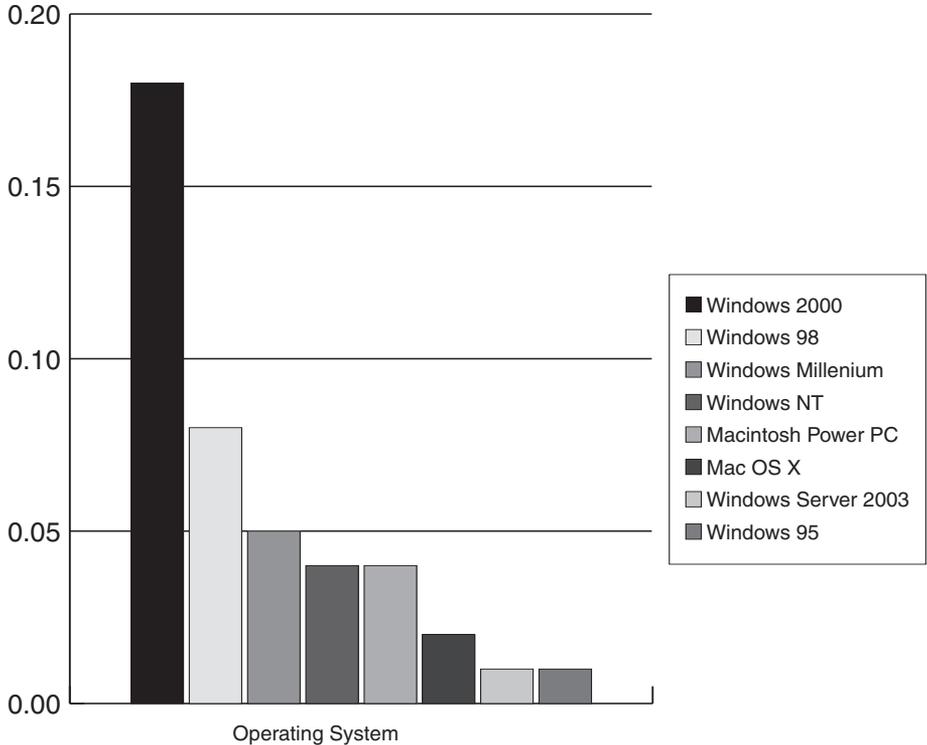
Journalists and coworkers offered feedback while visiting the site. Richard Smith, environmental reporter with the *Waco Tribune-Herald*, said, "News-wise the main features such as what to look for in buying a bull or rebuilding a bull herd all seem like they could be attractive stories for a farm and ranch writer, even though I only broach those subjects from an environmental standpoint. Overall, the blog looks like it could be a very useful communication vessel on several levels."

Lori Cope, an editor with *Country World*, an agricultural publication, said, "I didn't even know what a 'blog' was; but now I know it's a good thing. You guys did a great job covering the events and 'blogging' the information."

After completing the experiment, the conclusion is that blogging will be a useful tool for future news events. Blogging a news event offers many advantages: instant posting of news and information; audio interviews and

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Table 3. *Operating Systems*



digital photos incorporated into the Web log; and e-mail addresses for reader feedback and posting comments.

The site was set up so readers could post entries. This feature allows the audience to be drawn into the conversation of the blog. A reader could tip the reporter on a news angle that had not yet been covered while attending the news event, or ask a question the reporter may not have considered.

Blogging has set a new stage for reader feedback. In the past, newspapers and magazines have printed their news and delivered it in “fish-wrapping.”

With blogs, online readers can instantly post feedback, and the coverage of a news event can change instantly rather than waiting for the next day’s news cycle. Blogs can also draw more traffic to other Web sites. Using links to news articles or other information on the Web, blogs send more visitors to sites.

Plans to “blog” future events including short courses, agricultural sum-
mits, and Extension field days are under way.

About the Authors

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