

Blog Survey: Expectations of Privacy and Accountability

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[Background information on the survey](#)

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Formerly viewed as a marginal activity restricted to the technically savvy, blogging is slowly becoming more of a mainstream phenomenon on the Internet. Thanks to much media hype and some high profile blog sites, these online journals have captured the public's imagination. As novice authors plunge into the thrilling world of blog publishing, they soon realize that publicly writing about one's life and interests is not as simple as it might seem at first. As they become prolific writers, more bloggers find themselves having to deal with issues of privacy and liability. Accounts of bloggers either hurting friends' feelings or losing jobs because of materials published on their sites are becoming more frequent.

Here we report the findings from an online survey conducted between January 14th and January 21st, 2004. During that time, 486 respondents answered questions about their blogging practices and their expectations of privacy and accountability for the entries they publish online:

- the great majority of bloggers identify themselves on their sites: 55% of respondents provide their real names on their blogs; another 20% provide some variant of the real name (first name only, first name and initial of surname, a pseudonym friends would know, etc.)
- 76% of bloggers do not limit access (i.e. readership) to their entries in any way
- 36% of respondents have gotten in trouble because of things they have written on their blogs
- 34% of respondents know other bloggers who have gotten in trouble with family and friends
- 12% of respondents know other bloggers who have gotten in legal or professional problems because of things they wrote on their blogs
- when blogging about people they know personally: 66% of respondents almost never asked permission to do so; whereas, only 9% said they never blogged about people they knew personally.
- 83% of respondents characterized their entries as personal ramblings whereas 20% said they mostly publish lists of useful/interesting links (respondents could check multiple options for this answer). This indicates that the nature of blogs might be changing from being mostly lists of links to becoming sites that contain more personal stories and commentaries.
- the frequency with which a blogger writes highly personal things is positively and significantly correlated to how often they get in trouble because of their postings; ($r = 0.3$, $p < 0.01$); generally speaking, people have gotten in trouble both with friends and family as well as employers.
- there is no correlation between how often a blogger writes about highly personal things and how concerned they are about the persistence of their entries
- checking one's access log files isn't correlated to how well a blogger feels they know their audience
- despite believing that they are liable for what they publish online (58% of respondents believed they were highly liable), in general, bloggers do not believe people could sue them for what they have written on their blogs.

The findings in this survey suggest that blogging is a world in flux where social norms are starting to flourish. For instance, many bloggers reveal the names of companies and products when they blog about them, except when they write about a company for which they currently work or have worked in the past. More bloggers are becoming sensitive about revealing the full names of friends on postings as well. But for all of the careful publishing guidelines that are starting to evolve, bloggers still do not feel like they know their audience. For the most part, they have no control over who reads their postings. The study also shows that bloggers usually have some idea of their “core” audience (readers who post comments on the site) without really knowing who the rest of their readers are – in many cases, this latter group makes up the majority of their readers.

When confronted with questions of defamation and legal liability, respondents in this survey paint a conflicting picture. In general, they believe that they are liable for what they publish online. However, bloggers in this study were not concerned about the persistent nature of what they publish – which tends to be a major aspect of liability – nor did they believe someone would sue them for things they had written on their blogs. Moreover, 75% of respondents said they have edited the contents of their entries in the past. Even though most respondents explained that they usually edit typos and grammatical errors, 35% of respondents said they had edited for content as well: entries they decided were too personal, entries they thought were “mean”, some respondents mentioned having gone back to entries to obfuscate names of people. These results reveal a certain naiveté in how most bloggers think about persistence and how it operates in networked environments such as the net, where information is constantly cached. As blogs become more pervasive and their audiences grow, the ever-persistent nature of entries and the direct link to defamation and liability are likely to become even more of a burning issue.

SURVEY CAVEATS AND LIMITATIONS

The results presented here are based on an online survey, which ran for seven days (from January 14th to January 21st, 2004). During that time, 492 people responded to the online questionnaire. Out of those responses, 486 were selected for data analysis – the remaining 6 responses were incomplete and, therefore, were disregarded.

Respondents to this survey were not selected on a random basis. Announcements for the online survey were posted to mailing lists within MIT as well as on a few high-traffic blogs published by people known to the author of this survey. The viral nature of blogs meant that the links to the survey page quickly spread to many other blogs. Nevertheless, this does not qualify as a random sample of the blogger population and, as such, the results from this survey cannot be generalized to the entire blogging community; instead, these results are representative of the state of affairs in certain portions of the blogging world.

STUDY POPULATION

The charts and tables in this section provide an introductory snapshot of the population of respondents in this study. As table 1 indicates, the majority of participants (63%) is male. Even though a few of the popular blogging sites attract mostly teenagers, our respondents tended to be older, with almost half of them (46.3%) having between 21 and 30 years of age [Table 2]. The overwhelming majority of participants (78.6%) were Caucasian [Table 5]. Perhaps not surprisingly, given that the survey questionnaire was available only in English and that announcements for the survey were posted to mailing lists in a couple of American universities, 67% of the respondents reported they lived in the United States [Table 6]. The education level of respondents was quite high: 59% had been to college/university, and an additional 31.1% had attended graduate school [Table 3]. Finally, most participants in this study (67%) have been blogging for over one year, with 36% having blogged for over two years [Table 4].

1. female:	36%
2. male:	63%
3. undisclosed:	1%

Table 1: Sex distribution of respondents.

1. elementary school	0.2%
2. high school	9.7%
3. college/university	59%

1. below 20	10.5%
2. 21 - 30	46.3%
3. 31 - 40	28.2%
4. 41 - 50	11.3%
5. 51 - 60	3.1%
6. above 61	0.4%

Table 2: Age distribution of participants.

1. < 3 months	6%
2. 3 - 6 months	9%
3. 6 months - 1 year	18%

4. masters/professional.	26.2%
degree	4.9%
5. phd	

4. 1 - 2 years	31%
5. > 2 years	36%

Table 3: Education level of participants.

Table 4: Length of time blogging.

1. African	0.4%
2. African-American	1.0%
3. Asian	4.1%
4. Asian-American	3.3%
5. Australian	1.4%
6. Caucasian	78.6%
7. Latino/Hispanic	2.1%
8. Native American	0.6%
9. Pacific Islander	0.4%
10. Other	7.8%

Table 5: Ethnicity of respondents.

Live in the United States		Live outside the United States	
Alabama	1	Australia	10
Arizona	2	Austria	1
Arkansas	1	Bangladesh	1
California	56	Belgium	1
Colorado	5	Bulgaria	1
Connecticut	2	Canada	23
D.C.	3	Denmark	2
Florida	6	England	38
Georgia	8	Estonia	2
Idaho	2	Finland	1
Illinois	13	France	4
Indiana	4	Germany	1
Iowa	1	India	4
Kansas	3	Indonesia	1
Kentucky	2	Iran	1
Maine	1	Ireland	4
Maryland	5	Israel	1
Massachusetts	40	Italy	4
Michigan	3	Japan	10
Minnesota	5	Malaysia	1
Missouri	5	Netherlands	1
Montana	1	New Zealand	2
Nevada	1	Norway	1
New Hampshire	3	Pakistan	1
New Jersey	4	Portugal	7
New Mexico	3	Romania	1
New York	27	Scotland	3
North Carolina	8	Singapore	2
Ohio	4	South Africa	2
Oregon	14	South Korea	1
Pennsylvania	12	Spain	6
Rhode Island	1	Sweden	2
South Carolina	2	Switzerland	3
Tennessee	7	Thailand	1
Texas	15	Tunisia	1
Utah	2	Venezuela	1
Virginia	6	Wales	2

Washington	18		
West Virginia	1		
Wisconsin	6		
U.S. (in general)	23		
U.S. total		326	Non-U.S. total 148
Undisclosed location	12		

Table 6: Current place of residency of respondents.

RESPONSES

5. Do you identify yourself on your blog (i.e. is your real name clear on the site?)

1. Yes	54.62%	*****
2. No	19.10%	*****
3. on some blogs, but not all	6.37%	*****
4. it is a bit more complicated	19.92%	*****

6. How would you characterize the kinds of entries you publish on your blog(s)? Please check all that apply:

1. personal ramblings	403
2. academic brainstorm	190
3. professional brainstorm	227
4. political opinions	245
5. hobby	292
6. gossip	93
7. other	141

“Other” included:

- lists of links
- creative writing
- writings about social issues
- writings about local places (i.e. a blog about New York, Greece, etc.)
- humorous writings
- posting of pictures; picture blogs
- writings about religion
- critiques of movies, books, music
- surveys and quizzes

7. How private are the things you write about on your blog? ("private" means either personal or confidential)

1. extremely	3.70%	*****
2. ..	14.58%	*****
3. ..	30.18%	*****
4. ..	32.44%	*****
5. not at all	19.10%	*****

8. How often have you considered whether something was too personal to write about in your blog?

1. always	19.55%	*****
2. ..	41.56%	*****
3. ..	20.99%	*****
4. ..	12.55%	*****
5. never	5.35%	*****

9. In general, when you write things about people you know personally in your blog:

a) do you ask them permission to do so?

1. always	2.67%	****
2. ..	6.57%	*****
3. ..	15.61%	*****
4. ..	25.87%	*****
5. never	40.45%	*****
6. never write about people I know personally	8.83%	*****

b) do you reveal their names?

1. always	4.93%	*****
2. ..	16.22%	*****
3. ..	27.72%	*****
4. ..	21.97%	*****
5. never	20.12%	*****
6. never write about people I know personally	9.03%	*****

Strategies for not fully revealing the names of friends and family members on blogs included disclosing:

- a person's first name only
- initials, or first name and an initial for the person's surname
- pseudonyms, or nicknames
- the nature of relationship; e.g. "my daughter", "my father", etc.

Other naming conventions included:

- giving out the person's name if they have an online persona; for instance, if someone is a blogger, respondents will link back to the person's blog and use the same name or handle the blogger has chosen to use for themselves. This is also true of people who are not bloggers but who have some other kind of Web presence (home pages, for instance)

- several participants explained that, if they have good things to say about their friends and family friends they will, for the most part, reveal their names; if, however, they post negative comments about a person, they will often conceal this person's name

10. In general, when you write things about companies/products in your blog:

a) do you ask them permission to do so?

1. always	0.62%	*
2. ..	0.62%	*
3. ..	1.85%	**
4. ..	5.76%	***
5. never	83.74%	*****
6. I never write about companies/products	7.41%	*****

b) do you reveal their names?

1. always	44.44%	*****
2. ..	27.37%	*****
3. ..	13.99%	*****
4. ..	3.50%	****
5. never	3.09%	****
6. I never write about companies/ products	7.61%	*****

Reasons for revealing the names of companies on blog postings:

- providing a service to other people; that is, informing potential consumers about products
- if the products are good, the company deserves the credit

Reasons for not revealing the name of a company:

- if the company is the blogger's current employer
- if the company is a former employer
- if the blogger is interviewing with the company

11. How well do you feel you know your blog's audience?

1. extremely	10.49%	*****
2. ..	35.60%	*****
3. ..	32.10%	*****
4. ..	15.23%	*****
5. not at all	6.58%	*****

Bloggers in this survey relied on the dismal indicators of past actions (access logs, comments, and trackbacks) in order to form a mental picture of who is reading their postings. This lack of identity and presence cues causes distorted views of readership to emerge; for one thing, bloggers start perceiving the people whose presence is more tangibly obvious (commentators, for instance) as their entire audience.

a) Core versus Periphery

As it became clear from respondents' essay answers, a significant portion of the people who replied that they felt they knew their audience "fairly well" actually meant they knew their core audience well, that is, they knew those few people who are frequent readers and who, a lot of times, leave comments on their blogs.

b) Performing for an audience

Even though blogs have been hailed as the ultimate venue for personal expression; a world that is all about the self, it turns out that blogs are not necessarily that egocentric. In this survey, various respondents expressed the pressure that comes with having an audience. Even in its current elusive form, a blog's audience can become such a powerful element of the writing action that it can affect what the blogger chooses to write about.

c) Content-Based, Self-Selective Audiences

Sometimes authors perceive their audience as being formed solely of people with similar interests. They assume that, because they write a lot about a certain topic (or a certain group of topics), their readers are exclusively people who are interested in those topics.

12. How often do you look at the log of who has accessed your blog?

1. extremely often	19.96%	*****
2. ..	26.75%	*****
3. ..	19.55%	*****
4. ..	11.32%	*****
5. never	9.05%	*****
6. logs not available	13.37%	*****

13. If you were aware of all the people who read your blog, how likely is it that you would become more careful about what you write?

1. very likely	7.41%	*****
2. ..	17.28%	*****
3. ..	17.08%	*****
4. ..	22.63%	*****
5. not likely at all	32.92%	*****
6. N/A	2.67%	****

14. How often have you written highly personal things on your blog?

1. all the time	6.79%	*****
2. ..	18.31%	*****
3. ..	22.63%	*****
4. ..	33.13%	*****
5. never	19.14%	*****

15. How often have your gotten in trouble for anything you wrote on your blog?

1. all the time	0.82%	*
2. ..	4.73%	****
3. ..	8.23%	*****
4. ..	22.22%	*****
5. never	63.99%	*****

16. How much do the comments that people write on your blog affect the entries you write?

1. extremely	4.12%	*****
2. ..	16.26%	*****
3. ..	26.34%	*****
4. ..	23.87%	*****
5. not at all	21.40%	*****
6. leaving comments is not an option on my blogs	8.02%	*****

17. Are you surprised when someone you meet in person says they have read your blog?

1. extremely	20.78%	*****
2. ..	24.49%	*****
3. ..	13.37%	*****
4. ..	7.61%	*****
5. not at all	6.79%	*****
6. it has never happened to me	26.95%	*****

18. Does it bother you that the things you publish on your blog will be available online for a long time?

1. extremely	0.62%	*
2. ..	5.14%	****
3. ..	9.67%	*****
4. ..	20.37%	*****
5. not at all	64.20%	*****

19. How liable do you think you are for the things you write on your blog?

1. extremely	31.48%	*****
2. ..	27.37%	*****
3. ..	21.81%	*****
4. ..	9.47%	*****
5. not at all	9.88%	*****

20. Do you think people could sue you for things you have written on your blog?

1. Yes	25.10%	*****
2. No	74.90%	*****

21. Have you ever erased (or edited) something you had published on you blog?

1. Yes	74.69%	*****
2. No	25.31%	*****

22. Do you know any bloggers who have gotten in trouble with friends or family for things they posted on their blogs?

1. Yes	34.16%	*****
2. No	65.84%	*****

23. Do you know any bloggers who have gotten in trouble with the law (have been sued, or had their entries subpoenaed by lawyers) because of their blogs?

1. Yes	11.73%	*****
2. No	88.27%	*****

24. Have your blogging habits changed over time?

1. Yes	65.84%	*****
2. No	34.16%	*****

25. Do you do anything to limit who can read what you post?

1. Yes	23.66%	*****
2. No	76.34%	*****

If you would like more information about the results from this survey or about how the survey was conducted, contact Fernanda Viégas at blog-survey@media.mit.edu