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Ethics in Blogging

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Authors:
Andy Koh
Alvin Lim
Ng Ee Soon
Benjamin H. Detenber
Mark Cenite

Correspondence:
Andy Koh
Phone: (65) 9769 5600
Email: S8015106C@ntu.edu.sg

Benjamin Detenber
Phone: (65) 6790 5809
Email: tdetenber@ntu.edu.sg

Singapore Internet Research Centre
School of Communication and Information
Nanyang Technological University
Singapore 637718
www.ntu.edu.sg/sci/sirc/

Summary

Blogging has become an influential phenomenon that is gaining recognition and acknowledgement by the media, scholars, and government officials throughout the world. Recent events that have highlighted the importance of weblogs include the Asian tsunami disaster, the Iraq war, and September 11 attack. In Singapore, blogs have become increasingly prominent as a means of commenting upon issues of public significance, including the National Kidney Foundation incident and the Integrated Resort debate.

For good or ill, blogs have become an important source of news and commentary. However, bloggers are often criticized for not being "professional journalists," with the assumption being that they have neither the training nor the judgment necessary to present news and opinions that could affect public opinion. One of the most significant charges against bloggers is that they have lower standards, and do not keep to ethical standards of newsreporting.

In order to get a better understanding of what ethical guidelines bloggers do follow, students and faculty from the Singapore Internet Research Centre at Nanyang Technological University's School of Communication and Information completed an international survey of bloggers, focusing on several key questions, including who blogs, what is the most prominent type of blogging, and the ethical guidelines that bloggers value.

Our findings indicate that 73% of the bloggers surveyed said that their weblogs are personal while the remaining 27% said that their weblogs are non-personal. Further investigation of, these two groups revealed many significant differences between personal and non-personal bloggers. *Personal weblogs* are those that resemble an online diary or personal journal, while *Non-personal weblogs* are those that focus on specific topics and content, usually intended for larger audiences.

Key Findings:

There are significant differences between personal and non-personal bloggers, in terms of demographics, readership, topics, and most importantly, ethical standards.

- Non-personal bloggers are typically older males, with more formal years of education than personal bloggers.
- Non-personal bloggers tend to have more readers, update their weblogs more frequently, and spend more time on their weblogs.
- Non-personal bloggers' reasons for blogging, the people whom they write about, and their primary intended audience are also different from those of personal bloggers.
- Personal bloggers believe that *minimizing harm* is more important than do non-personal bloggers.
- Both types of bloggers believe *attribution* is the most important and *accountability* the least important.
- Neither type of bloggers is enthusiastic about a "blogging code of ethics."

The findings in our study indicated that personal and non-personal bloggers are indeed distinct groups of bloggers. Their demographics, blogging experiences and habits, as well as ethical beliefs and practices are different. In addition, bloggers currently do not see a strong need for a blogging code of ethics. A code of ethics may be more valued and adhered to when bloggers themselves see a stronger need for it. Also, the four ethical principles have different relevance to personal and non-personal bloggers and researchers should take that into consideration if they attempt to devise new codes of ethics for blogging.

Introduction

Weblogs are defined as "frequently modified web pages in which dated entries are listed in reverse chronological sequence" (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus et al., 2004, p. 1). A weblog typically consists of posts that are usually time-stamped, vary in length and frequency of updates, and are organised in reverse chronology so that readers always see the most recent post first (Bausch et al., 2002; Blood, 2002; Mortensen & Walker, 2002; Trammel & Gasser, 2004).

Since 1999, weblogs have proliferated following the development of user-friendly weblog publishing services such as Live Journal, Blogger.com and Pitas. Weblogs are still growing, and growing even larger. A study conducted in June 2002 found 2% of Internet users in the United States had created a weblog (Pew, 2005). Since then, the percentage soared to 7% in late 2004, corresponding to approximately 8 million weblogs. In the same year, the number of weblog readers rocketed by 58% to 32 million Americans or 27% of Internet users in the country. And all these had not taken into account weblogs from other parts of the world.

Blogging has become an influential phenomenon that is gaining recognition and acknowledgement by the media, scholars, and government officials throughout the world. Recent events that have highlighted the importance of weblogs include the Asian tsunami disaster, the Iraq war, and September 11 attack.

Various research studies have been done on weblogs, from the classification of weblogs (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2004; Trammel & Gasser, 2004) to the purpose of blogging (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, and Swartz, 2004). Yet few studies have touched on the attitudinal and behavioural aspects of ethics behind this activity. This is an important area for us to understand as how bloggers think and act may have tremendous impacts on others and themselves.

From the literature on blogging, we identified two distinct groups of bloggers: personal and non-personal. Personal weblogs are those that resemble an online diary or personal journal. Non-personal weblogs are those that focus on specific topics and content, usually intended for larger audiences. In addition to different types of content and intended audiences, these two types of bloggers are likely to have different perspectives on the functions and impact their blogs have which may in turn influence their ethics in blogging.

From the literature on Internet ethics (e.g., netiquette and nethics), blogging ethical codes, and journalism ethics, four underlying ethical principles that are relevant to blogging were identified. They are truth telling, accountability, minimizing harm, and attribution (ACM, 1992; Blood, 2002; Dube, 2003; Herrscher, 2002; Rinaldi, 1998; Scheuermann and Taylor, 1997; Shea, 1994; Strentz, 2002). Truth telling includes underlying concepts such as honesty, fairness, equality and completeness in reporting. Accountability involves being answerable to the public, honesty in one's work, revealing conflicts of interest, and bearing consequences of one's actions. The third principle is minimizing harm (done to others) by blogging. It includes issues of privacy, confidentiality, flaming, consideration of other people's feelings, and

respecting diverse cultures and underprivileged groups. Attribution involves issues such as plagiarism, honouring intellectual property rights, and giving proper credit to sources. These four principles form the structural framework in the design of our survey questions relating to bloggers' ethical beliefs and practices.

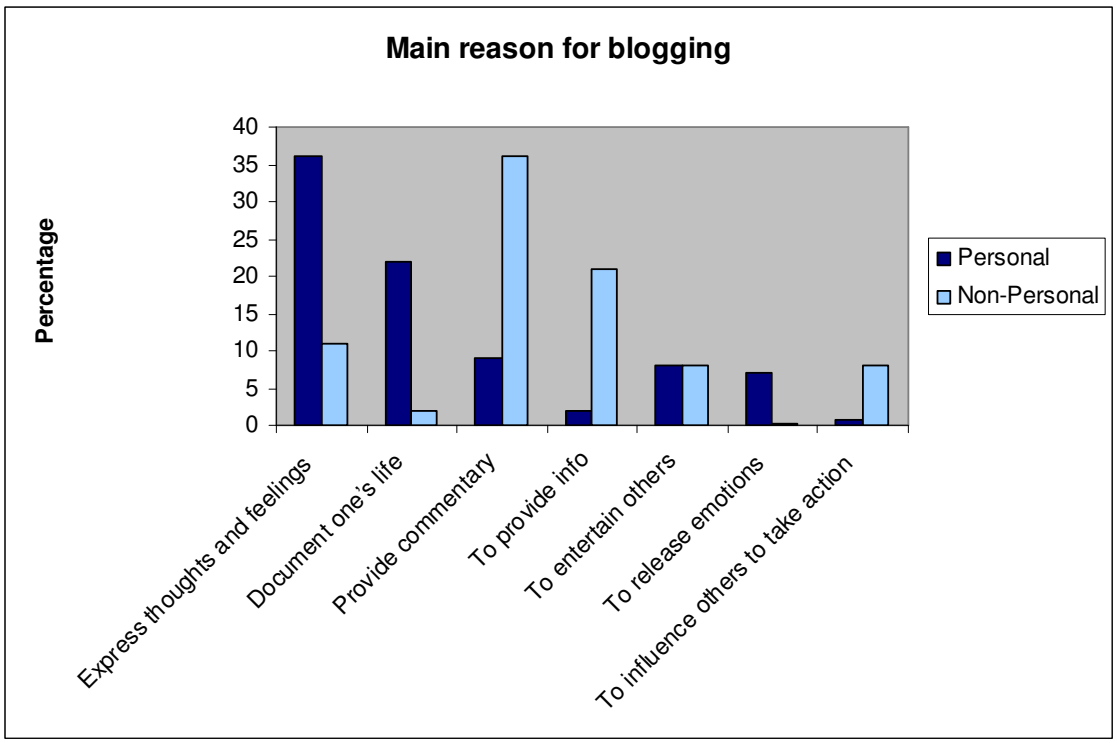
This study seeks to explore the differences between personal and non-personal bloggers through their demographics, blogging experience and habits, as well as their ethical beliefs and practices in blogging. Additionally, we looked into whether bloggers see a need for a blogging ethics code.

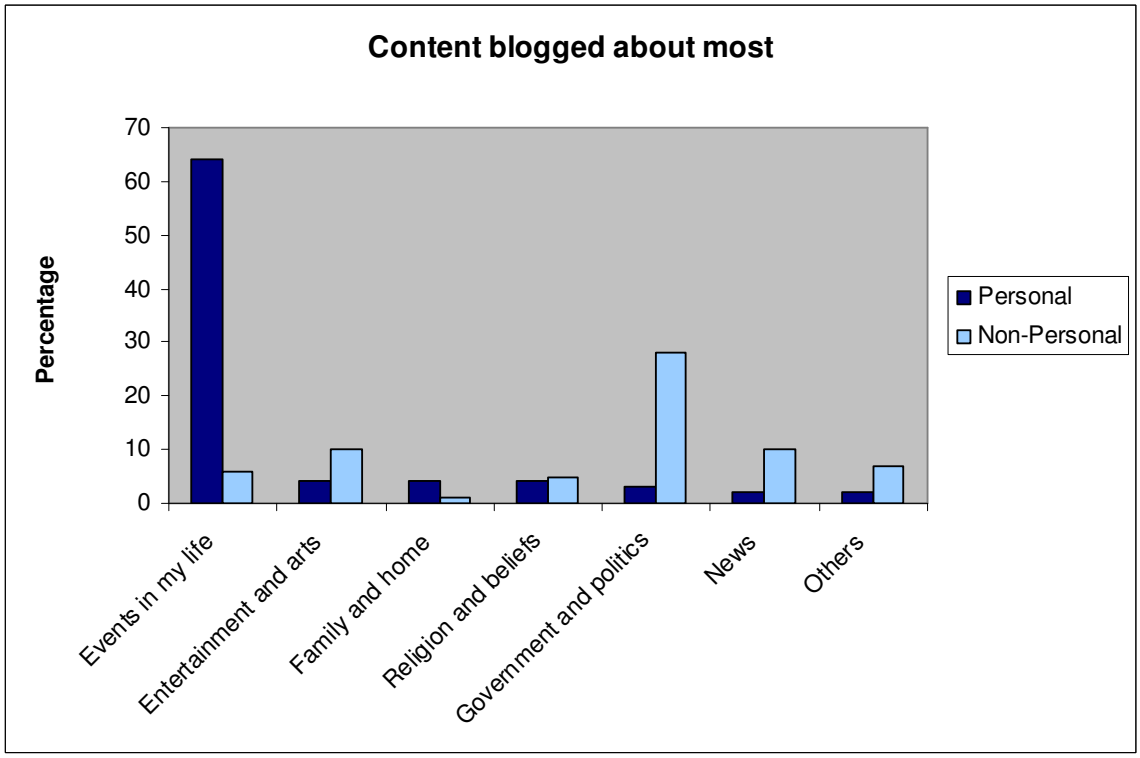
Method

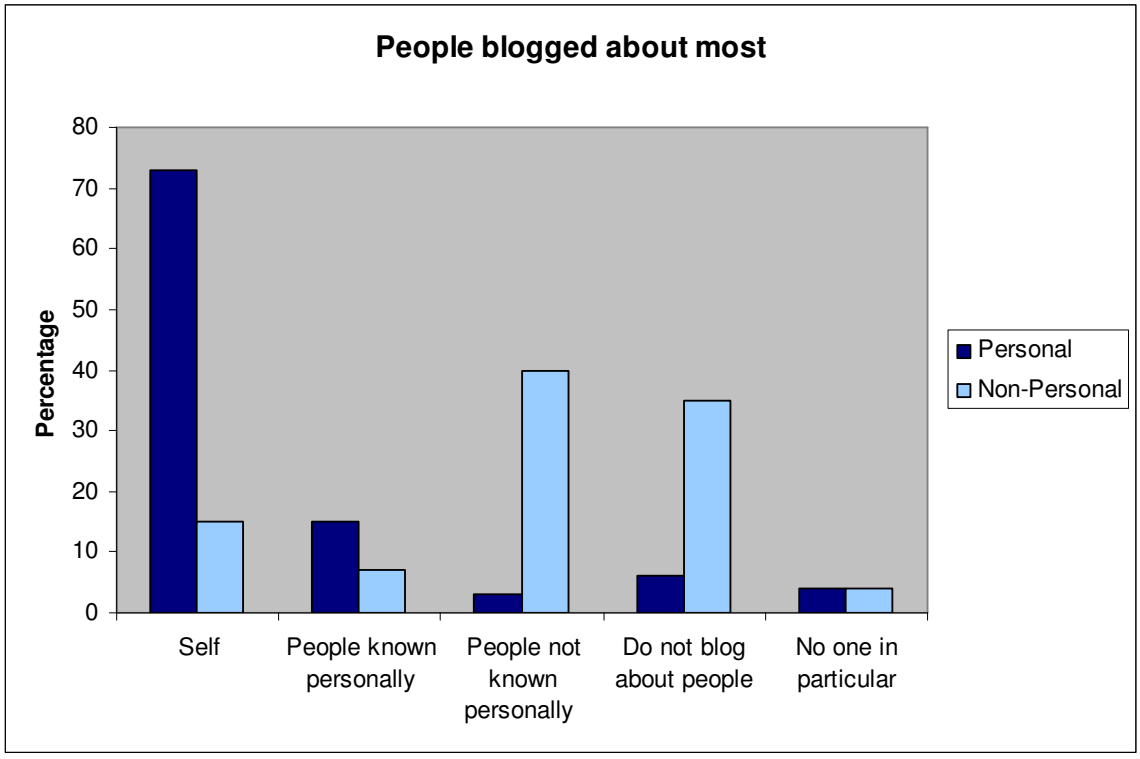
A purposive stratified sampling method that selected weblogs according to the distribution sizes of various weblog service providers was used, augmented by snowball sampling. Bloggers' e-mail addresses were retrieved from their weblogs where each weblog was randomly selected using freely available weblog generating services such as Blo.gs, Xanga, etc. Participation was voluntary and all information was kept confidential. A total of 6,000 e-mails were sent by the researchers over a period of three weeks from 6 February to 1 March, 2005. After culling multiple surveys from the same individual 1,224 completed surveys were used for analysis.

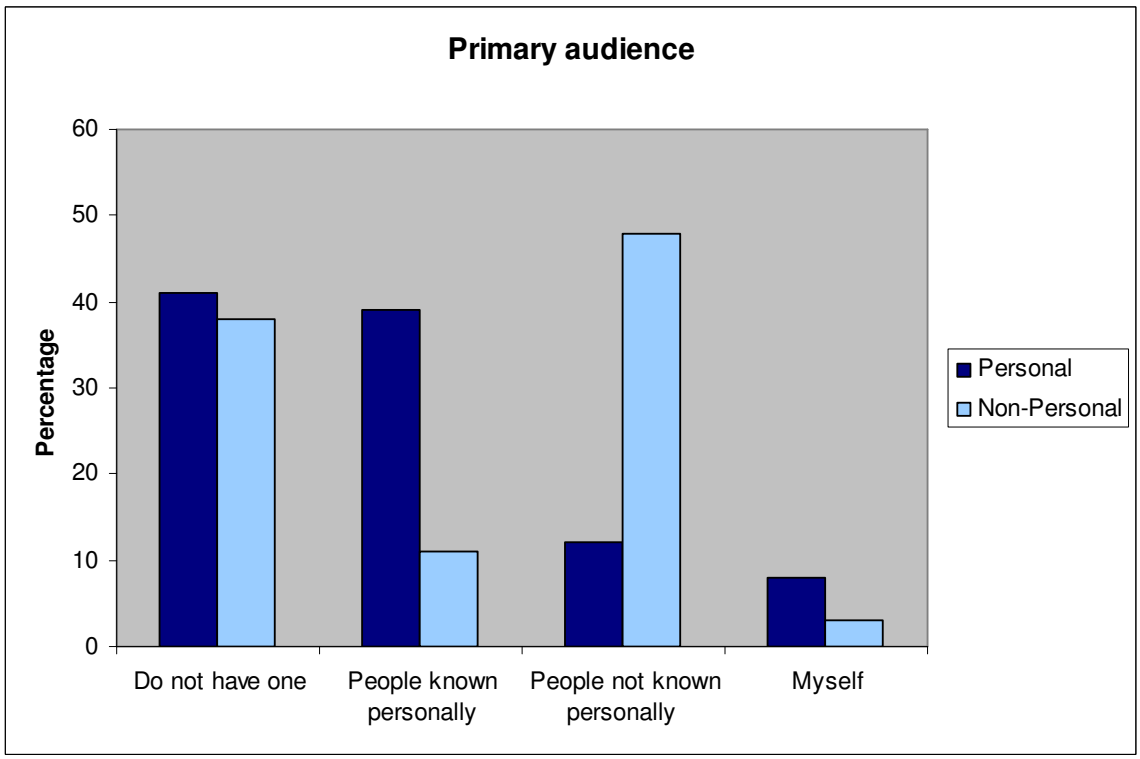
Findings and Discussion

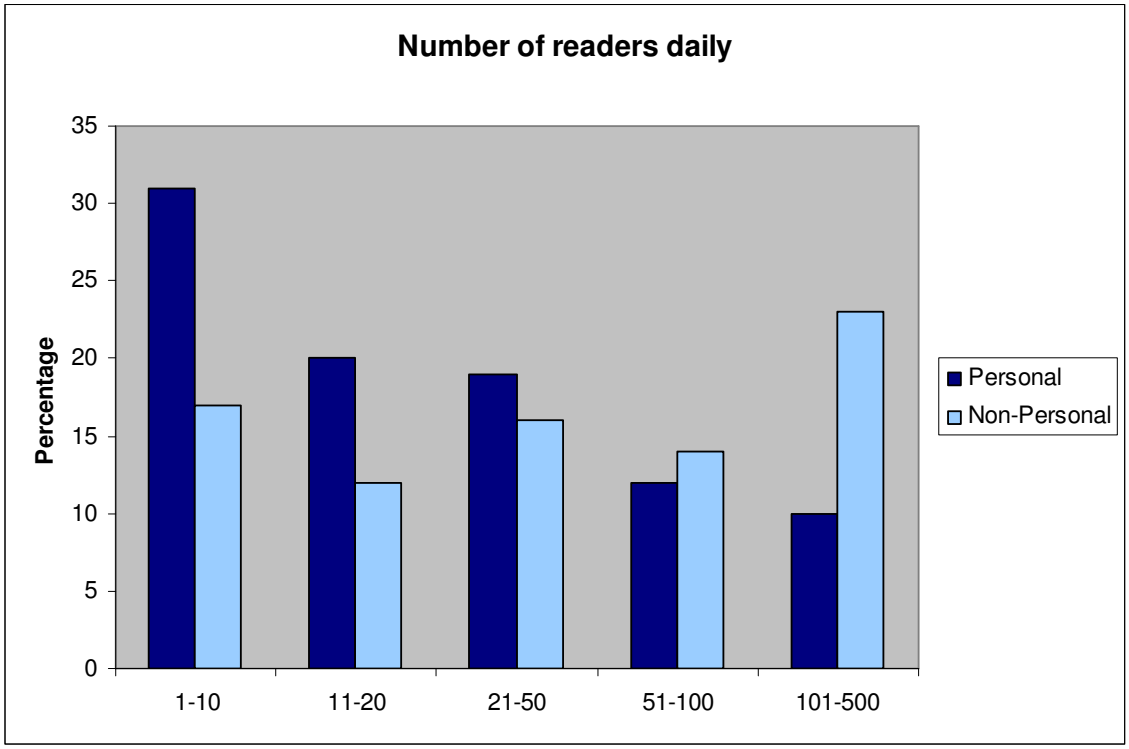
Of the 1,224 bloggers who completed the survey, personal bloggers made up 73% while non-personal bloggers were the remaining 27%. The results of our survey indicate that personal and non-personal bloggers are indeed different in their blogging experiences, habits, and demographics. The graphs below reflect some of the more distinctive differences between the two groups.

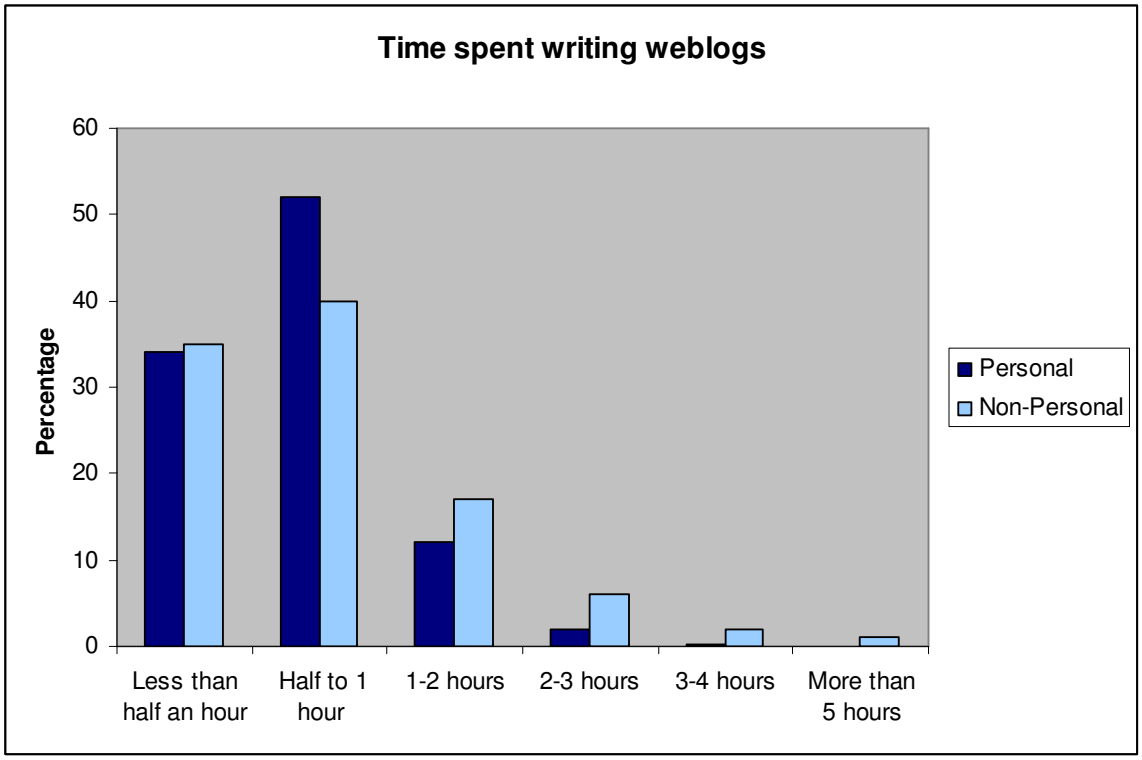

Main reason for blogging
Percentage
40
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
Express thoughts and feelings
Document one's life
Provide commentary
To provide info
To entertain others
To release emotions
To influence others to take action
Personal
Non-Personal

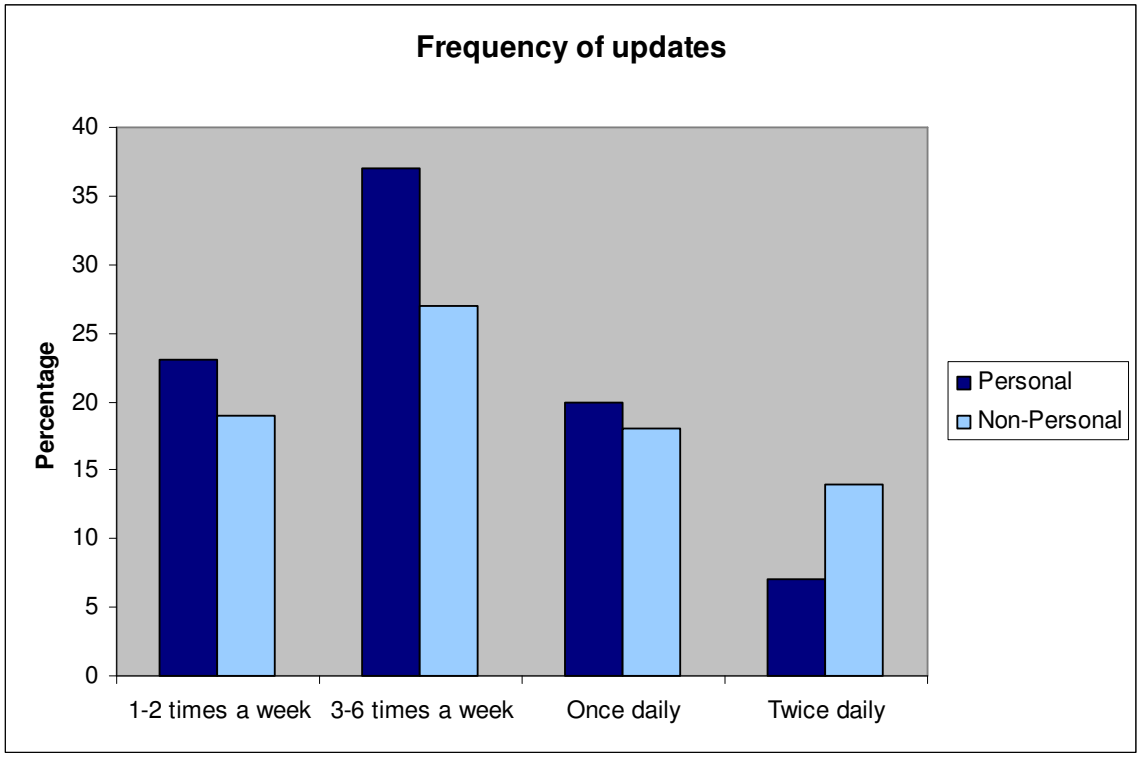

Content blogged about most
Percentage
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
Events in my life
Entertainment and arts
Family and home
Religion and beliefs
Government and politics
News
Others
Personal
Non-Personal

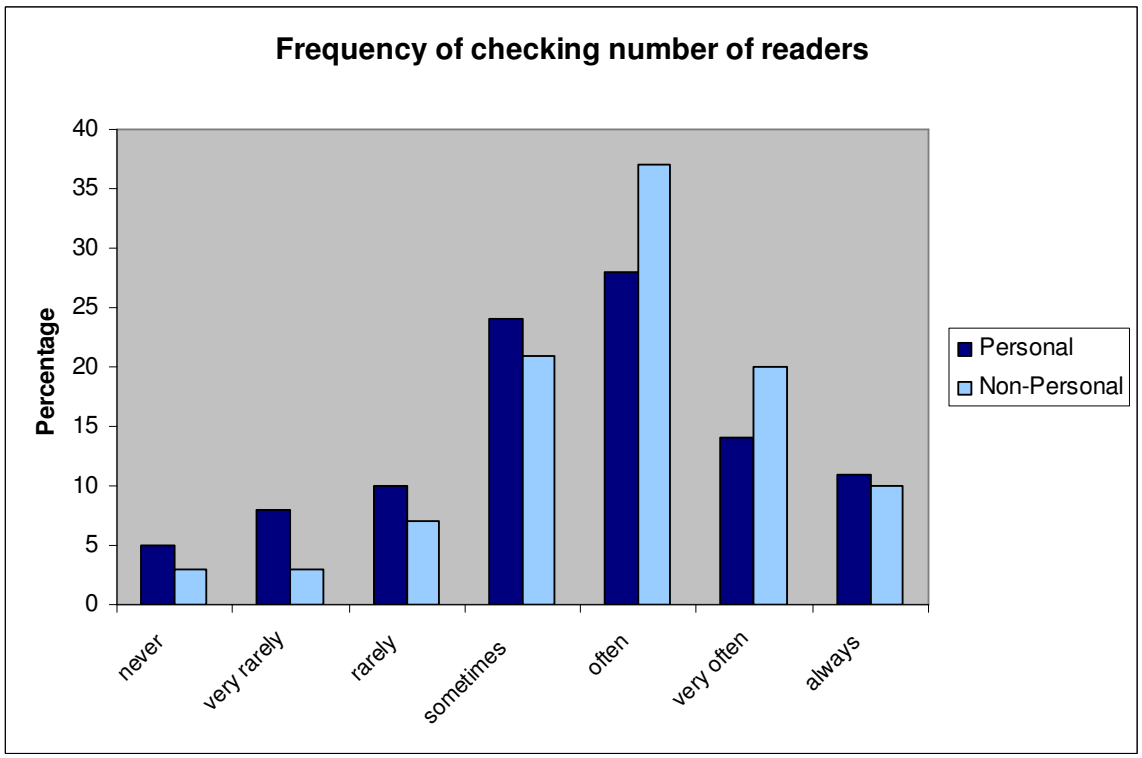

People blogged about most
Percentage
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
Self
People known personally
People not known personally
Do not blog about people
No one in particular
Personal
Non-Personal

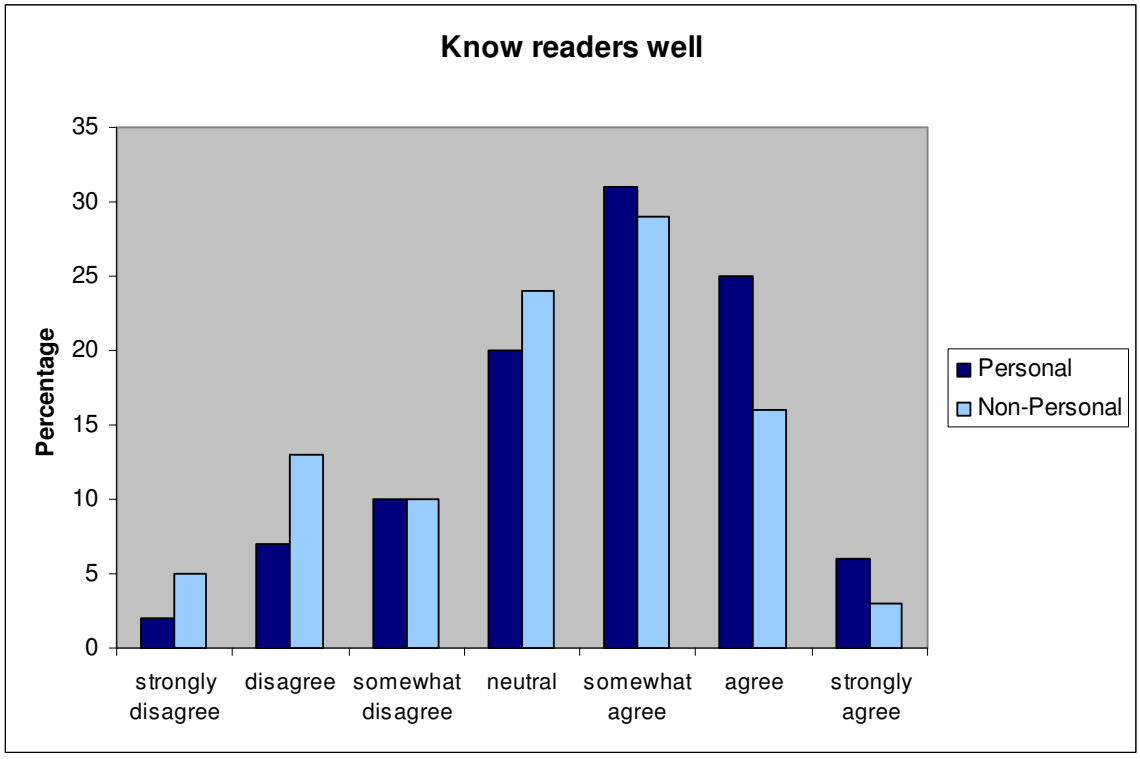

Primary audience
Percentage
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
Do not have one
People known personally
People not known personally
Myself
Personal
Non-Personal


Number of readers daily
Percentage
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
1-10
11-20
21-50
51-100
101-500
Personal
Non-Personal


Time spent writing weblogs
Percentage
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
Less than half an hour
Half to 1 hour
1-2 hours
2-3 hours
3-4 hours
More than 5 hours
Personal
Non-Personal


Frequency of updates
Percentage
40
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
1-2 times a week
3-6 times a week
Once daily
Twice daily
Personal
Non-Personal


Frequency of checking number of readers
Percentage
40
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
never
very rarely
rarely
sometimes
often
very often
always
Personal
Non-Personal



In terms of demographics, our findings show that non-personal bloggers are more likely to be male, significantly older and have more formal years of education compared with personal bloggers. The data also indicate that non-personal bloggers have more readers daily than personal bloggers, and this could be due to the wide variety of content they write about. Unlike personal bloggers who write mainly about events in their lives, non-personal bloggers write a variety of content that is useful and appealing to a larger audience. Non-personal bloggers more frequently check how many readers access their weblogs than personal bloggers. A likely reason for this is that a primary purpose of non-personal weblogs is to provide commentaries or viewpoints for others to read and appreciate, and a large audience is one indication that a non-personal weblog is successful.

Most importantly, our findings show that while personal and non-personal bloggers have some things in common in terms of their ethical beliefs and practices, there are also some distinctive differences (see Table 1). For example, non-personal bloggers valued attribution and truth telling the most, but for personal bloggers truth telling was less important than attribution and minimizing harm. The type of ethics most practiced by the personal bloggers was minimizing harm, while the non-personal bloggers practiced truth telling, attribution, and minimizing harm equally. The personal bloggers were also less consistent in practicing the ethics they said they valued than the non-personal bloggers.

Table 1: Ethical Principles

Comparison of Ethical beliefs and practices between Personal and Non-personal bloggers

	Ethical beliefs of Bloggers		Ethical practices of Bloggers		Correlation between Bloggers' Ethical Beliefs and Practices	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*r*	*n*
			Personal			
Truth telling	5.22_a	1.35	5.78_a	0.83	.28**	892
Accountability	4.44_b	1.39	5.13_b	1.35	.38**	880
Attribution	5.89_c	1.04	5.74_a	1.21	.51**	872
Minimizing harm	5.35_d	1.11	6.06_c	0.87	.35**	880
			Non-personal			
Truth telling	5.68_a	1.45	5.97_a	0.95	.41**	332
Accountability	4.53_b	1.51	5.35_b	1.39	.46**	327
Attribution	5.79_a	1.03	6.02_a	1.07	.45**	325
Minimizing harm	4.99_c	1.25	5.94_a	1.00	.47**	320

**p < .01.
Note. For each type of blogger, the mean values within columns with subscripts in common do not significantly differ, $p < .05$.
The sample size for each type of belief and practice varies due to missing data.

For both groups of bloggers, their belief in the importance of attribution was paramount. This could be due to the nature of blogging, in which bloggers show readers links to other pages to illustrate a point or to share information. Attribution in blogging is quite different from that in traditional journalism in that, other than giving proper credit, it also serves a community-building function (Blood, 2002). This may explain why non-personal bloggers and personal bloggers value it most. After all, weblogs started off as web pages where people shared hyperlinks to other sites that they thought were useful (Blood, 2002). This is evident from the high number of hyperlink-centered filter weblogs reported in earlier studies on blogging (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus et al., 2004).

In contrast, belief in accountability was regarded as least important by both groups of bloggers, and this could be due to a perception that in cyberspace, people can express their opinions without inhibition or consequences. This may be explained by two reasons commonly given why people make use of computer-mediated-communication. First, there is less perceived social risk (i.e., diminished personal cost if interactions or relationships fail) and second, there is less social responsibility toward others than traditional face-to-face communication (Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2000; Turkle, 1995; Wallace, 1999; Walther,

1996). In a concrete example of this, Viégas (2004) found that most bloggers do not believe people can sue them for their weblog content.

Need for Blogging Code of Ethics

Although a few blogging ethics codes for have been proposed by scholars (Blood, 2002; Dube, 2003; Kuhn, 2005), this is the first study to examine whether bloggers themselves see a need for a blogging ethics code. A code is only as useful as the number of people who would adhere to it. Our findings show that both personal and non-personal bloggers are quite ambivalent as to whether a blogging code of ethics is needed.

As most non-personal bloggers take a journalistic approach in their writing (Kuhn, 2005), it seems reasonable to expect them to see a need for a blogging ethics code (akin to that of journalism ethics code) when compared with personal bloggers. However, our findings revealed no significant difference between personal and non-personal bloggers' agreement on the need for a blogging ethics code. A plausible reason is that blogging is an activity that is "almost exclusively a part-time voluntary solipsistic enterprise" with virtually no income generated from blogging for the vast majority of people (Drezner and Farrell, 2004, p. 4). In fact, it is estimated that no more than two dozen individuals in the US earn their living from blogging (Drezner and Farrell, 2004). For everyone else, blogging is just a hobby, so it seems unlikely that many people will have developed a sense of responsibility and a system of ethics comparable to journalists and other communication professionals.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is that the survey was in English, and only English weblogs were sampled. Although English still dominates the Internet and blogging, efforts should be made in the future to assess the views of those with non-English blogs. Another problem for this study and others investigating on-line populations is that true random sampling is extremely difficult, if not impossible, due to the lack of a complete sampling frame available for weblogs. Therefore, strictly speaking, one cannot generalize to the entire population of bloggers. However, given the efforts made to ensure a diverse and proportional sample of respondents and the relatively large sample size, we feel fairly confident that the data are generally indicative of bloggers.

Conclusion

Overall, our findings show that personal and non-personal bloggers are distinctively different in their demographics, blogging experiences, and habits. Our findings also show that there are significant differences between personal and non-personal bloggers in the ethical beliefs they value and in the ethical practices they adhere to. Therefore, an important point to note is that when studying the blogging population, distinctions must be made regarding the type of bloggers who are being examined to prevent any misperceptions. In addition, the limited support from bloggers for a blogging code of ethics poses a serious problem for

advocates of on-line social responsibility. If any inroads are to be made in terms of bloggers regulating themselves, consensus in the community must be developed.

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