Vlogs: A Harbinger of the Narcissism of Communication

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Final Research Paper
December 6, 2006
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Imagine if at any given moment, you turn on your computer and find out that the Internet is gone forever. If this were the case, what would you miss the most? Maybe it will be being able to check the news and weather by the minute, or being able to buy your groceries online, but for most people, they will miss being able to easily communicate with people. In a recent Gallup poll, people responded that E-mail and communication are the main reasons they use the Internet. Moreover, ever since the proliferation of the Internet, the way we communicate has expanded and changed dramatically. Just several decades ago, most people would never have thought they could keep in touch with people through instant messages, blogs, and social networking sites. These are only a few of the many ways we interact. One of the newest and most exciting ways to communicate and express ourselves to others are through vlogs, or video web-logs. Vlogs give insight into our human nature and is influencing the future of communication and media.

First, let us take a look into what exactly vlogs are. They are mainly used as a tool of self-expression in which people record a short video clip, usually between thirty seconds to ten minutes, to share online with others. Vlogs are closely related to text-based weblogs, or blogs, which are also a relatively new form of asynchronous communication. Vlogs initially picked up in popularity until 2004 and are increasingly being created and viewed (“Vlog.” Wikipedia). This gradual process did not take the technology world by storm like Mozilla’s Firefox did, but is still a significant development because of the technological transition of people moving from a text-based medium into a visual one. Even though vlogs are asynchronous like blogs are, the most noticeable difference between the two is that instead of just reading what someone has to say, you can actually see and hear the author. The subtle cues of body language, tone, and
attitude are difficult to convey through text alone. Vlogs add an entirely new dimension and forge a closer and more personal connection between the viewer and author.

Even though vlogs give us this unique and different way to represent ourselves to others, the greater significance is that they give insight into the evolution of technology and communication and show us of the Internet’s influence on the dynamic human culture. In his book titled *The Psychology of the Internet*, Adam Joinson argues that the tools of communication change our way of thinking and of approaching a task. (Joinson 2). When these “tools” change, the way we think and approach tasks does also, and by understanding these changes, we can evaluate future trends in communication. In this case, vlogs show that people in the modern Internet culture are becoming more and more focused on themselves and want to have content to be more personalized for them.

Charles Derber, author of *The Pursuit of Attention*, believes that the pursuit of attention is now emerging as one of the main principles of American life and is reflected by our lifestyles. (Derber xiv). One of the four trends of society that illustrate the evolution of our attention pursuing culture is “The harnessing of new electronic technology to pioneer previously unimaginable ways of pursuing attention,” which is exactly what vlogs do (Derber xvii). We are social beings and vlogs give us another way to be more and more social to fulfill this human need for attention. This in turn is changing the way mainstream media caters to us.

**The evolution and differences of vlogs from blogs**

Vlogs are made in a variety of different ways and styles, but ultimately the main purpose of vlogs is for the author to share something with a viewer. Both vlogs and blogs are essentially online journals, but one of the main differences is the relationship between the author and viewers. A recent study posted on a blog revealed that about 1/3 of the blogs found online are
private and can only be accessed by invite from the blog author, as opposed to only approximately 10% of vlogs that are set to private (“Moz@work”). These private blogs or vlogs are usually intended to be seen only by the author or a certain group such as family or friends.

The fact that about three times as many blogs are set to be private over vlogs reveals the more gregarious nature of vlogging. After viewing many personal vlogs and blogs, vlogs tend to be a more public form of discourse and have a wider readership when compared to the more anonymous blogs. This may be partly attributed to the open nature of the Internet itself.

Vloggers realize and embrace the fact that they don’t have the same level of anonymity as blogs. They show their face, and by posting it on their website or Youtube, it is accessible to almost everyone, so privacy is not an issue. Blogs can be made almost entirely anonymous because nothing personal about the author needs to be posted.

In Bonnie Nardi, Diane J. Schiano, Michelle Gumbrecht, and Luke Swartz’s journal article titled “Why We Blog,” they reveal, “Blogs can be characterized by having limited interactivity. Bloggers value that they can post and share their thoughts without the intense feedback associated with other forms of communication” (Nardi et al. 6). This is the opposite of the nature of vlogs, which thrive on interaction and attention.

**Personal vlogs**

Vlogs are made in many creative and different ways. Some are focused mainly on the authors themselves and post contemplative and reflective video entries while others share interesting general news and information in their own unique style. The former type of vlog can be categorized as a personal vlog and the latter, a news vlog. Vlogs all have the audience in mind and make videos directly targeted for others to view, whether it is for a tech-savvy crowd or the random bored video-surf. Youtube is the largest online video-sharing website, and is
also one of the largest communities for vloggers to share their thoughts or creations to the world. With millions of viewers, and thousands of videos being posted daily, the most popular vloggers merit attention and examination.

The two most popular Youtube vloggers are known by their online handles: Geriatric1927 and Lonelygirl15. Geriatric1927 is a 79-year-old man from England named Peter, who became an Internet celebrity overnight after posting a video on Youtube entitled “First try.” As the video starts, blues music is playing in the background and the screen focuses on an old man who says:

“I got addicted to Youtube because it is a fascinating place to go to see the videos you youth make. What I hope to be able to do is to bitch and grumble about life in general from the perspective of an old person whose been there and done that and hopefully you will respond in some way by your comments and then I might be able to do other videos to follow up your comments, I do hope so.” (Oakley “First Try”)

The response he received from this vlog entry was overwhelming as over 10,000 viewers commented and encouraged him to make more videos. He followed their advice and started telling stories about his entire life and his experiences including his time served in war and current affairs. So far he has over 30 video entries in his vlog with the series of videos titled “Telling it all.” A few of his videos has reached over 1 million views and even garner video responses to his videos and thousands of positive comments such as, “You are such an inspiration,” or “I wish you were my grandfather.”

Peter’s vlog reveals much information about both the authors of vlogs and viewers on the Internet. It is evident not only through what vloggers say and expect, but also by logic that the purpose of a vlog is to be seen no matter what type of it is. There is no other reason to post it
online other than to share it with others. Peter clearly expresses the purpose of his vlog in his very first entry by his hopes that people will respond so he can communicate to the younger generation.

During my research, I sent an email out to several vloggers and asked a few questions about their experience with vlogging, and received a response back from Peter. He commented, “I had previously had a brief look at chatroom sites and was disgusted by what I saw there and appalled that people could hide behind false identities. When I found the Youtube site where people were putting up videos and could be seen in reality I thought that it was so much safer and looked like to be fun, entertaining and creative.” (Peter Oakley 11/4/06). Youtube opened lines of communication from him to millions worldwide and was able to bridge a generation gap and provide him with a safe and open forum for discussion. Another vlogger I corresponded to is named Marcus and he reveals, “I started vlogging for attention and to cam-whore because it is fun.” (Marcus 11/5/06). He deliberately chose to create a vlog because he wanted attention from others who view it. As he started receiving much attention, he kept making more vlogs because of the encouragement people gave him.

Another Youtube celebrity is Lonelygirl15, a girl named Bree who also has a personal vlog. She is an attractive girl that posts clips that are more edited and snappy than Peter’s entries. Bree’s vlog focuses on her problems with her boyfriend and her restrictive parents. She quickly grew a large audience and like Peter, many people commented and encouraged her and tried to help her go through her problems. However, it turned out that her entire vlog was staged and fake. “Bree” was actually an aspiring actress and aspiring filmmakers Mesh Flinders and Miles Beckett directed the vlogs. This angered some people who were faithful viewers, but interestingly enough, as the new videos came out, many people still watched them. In fact, the
comments that denounced the series were overwhelmed by responses that had the sentiment of “If you don’t like it, don’t watch” (Davis). Viewers that knew it was not real kept watching because they were still intrigued by this new medium that connects so well with them.

This idea of interaction was one of the main purposes the producers created the vlog and tried to present Bree as real. The evolution of her character was shaped mostly from the feedback of the audience and number of views. Viewers of her vlog wanted relationship and family drama so Flinders and Beckett deliberately focused more on her relationship tension and changed the storyline to fuel the speculation viewers had. Videos could be posted at any time on Youtube and the view-counter in addition to the frequency of comments are good indicators of what people wanted to watch (Davis). This interaction with viewers is similar to Peter and Marcus’s feelings toward the feedback they received.

These videos bring out the sense of egotism in our technological culture. Even though it may seem as if vlogs are made just for others, most of the personal vlogs are focused on themselves and their ultimate goal is to have many people view them. When videos receive many views, there are bound to be numerous comments left on the page, which is the interactive part of vlogs that satiate the vloggers’ desire for attention and the viewers’ desire to control there content.

**Research into the success of vlogs**

After observing these three vloggers who sought attention and interaction, a more systematic and concrete way to form a conclusion was needed. Looking at these three isolated cases was not sufficient, so I conducted primary research to look for a correlation between the amount of views and comments someone who makes a vlog receives to the frequency and number of vlog entries posted. The criteria I used were simple. I searched on Youtube for the
keyword “vlog” that people tag to their videos in order to get a randomized sample of some of the vlogs found on Youtube to test my hypothesis. I had to conduct this search because there was no way to browse random vlogs under the category of “News and Blogs” because they were all organized by popularity in categories such as the top rated, viewed, and discussed vlogs. In my random search, I found that there are over 12,000 videos posted as “vlogs” on Youtube alone. I wanted to take a sample of approximately 50 vloggers see the frequency of their posts.

My criteria also included the parameters that the first vlog a user posted must be posted before October to ensure that they have sufficient time to update and be established. Then from this huge pool from the search results, I arbitrarily clicked on different pages and went through each video to see if they fit into my parameters. Once a user did fit the requirements, I categorized each one into “Active Vlogs” and “Dead Vlogs.” Active vlogs are defined as having at least 7 vlog posts total and are updated on average of about once a week or more. Dead vlogs are defined as having at least one vlog entry posted, but has no update for at least 3 weeks.

Results

After looking at 55 different random users who created at least one vlog, only 13 of them were active and posted a total of at least 10 entries on an average of once a week or more. Another 9 vlogs were still updated, but very infrequently at an average of once or twice a month and all had a total of less than 10 vlog entries so I categorized those as semi-active. Finally, there were 32 dead vlogs where users have not posted a new entry in 3 weeks. It
is clear that at least half of the vlogs that are created are abandoned, but there is a deeper and more distinct correlation between the active vlogs and the dead ones.

Not coincidentally, of the 13 active vlogs, 6 of them had at least 10,000 views of their channel, or user page, and had at least 200 subscribers to their vlog. The other 3 had at least 1,000 views of their channel and about 50-150 subscribers. Finally the last 3 were anomalies of the active vlogs because these vloggers kept at least 10 frequent vlog entries and had less than 1,000 channel views and less than 50 subscribers. However, the general trend is that active vlogs have many viewers and subscribers to their channel.

What is even more astonishing is that for the dead vlogs, 31 of the 32 users had less than 500 channel views and 10 subscribers. Moreover, those same 31 vlogs all had less than 10 entries total and most only had 1-4 videos. The other user not included was the only one to create at least 10 vlog entries for an extended period of time and then quit. Many of the dead vlogs are probably unread or unnoticed because of the sheer number of them out there, but it seems as if vlogs are more susceptible to “vlog termination” with less viewers than blogs are (Henning).

Even though this was a small sample of the multitude of vlogs on Youtube and also on the rest of the web, the correlations between popularity and vlog longevity are strong. The direct causality between them is not certain, but the correlation is strong enough to conclude that the more popular vlogs are more likely to be active while vlogs that no one watch die out at a much
greater rate. This clearly shows that vloggers enjoy the attention and comments of viewers and are motivated by them to continue to make vlogs.

**Implications**

My research is based off of the work of Jeffrey Henning who conducted a similar survey of text-based blogs to develop a model of blog populations. He came up with the term “blog termination” and found out that like vlogs, a significant amount of blogs is abandoned after only a few entries. However, the biggest difference is that for the active blogs, their audience base is much smaller than those of the active vlogs I found on Youtube (Henning).

Another difference between blogs and vlogs lie in the content. Popular vlogs are usually more entertaining and focused on the audience as opposed to blogs, which are sometimes negatively stereotyped as “indulgent chatter of little interest to anyone but the blogger” (Nardi et al. 4). The rhetorical situation is much different, because of the nature of video. It is meant to be entertaining because unlike text, which can be skimmed or skipped over easily to the interesting parts, viewers are compelled to watch videos in full length because there is no way of fast forwarding to the interesting parts unless the entire video is seen first. There is a certain pressure to keep things interesting throughout most of the video, or else authors will receive negative comments. Vloggers are well aware of their audience in order to receive good feedback that satisfies their basic desire for attention.

This idea of audience focus in vlogs is closely related to the term prosumer and the business model of mass customization. Joseph Pine defines the latter as the use of flexible manufacturing systems to produce custom goods or services to meet individual customer's (or prosumer, a portmanteau of the words producer and consumer) needs with near mass production efficiency in his book *Mass Customization: The New Frontier in Business Competition*. For
vlogging, the fine line between the viewer and author is blurred because most vloggers create and maintain their own vlog but also participate in and view the vlogs of others as well. Peter Oakley actively corresponds with other vloggers and comment on their vlog entries. These comments and feedback directly affects the content that is subsequently posted such as when Peter takes time to answer specific questions in his videos, or when Lonelygirl15 just so happens to lead viewers on further in their speculations about her life. The viewers thrive on this type of control and power they have and are able to watch content that is personally appealing to them because they oftentimes request it both directly and indirectly.

The connection between the audience and viewer

So far most of the focus has been on the vlogger, but as mentioned before, viewers ultimately are the ones who have the power. Analogous to the production of goods, the end user is the one who dictates what happens to the producers. If no one buys, they go out of business. One might object argue that our technological society may not be as attention driven as I argued for. They maybe bring up the point that for every vlogger and every comment made, there are thousands of viewers who do not actively participate in discussion or have their own vlog. That may be true, but even these viewers perpetuate this attention focus by choosing whether or not to view a video. Every time it is viewed, the counter that keeps track of how many views the video has goes up and is a signal to the author of its popularity. This fits in with the idea of attention giving for the benefit of the self, which in this case is to be able to view content that is appealing (Derber 47). The viewer does not need to even comment for the author to see how well received their vlogs are, which makes it easier for vloggers focus on what their audience wants to see.

A perfect example of how vlogs caters to their specific audience is Rocketboom. Rocketboom is one of the most popular news vlogs, which comes out with a new 3-minute video
every day. It has fast paced and high-energy segments of news stories and interesting Internet sites, but its main reason for success is that it is targeted directly toward a tech-savvy audience. They are not like a traditional news outlet that attempts to reach out to every literate person. A person with limited technology knowledge would not be able to appreciate or care about the type of news Rocketboom produces. Nonetheless, Rocketboom surprisingly has over 300,000 viewers a day and is gaining more popularity because it reaches out to a large, but specific crowd.

Another surprising fact about Rocketboom is that it does not take a big budget and professional studio to produce, but only a consumer level video camera, a laptop, and two people in an apartment (“About Rocketboom”). This attests to the significant technological improvements that have been made in the past decade. People have easier and easier access to equipment and the Internet to post videos and share information online. The good thing about technology is that it does not grow in just one direction, but in all different realms of technology including consumer electronics such as cameras and software. Nowadays, even low-end digital cameras that are catered specifically those who are not technologically inclined can produce a decent vlog. Software is also becoming more and more user-friendly and even a 72 year old man can edit videos effectively.

This type of personalization and media intimacy will help vlogs carve its niche in the future of communication. Last year, media magnate, Rupert Murdoch, addressed the American Society of Newspaper Editors about the big problem media faces with the role of newspapers in a digital age. He said, “I believe too many of us editors and reporters are out of touch with our readers… They [Young people] want control over their media, instead of being controlled by it.” Murdoch calls for media networks to embrace this change and emphasizes the importance of the
Internet as a media outlet and highlights the influence of blogs, which can apply to vlogs as well. In fact, the use of vlogs extends past the dissemination of news, but also to the realm of marketing and business. Popular rap mogul Sean Combs, better known as Diddy, started a Youtube channel where he regularly posts videos promoting his music as well as sponsor partnerships (“Diddy TV” Channel on Youtube). Instead of traditional, scripted, unique commercials, Diddy’s videos show him talking directly to the average Youtube viewer casually in order to promote his music. This displays the direct influence vlogs have on mainstream media.

**Conclusion**

Even though it is obvious vlogs are part of the future, the better question is how big of a role will it have in our lives? Some may argue that it is just a fad and will die out. I concede that there are certain limitations to how many people actually use them. Most people probably will not create vlogs because some aren’t comfortable in front of a camera while others don’t care enough to share their lives or opinions. It is also a bit harder to monetize videos without obnoxious video ads when compared to traditional blogs. However, I do not believe that vlogs or traditional blogs will die out any time soon. Vlogs perpetuate the growth and maturity of the Internet and belong to a new generation of Internet-based services called Web 2.0 that focus on online collaboration (O’Reilly). Their significance is attributed not only to how it revolutionized communication through video, but to how it affects communication on a larger scale.

As mentioned before, the exact future of vlogs is a bit speculative, but there is one thing that is not speculative, and that is human nature. People nowadays are more willing to broadcast themselves to the world and strive to gain attention. People also love feeling targeted and have content personally appealing to them. These ideas will continue to influence mainstream media
and marketing. For now, vlogs fulfill both of these desires, and as long as the Internet is around, there will be more ways of communication and media programming that satisfies the technological prosumer.
Works Cited and Consulted


