# Categorizing blogs as information sources

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## ABSTRACT
A central area of investigation in information science has been the categorization, evaluation, and contextualization of information sources. However, blogs, and other social media platforms, pose a challenge to prevalent categorizations and typologies. The aim of the present paper is to examine how blogs could fit into current typologies of information sources, to identify what challenges arise in their classification, and finally to argue that current approaches require some modification to accommodate blogs. With the proliferation of blogs and social media platforms, it becomes increasingly important to study them not only as social spaces, but also as information environments.

## Keywords
Social media, blogs, information sources.

## 1. INTRODUCTION
A key area of research within information needs and uses examines what types of sources users rely on to acquire information that is relevant to them, either for their work, their everyday life, or to solve a problem (see the review in Pettigrew, Fidel, & Bruce, 2001). A wide variety of studies have focused on different types of sources depending on the users under investigation. Little work has been done to examining how blogs function as information sources, despite blogs being relevant in supporting the work of professionals, such as lawyers and judges (Maxwell, 2008), journalists and foreign policy analysts (Drezner & Farrell, 2005). As professionals continue to create and to use blogs, and as the diversity of blog usage continues to increase, it becomes increasingly relevant to investigate where blogs fit into existing typologies of information sources. In this paper, we first examine the literature in information science to obtain a good understanding of how information sources are categorized, then we provide an overview of definitions and typologies of blogs, and finally we argue for an understanding of blogs as not only social spaces, but also as relevant, up-to-date, and very personal sources of information that needs to be better integrated into academic and public libraries.

Influence 12, Halifax, NS. September 28-29, 2012.

## 2. BACKGROUND
### 2.1 Typologies of Information Sources
An information source can be defined as being 'any book, document, database or person which provides information' (Stevenson & Collin, 2006, p. 102). Information sources can also be understood as what a person turns to in order to answer questions or solve problems (Katz, 2002). Where individuals seek information goes well beyond books or electronic sources. Leckie, Pettigrew and Sylvain's (1996) research on information seeking behavior of professionals identifies three main categories of information sources: people sources, document sources and personal sources. People sources refer to answers that come from conversations, document sources refer to information that comes from written, printed or electronic text, and personal information sources refer to one's own knowledge or experience gained from professional practice. Hertzum et al. (2002) while concurring with the categories for people and documents, exclude personal knowledge and experience as a source, and instead add as a third category, virtual information source, to accommodate for the emergence of digital content. However, no existing typology provides a good fit for blogs.

### 2.2 Definitions and Categorizations of Blogs
A blog is a fairly recent information source that is continually evolving. Due to the newness and continued evolution of the blog, there exists an ongoing debate as to how to best define a blog. Blogs are considered web pages with briefly and regularly updated content arranged chronologically (Clyde, 2004). Apart from being conceptualized as web pages, an entire debate has emerged in the literature about whether blogs are a medium or a genre of computer-mediated communication (CMC).

Garden (2011) found that in the literature there was ambiguity in how blogs are conceptualized, which was further complicated with the arrival of the 'microblog'. She also documents the genre versus medium debate surrounding blogs, indicating that some scholars have even changed their stance as blogs evolved.

Herring, Scheidt, Bonus and Wright (2004) provide an early genre conceptualization of blogs. They saw blogs as being related to or replacing personal web sites. Blogs were conceptualized as being created by single individuals with content focusing on the blogger's life or on his or her interests (Herring, et al., 2004). However, Clyde (2004) suggests that not all blogs are created by single individuals, as some blogs are produced by institutions, organizations, or groups.

Herring, et al. (2004) also conducted a content analysis of blogs, from which they derived a typology that includes: 1) filter blogs, 2) personal journals, 3) k-logs, 4) travel blogs, 5) memory blogs and 6) conversational blogs. After analyzing these variant types, the authors conclude that blogs possess the characteristics of

being frequently updated, providing asymmetrical exchanges and possessing limited multimedia. Their methodology, however, neglected to include video blogs and photoblogs, which both have little to no text, thereby questioning Herring et al.'s multimedia characterization (See Table 1 for other categories of blogs in the literature).

boyd (2006) argues that while blogs are often conceptualized as a genre of CMC, this approach to understanding blogs is flawed. Instead of content analysis, boyd (2006) interviews bloggers to determine their opinion about what it is that they create. boyd (2006) therefore focuses on blogging as a practice or as what bloggers do. She concludes that blogging constitutes a practice consisting of the production of digital content intended to be shared asynchronously with an unknown audience. Blogs then are conceptualized as both a medium and a bi-product of practice.

The debate surrounding the definition and categorization of blogs suggests that there is uncertainty about what blogs are and how to best categorize them. Defining blogs is a first step towards assessing how they fit into current typologies of information sources.

| Categories of blogs | Description | Reference |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Blawgs | Legally oriented blogs | (Maxwell, 2008) |
| Catablogs | Libraries using blogs to provide access to collections. | (Clyde, 2004) |
| Commercial blogs | Blogs established for the purpose of sharing information in order to earn an income. | (Garden, 2011) |
| Conversational blogs | Blogs permitting readers to comment on posted entries, giving rise to discussion and group interaction around posted content. | (Herring et al., 2004) |
| Cooperative versus single author | Group responsible for posting and monitoring blog versus blog where a single individual posts and monitors posts. | (Clyde, 2004) |
| Corporate blogs | Produced by corporation attempting to monitor, intervene in and produce conversations. | (Dean, 2010) |
| filter blogs | Record finds on the Web, points to other useful information sources on the Web. | (Herring et al., 2004; Rettberg, 2008) |
| K-logs or knowledge blogs/topic-driven blog | Knowledge sharing on a single topic; observations + references. | (Garden, 2011; Herring et al., 2004; Rettberg, 2008) |
| Memory blogs | Post-it notes to self; storage place for information for future retrieval. | (Herring et al., 2004) |
| Personal journals/ personal blogs/ Diary blog/diary-style blog | Log of blogger's offline life; Written by single individual documenting events/life experiences. | (Herring et al., 2004; Garden, 2011; Rettberg, 2008) |
| Photoblogs | Focus on photography; may have little additional content | (Clyde, 2004) |
| Political blogs | Political commentary, public opinion and associated with political persons attempting to sway public opinion. | (Sauers, 2006) |
| Public versus private | Blogs intended to be found by general public, versus blogs that restricted by a specific audience and not made searchable to public search engines. | (Clyde, 2004) |
| Splogs | Spam blogs generated by bots or agents that scrape or grab content from elsewhere on the Internet. | (Dean, 2010) |
| Travel blogs | Travelogues and photo albums. | (Herring et al., 2004) |

**Table 1.Overview of Blog Categorization**

## 3. Blogs as Information Sources

Based on the literature on information sources and blogs, we propose a preliminary model of how blogs function as information sources:

1. *Guide to sources of information* - that contextualize, express opinion on, condense, comment on, assess or refer to other information sources.
2. *Non-fiction sources of information* - that embody or contain information (sometimes copies of documents, personal knowledge and experience or opinion) that seeks to be investigative and objective.
3. *Personal or Organizational storytelling* – based on subjective opinion, personal experience, observation or memory (falling within the realm of life-writing sources) or organizational constructed accounts of events or experiences.
4. *Fictional sources of information* – based on imagination or artful re-imagining or commentary of reality.

Blogs are also potentially in a new category of information source between people sources and documents. Rettberg (2008) argues that blogs are closer to the reciprocity of oral communication than to document sources, which tend to be static and lack interactivity and feedback. However, bloggers and their audience can choose not to utilize the conversational features of blogs, in which case blogs tend to resemble documents. In addition, government agencies and organizations can use blogs to post documents (Maxwell, 2008) without necessarily activating the interactive features so common in blogs.

## 4. Conclusions

Blogs are widespread and Nielsen write estimates that "6.7 million people publish blogs on blogging websites, and another 12 million write blogs using their social networks" (Nielsenwire, 2012). The widespread use of blogs for meeting information needs warrants investigation into how blogs fit into established information sources formally recognized by information scientists. While blogs have often been considered a type of social media and primarily geared toward supporting social interactions, their value as an information source has often been neglected. We argue in this paper, that blogs need to be integrated into current typologies of information sources and their value as sources of information needs to be further explored. This may prove problematic, as blogs do not adequately fit into existing categories, and can alternately combine or feature any or all of exiting information source categories of 1) personal information expressing tacit knowledge or experience, 2) exchanges and conversation among people and 3) documents.

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