

Blogging

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Blogging: The Early Days

The “blog” as we know it now, was started as a personal homepage by a Chicago-born student named Justin Hall in January of 1994. Credited to be the world’s first ever blog—Links.net (<http://www.links.net>)—it is still in existence.

During its initial days a blog was known as “Weblog”, to mean, “logging the Web”. The term was coined in 1997 by Jorn Barger of Yellow Springs, Ohio, USA. In 1999, programmer Peter Merholz introduced the present term “blog”.

According to a list compiled by the San Francisco-based information architect Jesse James Garrett, there were only twenty three blogs as of 1999. It was not until the year 2004 that blogging really took off—so much so that Merriam-Webster declared the term “blog” the Word of the Year. That number grew to 50 million blogs by the middle of 2006. By end of 2010, the number of active blogs grew to 152 million. By end of 2011, that number had swelled to 181 million blogs. The exponential growth of the blog has been nothing short of extraordinary.

A survey conducted in 2005 showed that in the US alone, 32 million people read blogs—roughly 11 percent of the population.

The first recorded “casualty” of blogging has to be a lady named Heather Armstrong, a Los Angeles web designer. She got fired for writing about her job on her blog—Dooce.com (<http://dooce.com/about>). Since then, anyone getting into trouble for writing something on his/her blog came to be described as being “dooiced” for it.

Why Blog?

Each blogger has his/her own reasons for blogging. Some use it to record their thoughts and to keep an account of what they did, what they saw, and what they felt, at a particular moment in time. Some use it to sell products and others use it to champion a cause. Some use it for education and yet there are others who use blogs as a tool for propaganda. Whatever it is used for, the blog is certainly a powerful tool. A popular blog can shape opinions and alter the course of events.

A good thing about blogging is that there is no law prohibiting it; a bad thing is that not all blogs are meaningful or consequential. And yet, the only person who can set a standard on the blog is the blogger himself/herself—no one else may define the blog’s ethical or moral standards.

Blogging —A Web-based Social Media Platform

Social media, of which blogging is an important part, is a powerful social instrument of communication that can influence and shape human behavior and attitudes. The modern society’s everyday life is largely entwined with the Internet—so much so that even love lives are constructed over the social media and its many channels.

The interactive nature of social media makes it a lot more effective than traditional media—the print and visual media. Unlike the television or newspaper that are one-way communication channels, social media permits instant two-way communications. Because its reach is truly international, social media can convey messages and ideas instantly and over continents.

Social media is used all over the world to champion environmental, political, and social causes. It has caused governments to fall, instigated social unrest, and disruption to peace and social harmony. But it has also helped maintain transparency among bureaucrats and politicians. It has helped good governance.

In Bhutan, activism through social media has helped stop the destruction of the White-bellied Heron habitat in Phochhu, Punakha, a few years back. But we have not been entirely responsible in the use of social media. Some in Bhutan have used it to malign people and cause discomfort to many. Thus, social media can be both a boon as well as a bane—depending on how it is used.

My Blogging Experience

Like everything else in my life, blogging for me was not a planned or premeditated effort—I got into it without being aware that I was doing it. I did not even know that I was blogging. Some friends suggested that I create a website to post my photos online so that they could see my pictures. Over time, instead of photos, I began to post articles and, as I went along, I began to understand that I was into blogging instead of merely posting photos.

As my blog began to gain popularity and my readership increased, realisation hit me that my blog was no longer my own, where I could say whatever I felt like. Because it was being read by a large audience all over the world, I had to be careful about what I wrote and how I wrote. A friend once cautioned me: “You are bigger than you think

so make sure you remain responsible. You can no longer afford to be imprudent or flippant.”

That has been an important part of my blogging experience—the need to be restrained, responsible, educated, objective, meaningful, fair and, above all, persistent with my posts so that I am able to retain my readers’ attention.

Retaining the Crowd

A useful lesson I learnt as a Charter member of the Rotary Club of Thimphu is that being able to draw a crowd is only half the battle—the more challenging battle is to be able to keep it herded and retain its attention. I have understood that the best way to attract new readers is to keep the old ones happy and interested.

Thus, in order to maintain my blog’s current level of popularity, I ensure that:

- I blog on a variety of issues so that it appeals to a diverse audience base and not to a specialist group;
- I go to great lengths to ensure that I keep my posts short—whenever possible—because only tall girls are appealing—anything else that is tall and long is tedious; and
- I keep my posts meaningful and progressive and that they are well researched and written in the simplest language.

What Do I Write About and Why

I write about issues that afflict the country. In particular, my concern for the environment and its destruction, hydropower projects that are destined to shackle the country to eternal debt, poor governance, rural-urban migration, and the tourism industry that is headed for doom.

I devote a considerable amount of time and effort to my blogging. I do not trivialise important issues—when I write I put my heart and soul into it. My passion about an issue will be evident in the manner I set out to write about it. If I choose to make a statement, I will present the facts as they really are—I will not pussyfoot around an issue—I will tell it like it is. This tendency has led many of my Bhutanese readers to conclude that I am a courageous person. That is not true. I do not write because I want to prove that I am a courageous person—I have no need to do such a thing. I write on some issues because I believe that doing so might contribute to correcting some of the many problems that beset us.

I blog because I believe that there are some things that a private citizen can articulate

better than the government. I blog because I believe that there are some things that need to be said and only a private citizen can say it openly and frankly, without fear of reprisal.

I have blogged on issues that have seldom, if ever, been discussed openly. The need for such a dramatic departure from the usual Bhutanese timidity is necessary, I believe, because most Bhutanese have become so complacent that they are no longer capable of critical thinking. They have a mind but it behaves like an empty bucket—it will absorb all the information that is poured into it—without processing and without analysis. What is the point of having a mind if it is not applied to thinking?

That is why, once in a while I blog on matters that are considered “inconvenient truths”—matters that people would rather push under the carpet than discuss openly. My blogs are intended to inform the people—to uncover the sycophancy, to unravel the misinformation, to lay bare the deceit and the sham. In doing so, I hope to be able to convert some of the Bhutanese people to think and thereby do things thoughtfully.

It is not daredevilry that prods me into writing critical blogs. It is my love for the country and my belief that we need to be more mindful than we are, that compels me to act, as many have told me, in a “courageous” fashion. Mine is not an act of courage—it is a cry and an appeal to consider matters with objectivity and reasoning. The less thinking we are, the more decadent we become.

The Internet technology that empowers blogging is a boon to modern society. Through blogging, ideas and opinions can be transmitted to millions of people around the globe, instantaneously. The blog’s potential is simply unfathomable. It offers citizens the opportunity at interactive governance. In other words, blogging is a powerful medium that strengthens democracy through empowerment.

The evolutionary process of human society has not been entirely straightforward. One case in point: that truth is no longer believable or useful. Most set store by PERCEPTION. What is perceived is more important than what is the truth. It is a commonly held belief that all truths have been doctored by the mighty and the powerful, to suit their own purposes. And yet, people tend to ingest truth without contest or scrutiny.

Unfortunately, perception is not entirely immune to alteration either. A skillful blogger with a popular following has the power to transform opinions and alter perceptions. This can be both good and bad, depending on which side of the fence you are sitting on. But one thing is certain—whether you like it or not, blogging is here to stay. All that we can do is pray that the blogger is a responsible person and has the best of intentions at heart—best of intentions for the collective whole—rather than the self.