

Video Documentary Describing a Pre-digital Communication Technology:  
The History of Communication: from Cave Drawings to Blogging

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As students in a distance graduate program, we are consistently using blogs to communicate and collaborate with our peers. We have grown so accustomed to them, that it's hard to imagine what life was like prior to logging information on the world wide web. We are seeing the positive effect blogs are having on higher education and in elementary and high school learning environments. Students are developing critical and creative thinking, communication, and computational thinking skills; integral to the 21st century. Our video documentary looks at the history of logging information before the computer and the implications for literacy, and how this technological innovation modifies the phenomenology of reading, writing, and communicating.

Blogs have modified the look and feel of reading, writing, and communicating information. Blogs don't always have to follow academic writing standards. They can be informal and reflective. Blogs are, "Firmly established as a web based communications tool, with an estimated number of users in excess of one million (Bryant, 2003). "Blogs have emerged from early email lists and instant messaging communities, as a means of informing a dedicated reader base about items of interest to the authors, news, and personal information. But the blog is a whole lot more. It is also a means of reaching a wider audience; ready and willing to respond to the opinions and commentaries of bloggers. With a 'soapbox' all to themselves, blogs provide their readers with the rare opportunity (for the vast majority, at least) to act as an oracle of information. More importantly, perhaps, the publication of one's personal thoughts for the public consumption of such a vast audience can be an uplifting and sometimes cathartic experience" (Williams, J. B., & Jacobs, J., 2004).

The word blog was first entered into the Oxford English Dictionary in 1999. “Blogging is a web-based form of communication that is rapidly becoming mainstream. Weblogs or “blogs” are frequently updated webpages with a series of archived posts, typically in reverse-chronological order. Blog posts are primarily textual, but they may contain photos or other multimedia content. Many blogs allow for audience comments. In recent years, tools have been developed to make blogging much easier and more widely accessible - effectively, pushbutton publishing for people” (Nardi, B., Schiano, D., & Gumbrecht, M., 2004).

Blogs are defined as a frequently updated website or webpage, typically one run by an individual or small group, arranged in chronological order, that is written in an informal or conversational style, similar to a diary. Blogs are platforms for communication. It appears that there are blogs for anything and everything, sports fanatics, fashion and lifestyle, and education. Anyone can start one, with no essential prerequisites. You could establish a blog that sets out to share your story, find and review local coffee shops, a political news blog, providing readers a different perspective, or even tutorials and walkthroughs for individuals looking to gain technology skills in their small business ventures. Weblogs have provided a platform for anyone to be seen or heard.

This has been especially important in the field of education, both for learners and educators. Our research looks at this technological development from a historical and cultural viewpoint. In 1998 there was just a handful of sites that are now identified as weblogs. Looking at the evolution of the weblog, our research delves into the history of communication. We look at how people have been communicating and logging information through cave drawings, oral stories,

circulating news sheets, manuscripts, commentaries on sacred texts, newspapers, and finally to columnists, who wrote recurring pieces in a newspaper or magazine. We are looking at blogs as a platform to share opinions or a narrative about a culture. Dating back before the internet, individuals physically logged information with pen and paper, and before this, groups of people used cave drawings and symbols to share or log information. “Crude drawings on rock and cave walls are the earliest methods of communication which we know. Though it was cumbersome and slow it helped to convey ideas and past events to other people.” (Chakravarthi, 1992).

Some blogs are designed as an online narrative, often sharing a story in chronological order. Storytelling predates writing, with the earliest forms of storytelling usually expressed orally and/or combined with gestures and expressions. Stories in tradition come in all shapes and sizes, for example: myths, legends, wonder tales, fairy tales, fables, hero stories, teaching stories, oral histories and more (Parkinson, 2001). People in ancient times travelled with their invisible luggage of tales in which they shared. “In pre-literacy days, people had better listening skills, better memories and perhaps, less need to be fettered by ‘authenticity’” (Parkinson, 2001, p.2). In any case, stories stuck and were told and retold and, in the process, became part of widely differing cultures. Oral storytelling was very much a part of our life as stories show life as it might be, should be, shouldn’t be, and never could be. Basic social values, skills, wisdoms and all show up in stories. “Weblogs provide ample opportunities and new spaces for personal storytelling. Making use of ready-made templates, these platforms introduce non-expert users to online publishing and have spawned a variety of different weblog genres.” (Eisenlauer & Hoffman, 2010). As Eisenlauer and Hoffman share, weblog storytelling adheres to the dynamic potential of the conversational approaches (2010). “In weblogs, narration seems to be particularly crucial,

simply because ‘bloggers’ usually draw on short stories to report the latest news to a virtual audience. In contrast to written diaries, they can switch between personal forms of writing and spontaneous public discourse meant to intrigue and entertain a broader readership” (Eisenlauer & Hoffman, 2010).

Human beings have been drawing pictures for countless millennia (Ong, 1982, pp. 83). Even when it is pictographic, a script is more than pictures. Pictures represent objects. Codes have to be explained by something more than pictures; either in words or in a total human context, humanly understood (Ong, 1982). A script is a sense of true writing that does not consist of mere pictures, but a representation of utterance, of words that someone says or is imagined to say (Ong, 1982). Thus, a simple scratch on a rock or a notch on a stick interpretable only by the one who makes it would be considered writing (Ong, 1982). While cave drawings have been cited as early evidence of human art, these drawings some 10,000-40,000 years ago are the first glimmers of graphic communication among human beings before the written word. This was a pivotal moment as we went from spoken language to making these durable marks and images (Ong, 1982). These drawings and marks share a lot about groups of people and their form of communication, however they are not yet classified as writing, as true writing consists of a set of symbols and rules in which we call language (Ong, 1982). Prehistoric signs do not have the complexity of a writing system but they qualify as an early form of graphic communication (Ong, 1982). Pictures can serve simply as *aides-mémoire*, or they can be equipped with a code enabling them to represent more or less exactly specific words in various grammatical relation to each other (Ong, 1982, pp. 85) The critical and unique breakthrough into new worlds of knowledge was achieved within human consciousness not when simple semiotic marking was

devised but when a coded system of visible marks was invented whereby a writer could determine the exact words that the reader would generate from the text (Ong, 1982, pp. 83). “Many tools have aided memory and/or conveyed human thought and speech over distance, all of which inflated the repertoire of resources that would eventually yield complete writing” (Fischer, 2001, pp. 21). Dating back to the Paleolithic times (early Stone Age), encoding songs, chants or ‘writing in air’ served as communication as its purpose was to articulate speech. These ‘writing in air’ correlates to the pictorials/symbols found in the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC.

In 1660, the art of printing began in Europe where all literature was either in the hands of the clergy or under Church’s immediate management. Nothing was to be put to press without previous licence of the archbishop of Canterbury or the bishop of London, except what was ordered of the queen’s printer, or legal matter appointed by the chief justices (Bourne, 1887). Newspapers improved slowly after the Revolution of 1688, where they increased in numbers, even while the Licensing Act continued. The London Gazette, generally offered two double-columned folio pages each week, featuring a scanty supply of news, either dry and not always accurate official information were being sold for a penny each (Bourne, 1887).

“The first newspapers were written or printed letters. In the seventeenth century, English country gentlemen used to employ correspondents to write them once a week from London the gossip of the court and of the town” (Park, 1923). The advent of the printing press was an essential catalyst in the emergence of the newspaper but many of the features we associate with the newspaper pre-dates printing (Williams, 2010). “They can be traced back to the era of handwritten manuscripts and even further back to when societies were dominated by oral communication”

(Williams, 2010, p. 23). Newspapers are a relatively recent invention but their basic ingredient is one of humanity's oldest pleasures. People have always had the desire to know what is happening around them and the spreading of news, but long before people could read and write they exchanged news and information verbally as mentioned above. The newspaper has an intimate relationship with the society in which it has developed. British society, its institutions, peoples and culture have played a central role in shaping the kinds of newspaper we have (Williams, 2010). "A newspaper is not merely printed. It is circulated and read. Otherwise it is not a newspaper. The struggle for existence in the case of the newspaper, has been a struggle for circulation. The newspaper that is not read ceases to be an influence in the community. The power of the press may be roughly measured by the number of people who read it" (Park, 1923).

Oravec (2002, p. 618) observes that the blog has many dimensions that are suited to students' 'unique voices', empowering them, and encouraging them to become more critically analytical in their thinking. The reason, simply, is that in order to develop and sustain a clear and confident voice of one's own, one has to carefully formulate and stand by one's opinions. Writing a blog assists here because it forces a student to confront their own opinions and contemplate how their views might be interpreted and reflected upon by others (Lamshed, Berry & Armstrong, 2002). Viewing the blog as a public space to share discourse and understanding, we can look to the history of the Talmudic tradition. Talmud is the term that refers to "the transmission of texts and the creation of new knowledge central to the way the creators of the Talmud understood themselves" (Vidas, 2014, pp. 116). "The Talmud is indisputably the most important and influential non-biblical Jewish work. It's redaction was completed at the beginning of the fifth century and the most important commentaries were written in the middle ages. Studied without

interruption for a millennium and a half, it is surprising just how significant the invention of printing, a relatively late occurrence, had upon the Talmud” (Zeitlen, 1942). “The spread of printing meant that distinct scribal styles became generic fonts, erratic spellings became uniform and sequential numbering of pages became standard. The first printed books (incunabula) were typeset copies of manuscripts, lacking pagination and often not uniform” (Zeitlen, 1942). The discussion that sparked the commentaries is an example of blogging before computers existed. Scholars debated what the passages meant, and created commentaries, with different interpretations and understanding. Webloggers are now sharing their interpretations, thoughts, and opinions in a public digital space for others to read.

As we have seen the evolution of communication move from oral language to literacy, we can see how blogs are free from the constraints that govern traditional print and journalism. Blogs provide ways of knowing and learning, as we are able to acquire knowledge about the world around us. “Writing plays a role in the organization of societies. On the one hand, it can create new social classes. Scribes in ancient Sumeria, Egypt, and China were members of a privileged class, as were monks during the Middle Ages, who were largely employed copying texts in scriptoria. On the other hand, the distribution of literacy - who gets to read and write - has been a tool of social engineering for centuries. Slaves in most societies were denied literacy because of the empowerment it offered. Through the Middle Ages, the ability to write and read was a valuable skill, restricted to those who controlled society” (Fasold & Connor-Linton, 2015). Blogs have advanced the progress toward mass literacy, as everyone has the ability to read and write publicly, while meeting the needs of the culture that produced it, providing a public, digital platform to communicate.



As Hiler (2003) states, blogging has become firmly established as a web-based communications tool. The blogging phenomenon has evolved from its early origin as a medium for the publication of simple, online personal diaries, to a platform to engage people in collaborative activity, knowledge sharing, reflection, and debate (Williams, J. B., & Jacobs, J., 2004). We are seeing blogs utilized in elementary, high school, and postsecondary. Weblogs help connect individuals according to their needs. Blogs are used as a form of communication and reflection in all realms of education. With any device able to access a weblog, individuals are able to connect and communicate from virtually anywhere. Individuals can write, upload, and document their learning on tablets, laptops, and personal phones.

Blogging has changed educational practice. Doering, Beach, & O'Brien (2007) share that any envisionment of a future English curriculum needs to recognize a major shift in how adolescents are communicating with each other through IM'ing, MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, blogs, and other virtual interactive tools. In using these tools, adolescents are moving beyond using the web to simply access information to using these platforms to be active communicators on the "Read/Write Web" (Richardson, 2006, p. 3) involving both reading and composing on the web, both understanding and producing multimodal digital texts (Doering, Beach, & O'Brien, 2007). In the elementary classroom, students are now composing their thoughts online for a public audience. Instead of filing their thoughts away in a duotang or binder, students can add to a class blog to facilitate discussions, reflect on their learning, and connect with other students.

“Over time, as blogging spread from a handful of Web designers and software developers to writers, and political activists, and then on to the general public, this form has grown flexible and capacious enough to encompass virtually anything that anyone might wish to express. In this way, the rise of blogs has gone a long way toward making good on the promise of the Web’s first inventors: that their creation would welcome contributions from every corner of the globe and open a floodgate of human creativity. It gave a multitude of formerly private people a public voice. It handed them a blank page and said: Learn. Learn what happens when you take strangers into your confidence. Blogging provides a space where people can begin to explore the opportunities and boundaries of self-expression online” (Rosenberg, 2009). In education, as we promote life-long learners, students will use weblogs as spaces to learn and contribute to mass literacy.

The effect that blogs have on education is the ability to provide an online space, where students are able to share their views, ideas, and opinions. Oravec (2002, p. 618) observes that the blog has many dimensions that are suited to students' 'unique voices', empowering them, and encouraging them to become more critically analytical in their thinking. The reason, simply, is that in order to develop and sustain a clear and confident voice of one's own, one has to carefully formulate and stand by one's opinions. Writing a blog assists here because it forces a student to confront their own opinions and contemplate how their views might be interpreted and reflected upon by others (Mortensen & Walker, 2002, cited in Lamshed, Berry & Armstrong, 2002). Students take ownership over their learning when they control the space in which their words have substance. They facilitate discussions, prompt with questions, and reflect on others’ views

and opinions. This is especially important in promoting digital citizenship, further developing a positive digital footprint, and teaching students the proper way to use social media.

In looking at the literature of blogs and academic discourse, we can see the connection they have. As Allen (1999) puts it, the really important step forward that universities can take is to begin fostering communities that are less specifically connected to units and are, instead, about issues, subjects, disciplines or professions and which are distinct from those already forming in the virtual world of the Internet by being associated with overall courses offered by that university. Student membership of these communities should become integral to their course completion; where necessary, whole components of the course should become (instead of 'study') knowledge-based community participation (Allen 1999).

Micro-blogging typically has smaller content, where users are restricted to communicate in a limited number of characters. The effect that micro-blogging has on education and literacy is that users are forced to be concise in how they communicate. Each time users log into their social networking accounts, they are invited to search for trending topics or communicate in different forms. These prompts highlight some of the features of literacies in a digital age - immediacy, community, interactivity, and transparency (Mills & Chandra, 2011). Communicating on twitter allows individuals to publish links to outside blogs, resources, video content, or websites.

“Literacy educators are increasingly aware of the need to harness authentic digital communication tools in educational settings, to extend but not replace conventional literacy practices” (Mills & Chandra, 2011). These new forms of communication are called multiliteracies. Cope & Kalantzis (2000) share that reducing the English curriculum to a narrow

repertoire of conventional genres and writing skills discounts the reality of literacy practices in society today ((Mills & Chandra, 2011). It is important to utilize different communication platforms in the classroom to teach both reading and writing literacies. “The small corpus of microblogging studies has pointed to the benefits of using platforms such as Twitter to enable mobile communication between students and course facilitators in remote regions (Mills & Chandra, 2011). Micro-blogging establishes an active social dynamic among the participants, to create an open, fluid, and continuous dialogue, rather than one that is closed, static, or bound, which demonstrates how communication has evolved from orality to literacy (Mills & Chandra, 2011). “With the advent of secure and free microblogging platforms, students can now engage in immediate, spontaneous, hyperlinked, collaborative, and democratic arenas for knowing and communicating in a supportive learning community” (Mills & Chandra, 2011).

As shared by Oravec (2002), a blog has the potential to promote deeper learning on a variety of fronts. A blog can serve as an online journal, which encourages personal reflection on big ideas and themes, and encourages collaboration amongst students. Students can share links, resources, and up to date information (Williams, J. B., & Jacobs, J. , 2004). In higher education, ePortfolios promote deeper learning as students own the space which demonstrates their learning narrative.”

As Williams, J. B., & Jacobs, J. (2004) share, students have long learned as much from each other as they have from an instructor or a textbook - it’s just a question of finding an appropriate vehicle for facilitating this learning. Students are able to engage with one another off campus, even from different countries. “In short, blogs have the potential, at least, to be a truly transformational technology in that they provide students with a high level of autonomy while

simultaneously providing opportunity for greater interaction with peers. A blogging tool would be a valuable addition, therefore, to any LMS” (Williams, J. B., & Jacobs, J. , 2004).

As students design a blog or post, they are developing creative and critical thinking skills. “For example, in posting material on MySpace or blogs, adolescents draw on visual design and rhetoric to both engage audiences as well as to change their beliefs and attitudes” (Doering, Beach, & O’Brien, 2007). With the understanding that their ideas are being shared to large audiences, potentially world-wide, adolescents must then know how to go beyond putting their thoughts into words, to knowing how to design these texts using visual rhetoric to effectively attract, engage, and influence their audiences (Doering, Beach, & O’Brien, 2007). Students experiment with size, text, images, links, and themes, while considering their audience and the response they will have. They will also develop an understanding of how blogs function to foster constructivist, inquiry-based learning related to fostering critical thinking and deep reading practices (Doering, Beach, & O’Brien, 2007).

British Columbia’s new curriculum focuses on personalized learning, which enhances student engagement in learning and gives students choices, providing them a say in what and how they learn, which will lead to lifelong, self-directed learning (BC Ministry of Education, 2015). The new curriculum encourages students to reflect on their work, while setting new goals based on their reflections (BC Ministry of Education, 2015). “The research of Ferdig & Trammel (2004), drawing on educational theories of Vygotsky (1978), is also significant in assessing the educational value of blogs. They argue that the discursive nature of knowledge construction is best addressed by the immediacy and commentary based system of blogging. They observe that

there will be a natural tendency for reflection and analysis on the part of the student, given feedback systems are integral to the blogging interface, but also note that the contextualisation of learning through hypertext links to other materials encourages revisiting and revising of learned concepts, enriching the learning experience. Compared to asynchronous discussion forums such as newsgroups and bulletin boards, Ferdig & Trammel (2004) contend that blogs are more successful in promoting interactivity that is conversational; a mode of interaction more conducive to improved student and teacher relationships, active learning, higher order thinking, and greater flexibility in teaching and learning more generally” (Williams & Jacobs, 2004). Using blogs in education gives students choice, and provides a platform for them to share their learning, with the option of receiving feedback from both their peers and teachers, further encouraging discourse.

Communication has evolved significantly from orality to digital literacy. Studies have shown that innovative social networking and mobile communication could lead to more spontaneous and frequent interactions with literacy (Young Park, 2011). From our research, we can see the positive effect blogs have on literacy, in both writing, reading, and communication.

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