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► **To cite this version:**

John Lenarcic, Pradipta Sarkar. The Tragedy of the Virtual Commons as Manifested in the Death of Blogs. 9th IFIP TC9 International Conference on Human Choice and Computers (HCC) / 1st IFIP TC11 International Conference on Critical Information Infrastructure Protection (CIP) / Held as Part of World Computer Congress (WCC), Sep 2010, Brisbane, Australia. pp.142-149, 10.1007/978-3-642-15479-9_13 . hal-01054799

HAL Id: hal-01054799

<https://inria.hal.science/hal-01054799v1>

Submitted on 8 Aug 2014

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The Tragedy of the Virtual Commons as Manifested in the Death of Blogs

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Abstract. The life span of weblogs is investigated with reference to Lanham's view of the "Economics of Attention" and Hardin's conception of the "Tragedy of the Commons." It is advanced that the unfettered buildup of inactive blogs is leading to a surfeit of information which effectively disables potential readers due to an excess of choice. One factor indicating healthy activity in a blog is postulated as being sufficient feedback from readers that leads to the emergence of an ongoing social network. This is viewed as an example of a virtual technology shaping social groups. Research-in-progress is outlined that refers to observations of various film music blogs derived via the case study method, featuring a focused commentary on one that has subsequently been a victim of death in the blogosphere. In this case, the forced extinction of a blog is taken to be an example of human foibles influencing the download spiral of one instance of a virtual technology.

Keywords: Blogging, Sustainability, Tragedy of the Commons.

1 Introduction

Generally envisaged as a self-directed framework to publishing using third-party applications such as Blogger, weblogs (or blogs) are web sites that use a chronologically-tagged record layout to enable the broadcast of personal or topical information on a regular basis [20]. With succeeding items displayed in a reverse time-stamped manner, blogs can be considered as either filters for information aggregation or personal journals and are often a hybrid of the two. In their guise as filters they act to accumulate and put on view links to other web sites that may include subject matter of mutual interest. Those blogs that function as journals are often a conduit for an author's soliloquies to the assumed massed readership of the virtual universe known as the blogosphere.

Bloggging is a pastime that is similar to that of keeping a physical diary but one that is drastically more transparent in its one-to-many dialogue format via an interlinked hypertext network [1]. Some have argued that the on-going production of a diary has therapeutic benefits to the self given that reflective writing can anchor one with a sense of place [30]. If the solitary pursuit of diary-keeping can nurture a community of one through internal dialogue, what would the consequences be with the implementation of a networked incarnation? Indeed, this factor could be one of the

driving forces underpinning the boom in blogging as a pastime: The weblog is a tool that is an inadvertent design tool in the creation of ad-hoc social networks where the shared sense of place forges a community bonded by a collective, often idiosyncratic, forte.

2 Blogging and the Economics of Attention

It has been stated that almost 10 percent of Internet users in the USA maintain their own blogs and 40 percent of this population read them, indicating that the Web is gravitating towards becoming a medium where anyone with appropriate access and the right motivation can become a publisher [31]. However, in 2007, “The Age” newspaper in Melbourne, Australia, reported that despite the meteoric rise in the number of blogs, there were apparently millions that were dormant to the point of fading into oblivion [20]. What motivates actions to ensure the sustainability of a blog? Blogging is a democratic means for an individual to express their views to an audience and to obtain feedback from readers on these opinions [25]. Feedback either as comments posted, or even peripheral approbation via other channels (e.g. word of mouth), has been advanced as a key factor in ensuring that a blog does not dwindle into inactivity [21].

Feedback of either a positive or negative nature can be thought of as reinforcement to sustain or modify an activity: Affirmative responses can instill confidence in the emerging mission of the blog to both the initiator and the readership at large, whereas downbeat postings can evoke a vigorous discussion in retaliation which also accentuates the vivacity of a blog. In effect, the ideal blog environment from a routine performance aspect is one that resembles a kind of interlaced Socratic dialogue between many contributors, rather than it being a one-to-many presentation, with occasional reader reactions, where the originally blogger always seems to be in supreme control.

Economics as a field of endeavour is primarily concerned with the allocation of resources, conventionally of the tangible variety. There are some who would contend that the most prized resource in the present information economy is not information per se, rather it is the capacity to draw attention to make sense of information [15]. Much has been written about the crippling effects of “information anxiety” in society whereby one can virtually drown in a glut of data [28, 32, 33]. Information is plentiful but critical awareness of it is not. We believe that this line of reasoning can be extended into the blogosphere: It is possible that the most precious resource in this domain is the set of attributes that would attract a sustained interest in a blog.

3 Blogging and the “Tragedy of the Commons”

In economic terms, the “Tragedy of the Commons” (TC) defines a social scenario where there exists a dispute between the interests of the individual and that of the common public good [10]. This tension can impinge upon the sustainability of freely-available public resources. Research findings have indicated that reputation can

alleviate the TC [23]. Indirect reciprocity of the “give and you shall receive” variety rests upon social standing and can sustain a high degree of co-operation within communities. It has been shown that the need to maintain a reputation for indirect reciprocity can also have the side-effect of keeping contributions to freely-available public goods at a high level [23]. How does this relate to the blogosphere? Li and Walejko [19] highlight the problems posed by “splogs” (or spam blogs) and abandoned blogs in the blogosphere. Splogs post bogus links and content pointing to a single site [14] and estimates indicate that one in five blogs is actually a splog [24]. One source reckons that as many as two-thirds of blogs are abandoned and constitute a new kind of flotsam and jetsam for the digital age [17].

The public goods that constitute the content of blogs can only be sustained by the indirect reciprocity of contributors, be they the authors of postings or those who submit comments to postings. Whereas the notion of TC in the physical sense is dependent on limited resources being desecrated to non-existence, in the blogosphere there is effectively no limitation on quantity or content. On the other hand, we posit that since “dead” blogs never actually decay into nothingness but linger effectively forever, this ever-increasing accumulation is an example of what we deem to be the “Tragedy of the Virtual Commons” analogous to that of the flood of information associated with the spam problem [14].

The paradox of choice afforded by the unchecked generation of blogs could lead to a situation where readers are faced with a myriad of information sources, with varying degrees of activity levels, but without the personal time to assess the authenticity in a selection [27]. To test the assumption that vigorous traffic in posted comments sustains the life span of a blog we are currently tracking the behavioural machinations of a cohort of film music blogs, with particular analysis given to a prototype within this group. These represent a niche area of interest that we believe would foster an online community of those with a deep fascination with movie soundtracks.

Lessig [15] introduces the notion of the “intellectual commons”, which advocates the sharing of ideas amongst the public, though they may have originated from the minds of creative individuals. It is believed that the sharing of the ideas will be for the public good. This notion is at odds with Hardin's [9] view of the depletion of public resources owing to “overgrazing” by individuals. However, Keen [12] believes that user-generated media such as blogs or YouTube are a disruptive influence in society from economic, cultural and value-centric perspectives. Web 2.0, in other words, facilitates mediocrity as cultural ideal. Echoing these sentiments, Lanier [14] is of the opinion that that internet has become a platform that stifles creativity and a tool that is destroying middle-class professions due to activities such as file-sharing.

Gotterbarn [9], on the other hand, claims that the TC may not be applied to Web 2.0 in its original sense due to increasing computing power. Instead, he describes the situation as the “Soiling of the Commons”, whereby a rising number of dead blogs and splogs contaminate the blogosphere. The latter argument, though, fails to realize that the TC concept is actually a metaphor that has been applied in a variety of contexts outside of its original inception to describe an ecological scenario [3].

4 Research Methodology

We adopted a qualitative research methodology as we were interested in finding out “how social experience” was generated and given meaning in relation to the blogs [7]. Therefore, an “interpretive, naturalistic” approach was deemed appropriate for the study [2]. To facilitate this research tactic the case study method was adopted for this project [6, 34]. Case studies are considered to be appropriate when a phenomenon is inadequately substantiated in theory, or when contextual factors need to be captured. The focus of case study research is on developing a detailed account analysis of one or more cases. It involves the exploration of a case (or multiple cases) over a period of time by means of elaborate and in-depth data collection from “multiple sources of information rich in context” and presents rich empirical findings and discussions of the phenomenon under study [5]. Furthermore, the “how” and “why” aspects of the study warrant the use of case studies [6].

Initially, we have chosen to focus on one paradigmatic case study of a music blog which for this exercise has been dubbed “Blog X”. This has been done to respect the anonymity of members of this blog community who are primarily referred to by nom-de-plumes when posting comments, including the originator of the blog. (Anonymous comments are permitted in this blog how most visitors to Blog X posted comments signed by the writer’s alias.) Upon inspection of the limited cohort of blogs devoted to film music, Blog X was considered to be a cultural prototype within the spectrum of movie soundtrack appreciation. (During its short history, Blog X changed from being a dedicated film music forum to one that catered to more eclectic tastes, however it never entirely discarded its roots.)

Given significant longitudinal scrutiny of the blog, it was felt that this developing case study would provide valid generalizations that would shed light on the issues raised earlier in the paper [6]. What occurred in our observations was that we witnessed the death of a blog. Most blogs would probably become abandoned due to the cessation of comments by readers and the lack of fresh posts by the initiator. However, in this instance, the initiator composed a final post announcing the termination of Blog X. So far, 90 readers have responded with condolence comments. The next section features the final post in its entirety, interspersed with critical commentary where appropriate.

5 Requiem for a Blog: An Interpretation of a Final Post

The following text is the final post of an atypical music blog whose life span was just over two years. It was deemed to be atypical amongst eclectic music blogs due to the perceived level of commitment bestowed upon it by the initiator of this blog. Blog X, as it is called in this paper, was a more generic weblog in that the initiator played a more dominant role in steering a course for the content posted. In other words, Blog X did not exhibit community-like behaviour in the same fashion as film music Blog X. The final post of Blog X is presented in unexpurgated form with only the blog name substituted with “Blog X” for the sake of anonymity as the initiator is still active within the blogosphere.

Blog X is an exemplar of the effects of TC within the blogosphere: A publicly-accessible film music blog evolves into a more eclectic online forum dealing with a variety of music genres, all due to a growing number of participant readers who return because of the blog initiator's obvious passion for certain musical arts. The growing interest in the Blog X incites probable envy in one reader, whose actions eventually lead to the demise of the blog. Embedded within the text of this final blog post are running interpretive annotations (in non-italic text within parentheses after the word 'Commentary'):

Monday, December 14, 2009

Thank You All, See You Around...

Dear Friends,

It is with great regret that I announce the official demise of this blog.

Blog X was my labor (sic) of love for more than two years, offering the opportunity to sample obscure and often-impossible to find music: music that is ignored and buried by recording companies, and otherwise unavailable to people in most parts of the world. It was a place of discovery, both for its visitors and for me, as I delighted in learning more about the music I love and share.

(Commentary: Here the initiator of Blog X offers a justification for its inception based in part on his deep interest in eclectic music as well as his contempt for the cultural hegemony sustained by the recording companies use of copyright law. Blog X was originally a film music forum but it expanded to include non-mainstream esoteric content from the jazz, easy-listening and classical genres. Meticulously assembled, download links to full compact disc or LP albums were posted on the site and these were exclusively available in lossless FLAC file format along with scans of the compact disc itself, associated album artwork and accompanying booklet. No music was stored at the Blog X site itself as these download links redirected to a commonly used file-sharing website. Donations of the monetary kind were not sought by Blog X in exchange for the downloading of music. The only currency actively encouraged was the posting of a comment signaling gratitude.)

In choosing material to feature (almost on a daily basis), I always sought to make Blog X a place that I, myself, would enjoy spending some time at. In accordance with my own musical tastes, I strove to include diverse genres, hence Blog X's familiar slogan "superb music of all kinds".

I guess I was doing something right as Blog X attracted a considerable following and I received e-mails and friendly comments on a daily basis. In addition to the stimulating interaction generated by Blog X readers, a group of friendly collectors generously contributed their own shares of hard to find, out-of-print discs and rare LP's. It all seemed like a win-win proposition for all involved, especially since the vast majority of the items on offer were not commercially available in 95% of the world. However, some blog-troll out there in cyber(looney)space was not pleased.

(Commentary: The use of pejoratives in the last sentence is an indication of the level of emotion. In Norse mythology a troll was a generally an unfavourable supernatural being, either manifesting itself as a dwarf or a giant. In contemporary vernacular, the word "troll" refers to anyone who appropriates a property that they have no original claim to and then misuses it in their name, one example being "patent trolls"[15])

A few months ago, a series of abusive, harassing (sic) and threatening e-mails were sent to me, often obscene and confusing. Obviously, a disturbed mind was at work and his attention was aimed at my blog. He also made hundreds of comments in my name, "impersonating" me at many music blogs worldwide. However, this strategy backfired on him as it attracted many more visitors to my site than before his assault started. I also refused to acknowledge his actions or existence. This must have infuriated (sic) and enraged him, so dearly craving attention as he does.

(Commentary: The initiator of Blog X had developed a positive reputation within other film music blogs and the "blog-troll" in question may have been driven by envy in his or her behaviour as outlined.)

After a few months, my online "stalker" apparently went away (maybe he found a real job instead, I thought). Unfortunately for all the people who enjoyed discovering new musical treasures at Blog X, Mr. Troll was planning instead to eliminate all access to these by destroying the actual links to the files. He succeeded two weeks ago, and for this reason I have decided to close down all blogging activities permanently.

(Commentary: Acting as a whistleblower with possibly more selfish motives than is normally characteristic of such actions [10], the "blog-troll" reported the music content that Blog X had posted to its file-sharing site, thus resulting in the download links being made invalid over time until they were all extinct.)

I had hoped to retool and re-emerge in some alternate form and had communicated same to the many of you that had written me. I regret having to disappoint you but it seems I have little choice in the matter. I am sure the moron thinks he has punished me in some way... whatever.

I want to thank all of you who made this project a personal joy for me, all those who commented enthusiastically, and especially to those that contributed their own rare music in their own generous fashion. These people include (hope I don't leave anyone out): Buster, Derwent, Grumpy, Jamie, Alternate Athos, Jonathan F. and especially Beppo. MY DEEPEST AND SINCEREST THANKS.

Farewell, goodbye, and good luck! Hope to meet you all again somewhere soon...

6 Conclusion and Implications

In an account of the recent modest revival of interest in the analogue LP record, it has been observed that part of its appeal as a musical artefact is the social experience factor: Congregating around a record player is a physical act conducive to discussion about the shared listening event [4] Live concerts of all musical genres evoke a similar communal passion channeled towards a directed interest. Music blogs would appear to be a similar social platform for appreciative expression. In our ongoing study of film music blogs and allied online forums we have observed this passion, either from the self-evident enthusiasm of moderators or in the fervent debate, artistic exchanges that take place within emergent communities that arise from readers who come to post comments and end up creating camaraderie.

However, Blog X is an exemplary case of the negative side of social networking in the blogosphere. The final post of Blog X as discussed above is a digital "tombstone"

that offers an extended epitaph of its own reason for extinction. We believe that the TC was instrumental in leading to the end of Blog X. Rather than being destroyed by the apathetic misuse of a population of individuals, the blog was effectively terminated because of the malicious actions of a single person, the so called “blog troll.” This person may have been motivated through greed or envy or there may have been other more pathological reasons for the obsession. Whatever the causal reasons may be, it does weakly suggest a non-linear manifestation of the TC in the blogosphere, namely in the potential destructive power that a lone individual can wield in this “Virtual Commons.”

Natural languages emerge, evolve over time and can decay to extinction. Blogs are a conduit for natural language and they too can be subject to a similar life-cycle. The case described in this paper provides an instance of the dissolution of a community owing to the depletion of a common resource – in this case Blog X, a technological artefact shaped by societal influence and terminated because of it.

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