**Newsblog Relevance: Applying Relevance Criteria to News-Related Blogs**

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**ABSTRACT**

Blogs, and particularly newsblogs, are receiving increased attention for their role in uncovering important or underdeveloped aspects of news stories. This research was an attempt to explore relevance criteria as it applies to users of newsblogs. An anonymous online questionnaire presented individuals with a list of established user relevance criteria, ranking the importance of each characteristic in determining a newsblog’s quality.

**Keywords**
relevance criteria, weblogs, information seeking behaviour, online news.

**INTRODUCTION**

The news industry has changed from a situation in which information was scarce, and where commercial and governmental entities controlled access and distribution channels for much of the world’s information, to a world of information overload where the public can now access, generate and distribute news information for themselves. Blogs, and particularly newsblogs, are receiving increased attention for their role in uncovering important or underdeveloped aspects of news stories. This has led to some controversy over how individuals judge information produced and accessed over the Internet. In the absence of obvious markers of credibility and authority, how do individuals assess information online?

**PROBLEM STATEMENT AND METHODOLOGY**

This research was an attempt to explore relevance judgment criteria as they are applied to newsblogs. The research question posed was as follows: What relevance criteria do users apply when assessing newsblogs?

Using an online survey instrument, 379 respondents were asked to answer 36 multiple choice questions about criteria for judging the relevance of online news and newsblogs. By conducting the survey online and screening the participants by their use of blogs, the study was able to ensure that all respondents were familiar with and accustomed to the subject matter. Subjects were recruited using a combination of online social networking tools such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as professional associations’ electronic mailing lists. Respondents needed to be eighteen years of age and familiar with blogs to participate.

Participants were surveyed on their use of resources to find news information (including search engines, social networking sites, and blogs), as well as the topics of news-related content that interest them, and the devices on which they access that content. Relevance criteria identified in prior research (Park, 1993; Cool, Belkin, and Kantor, 1993; Barry 1994) were used to form a list of characteristics specific to newsblogs that serve as indicators of quality and relevance. These included currency, reliability, specificity, geographic proximity, clarity, style, content novelty, aesthetic appeal and accessibility. Respondents were asked to rank the importance of each.

In determining blog genre, we relied primarily on traditional categorizations used in a print beat system or in the organization of a newspaper, considering the question, “What sort of editorial section or department would this kind of blog be related to?” This approach is not seamless, as newspapers have diverse ways of organizing their departments and “bleed” between departments and categories is always possible. Nevertheless, some types of topical specializations are common, such as politics, sports, business/finance, entertainment/gossip, arts and culture, health, science and technology, local news, international news, and shopping.

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RESULTS
A majority of respondents suggested that they used search engines, blogs, and online newspapers as a means of accessing information online, while only half suggested that they used broadcast news sites. The dominant genre of blogs users attested to reading was entertainment blogs, followed closely by personal blogs.

Individuals valued currency more highly than in-depth background information, for which they turn to search engines and online newspapers. Respondents also highly value clarity, originality, and aesthetics.

Certain of the user relevance criteria examined in this study compared favorably with those of Barry and Schamber’s model. In conjoining the relevance criteria of their separate studies, Barry and Schamber produce the criterion categories common to both studies: depth/scope/specificity, accuracy/validity, clarity, currency, tangibility, quality of sources, accessibility, availability of information/sources of information, verification, and affectiveness.

In addition to Barry and Schamber’s list of criteria categories, we proposed the category of Interactivity/Social Networking, which would include several criteria specific to the experience of newblogs and the Web 2.0 experience more generally. It is worth noting, however, that respondents did not place a high value on these criteria. This is particularly interesting in light of common (mis)conceptions about what individuals want from their experience of the web. While interactivity may be the sine qua non of people’s use of social media platforms like Facebook or Twitter, it does not appear to be as important to their use of newblogs.

One attribute of particular interest has to do with the source as a measure of quality. As the low ratings for various source criteria suggest, the blogger’s personal identity and the overall brand or ownership of the blog itself is considered entirely unimportant to a significant number of respondents. Furthermore, and perhaps more surprisingly, the “authority” of the blog, as this is traditionally defined and measured by the criteria of “the blog is popular” and “the blog is considered an authority by other websites”, was also considered to be of low value to respondents. This may be indicative of the online trend toward independent sources and the variety of perspectives available through a relatively democratic medium like the Internet.

CONCLUSION
This study of relevance criteria as it applies to newblogs provides a foundation for the analysis of news-seeking behavior on the Internet generally. Mainstream news sources have historically provided the vast majority of available news content. This model of news is in flux as blogs, RSS feeds, mobile news, and social media technologies such as Facebook and Twitter facilitate the instant and networked dissemination of short fragments of information from a variety of official, unofficial and ‘semi-official’ sources. A number of questions for future investigation regarding relevance criteria present themselves: where do people go for their news, and how does the type or genre of news affect their choice of source? Does type/genre of news affect the relevance criteria by which people judge the accuracy and authority of news content and news sources? How are queries, search behaviors, sources, and trust affected by the type of news sought, the currency of the story, and the impact and reach of the event? It is evident that the study of such relevance criteria is presented with several difficulties. For instance, the networked and increasingly integrated nature of social media renders problematic the attempt to delineate discrete sources of news, while the fragmentation of information into small or ‘byte-sized’ ‘snacks’ often obscures the precise identification of news genre. These problems cannot be avoided, however, as the difficulties that researchers face in addressing these questions are the same that individuals face every day in their attempts to make sense of the online world. To the extent individuals do face these problems within ever-changing information environments, the study of relevance criteria must also grapple with them.

REFERENCES


