



## ***PAF Express***

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### **The Good, The Blog, And The Ugly**

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. . . A blog can become a potentially powerful publishing tool. This is because blogs can "push" information to consumers by utilizing a technology that distributes blog updates to subscribers continuously.

Not long ago, in a universe called cyberspace, the son of two mathematicians created the dazzling, amazing World Wide Web. The Internet connected world soon was busily shopping online, downloading GEDCOM files, and typing Google searches — not noticing that another virtual universe was being created: Its populants called it the blo-gosphere.

Most of us who weren't drawn into the blogosphere still don't understand much about it. When we hear about blogs (short for web logs), it may be because the news media report that a teenager is posting a daily blog, or an online diary, about life in a war zone.

Blog is the technoterm for a type of cyber journal or update posted by a blogger. To write or maintain a blog is called blogging, and the community of bloggers is the blo-gosphere. Blogs that are linked together and that trigger a burst of activity over a specific subject are called a blog-storm.

In the 2004 U.S. presidential election, early and inaccurate reports of voter exit polling were distributed by bloggers with access to polling results that weren't yet statistically weighted to match the population, and thus were inaccurate. These bloggers, defending their misleading release of data, proclaimed themselves to be "citizen journalists" who were engaging legions of the likeminded with their blog content. Some blogs are serious attempts to share constructive ideas through a free wheeling quasi or pseudo journalism. Some, of course, are not.

Blogs, like their progenitors the Web site and the email distribution list ("listserv"), can cover any topic, and can go nearly unread or can be disseminated to thousands of readers through "feeds." The blog sites themselves are more interactive than most traditional Websites, functioning largely like a Website with a feedback mechanism and an archive, and populated by a fluid online community.

Traditionally, publishing one's ideas has required a lengthy process of writing down the ideas and submitting them to an editor and publisher. A publishable manuscript had to have a beginning and an end with plenty of meaningful content in between. The editor imposed a discipline on the writing and gave it a polished style. Then the publisher assembled the material in an accessible format and took the risk of getting it to market. All this had the effect of moderating whose ideas we ended up reading.

But as you know, the Internet knows no limits. The freedom to post anything on a Web site has spawned the blog. In one sense, the phenomenon of blogging seems to be the result of a rebellion

against the discipline of conventional writing wisdom. Bloggers pay little attention to style or form. They write whatever they want, in whatever style they want, using whatever level of language they want.

The blogosphere comprises a diverse landscape, and, as does the Web itself, ranges from the sublime to the odious. One blogger may be a pseudonymous programmer writing a fictitious account of his supposed travel exploits, while another may be a child creating a fanciful play world of dinosaurs or Legos.

Blog technology is evolving to allow consumption of a substantial amount of information without consuming a staggering amount of time. This is a feat never accomplished by e mail lists and newsgroups. Blogs can be foolish and even dangerous, or useful and entertaining. As with all things cyber, they are what we make of them.

### **Wading into a Blog. What does a blog look like?**

A blog site looks like (and, for the most part, functions like) a typical Website. You can search for it on Google or any other search engine. An example: Enter the words cat blog into a search engine, and up will come a list of blogs about—and occasionally by—cats. A typical one regards a cat named Abbie, with this introduction: "Hi my name is Abbie and I am a rat and I am writing all about me and the other cat and the people in this place." Abbie's blog apparently has been in existence since 2001; we learn that Abbie lives in Massachusetts and is astrologically a Taurus. Up to that point, Abbie's blog is no different than a typical Web. site created by a typical anthropomorphic cat fanatic (not necessarily a bad thing). However, as Web technology has evolved to allow free distribution of blog content to those who subscribe, Abbie the cat now can distribute her meowings to untold users. No longer does she merely mutter to herself about the inadequate amount of food in her bowl; now she can yowl to millions.

### **How Does a Blog Differ from a Web Site?**

One difference between a blog and a typical Web site is that blogs usually have ready access to an archive of the postings to the blog. These can be topical and chronological. Some blogs include postings only by the blog owner (or, as in the case of Abbie, the blog owner's pet), whereas others include postings by multiple authors.

In content, a blog site is an interactive Website with a log of the blogger's postings. As a passive site, its use requires that visitors come to it. In function, however, a blog can become a potentially powerful publishing tool. This is because blogs can "push" information to consumers by utilizing a technology that distributes blog updates to subscribers continuously. One such technology is Really Simple Syndication, or RSS. The FeedBurner site ([www.feedburner.com](http://www.feedburner.com)) explains that "RSS is a standard for publishing regular updates to web-based content." Those publishing on the web provide "feeds," or content updates, that are sent to central locations such as one hosted by [www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com), where they are listed in a directory.

Blogs that are available through these central listings then can be distributed to those who opt to receive updates every time an update is posted to the blog. RSS content is downloaded to a computer or other device and accessed through "reader applications" that serve up a reader's favorite feeds. As FeedBurner, whose product is a "feed enhancement service," explains further, the consumer's bottom line is that RSS allows review of a large number of sites in a very short time, whereas the publisher's bottom line is that RSS facilitates instant distribution of content updates.

RSS also can be used for distribution of Internet based audio feeds called podcasts. The term, derived in 2004 from the words broadcast and iPod (Apple's groundbreaking portable audio player) is a misnomer, because the audio is not broadcast, and an iPod or similar player of MP3 audio files is not necessary. Podcasts can be played on nearly any recent PC or Macintosh computer that can play music files. Video podcasts also are becoming more common.

RSS is not the only player in this game. Also popular is software called Atom, which is touted as "a simple way to read and write information on the web, allowing you to easily keep track of more sites in less time, and to seamlessly share your words and ideas by publishing to the web." Atom is designed to be "a universal publishing standard for personal content and web logs." Since RSS also is designed to be a universal publishing standard, the developers of "reader" software are left with the task of making sure that information is accessible by consumers, no matter what standard is used.

### **Where would I find blog software to create my own blog?**

The easiest way to start is to use browser based software such as TypePad, which is a commercial service (\$50 to \$150 per year, depending on the number of bloggers), or eBlogger, which is free from Google. Our seven unsuccessful attempts to sign up with eBlogger have convinced us that if we get serious about blogging, we'll probably use a modestly priced fee based service.

### **How do I access others' blog feeds or content?**

First, you need to install reader software, such as FeedReader, onto your computer. Once you add some blog sites to your list (see the sidebar list of genealogy blogs), be prepared to have news alerts popping up like giddy munchkins, begging you to stop whatever foolish thing you're doing and read the latest updates. You'll definitely want to customize your feeds to minimize the popups. Soon.

### **Why should I try this?**

Blogging can be a creative way to draw family members together, to share images and ideas, and to stay current of important news about the genealogy world. If you just sign up and allow uncontrolled popups of blog news, you won't be giving this technology a fair chance. Carefully customize what comes into your reader software. Check out sites such as the New England Historic Genealogical Society's Online Genealogist blog site ([www.davidlambertblog.com](http://www.davidlambertblog.com)), and be among the first to know when a new census is online, or read why your ancestor may have more than one marriage location.

### **Looking through the Blogging Glass**

Few technology events in human history parallel the impact of the Gutenberg press. Few technology events in modern history parallel the impact of the Web. The "push" technology of blogging by whatever name we call it in the future has explosive potential. If the blogosphere is populated largely by self styled gurus and goofballs, blogging will come and go, yet another phase in our worldwide connectedness. Alternatively, the technologies that blogging spawns could be utilized and honed in the service of good in a new virtual world.