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'Speaking the same language? Differences and similarities between US and UK bloggers'

Do Brits do it differently?

In 1997, when the term blog or weblog was first coined, there were 23 known blogs. The blog directory Technorati now claims to be tracking over 70 million. At first restricted mainly to North America, blogging is now a worldwide phenomenon: 33% of the posts currently tracked by Technorati are in Japanese, while only 39% are in English.¹ However, while blogging as a form of computer-mediated communication has attracted a growing amount of academic investigation in recent years, the majority of such research has focused on the North American experience. This imbalance is now being redressed in relation to non-English language blogging, for example Trammell et al's recent examination of the state of the Polish blogosphere, Tricas-Garcia [& Merelo-Guervos'] work on the Spanish blogosphere and Abold's discussion of the use of blogs in the 2005 German election campaign.² There has also been a limited amount of research into the UK blogosphere. Discussion of gender issues within the UK blogosphere has been undertaken by Pedersen & Macafee while Auty has investigated the blogs of UK politicians and Thelwall undertook a descriptive analysis of blog postings around the London bomb attacks of July 2005.³

British bloggers have mainly been part of the second wave of blogging, after the introduction of cheap and easy-to-use blogging software such as Blogger. This paper asks how their comparatively late arrival to the blogosphere has impacted on the way in which they blog and how they perceive their blogging experience in comparison to US bloggers.

¹ <http://www.sifry.com/alerts/archives/000443.html> (accessed 26 March 2007).

² Trammell, K. D., Tarkowski, A., Hofmokl, J., & Sapp, A. M. (2006). 'Rzeczpospolita blogów [Republic of blog]: Examining Polish bloggers through content analysis'. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 11(3), article 2. <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol11/issue3/trammell.html>; Abold, Roland (2006). "1000 Little Election Campaigns: Utilisation and Acceptance of Weblogs in the Run-up to the German General Election 2005." 2006 ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops, 25-30 April, 2006. Nicosia/Cyprus; Tricas-García, Fernando, and Juan J. Merelo-Guervos (2004). "The Spanish-Speaking Blogosphere: Towards the Powerlaw?" IADIS International Conference WWW/Web Based Communities, Lisbon. 24-26 March, 2004.

³ Pedersen, S. & Macafee, C. (2006). The Practices and Popularity of British Bloggers. ELPUB2006. Digital Spectrum: Integrating Technology and Culture - Proceedings of the 10th International Conference on Electronic Publishing held in Bansko, Bulgaria 14-16 June 2006 / Edited by: Bob Martens, Milena Dobрева. pp. 155-164 http://elpub.scix.net/cgi-bin/works/Show?213_elpub2006; Auty, Caroline. "UK elected representatives and their weblogs: first impressions." *Aslib Proceedings: New Information Perspectives*, 57.4 (August 2005). 338-355; Thelwall, M. (2006). 'Bloggers during the London Attacks: Top information sources and topics'.

Methodology

This paper is based on research conducted between September 2006 and May 2007 and supported by an award from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

120 UK and US bloggers (equal numbers of men and women) were surveyed about their approaches to blogging, including blogging techniques, habits, motivations and rewards. At the same time, data was collected directly from respondents' blogs and by means of online tools (Technorati, Surf Wax and The Truth Laid Bear). The bloggers were identified through the use of the blog directories Globe of Blogs and Britblog. Both directories offered the opportunity to identify a blogger's home county or state, which meant that it was possible to ensure a wide coverage of both countries. The majority of bloggers indicated whether they were male or female in their 'About me' page on the blog. For those who did not, it was usually easy enough to ascertain their sex through their blog postings. If sex or location was not identifiable, bloggers were not contacted to take part in the survey. While the project was not concerned about sexual orientation, the final sample of bloggers contained one UK woman respondent who identified herself as a lesbian and one US man who identified himself as gay. In addition, one of the UK men was a transvestite. It should be noted that, during the eight months of the project, two of the UK women respondents actually moved to live in North America.

In addition to the survey and blog analysis, a blog related to the research was established, which gave the researcher first-hand experience of the challenges of blogging and also offered the opportunity for further data collection since the surveyed bloggers were invited to comment on the research as it was ongoing.

While the study found much that was similar in blogging on both sides of the pond, certain differences between UK and US bloggers were established, in particular relating to their motivations for blogging; how the bloggers perceived blogging (for example, whether it was an IT-related product or more related to creative writing); and satisfactions gained from blogging. In addition, this research has highlighted the growth of a financial motivation for blogging, which would be a fruitful subject for further research.

Is blogging creative writing or information technology?

The first difference to be discerned was in the *perception* of blogging by respondents: whether it was seen as a form of creative writing or more related to information technology. Respondents were asked to indicate whether any of the following skills used in their current employment were necessary for their blogging: IT skills, journalism or creative writing. They were allowed to select as many of these three skills as they wanted, or to suggest others.

Skills necessary for current employment and relevant to blogging

As can be seen in Figure 1, UK respondents were far more likely than US respondents to see the IT skills used in their current employment as relevant to their blogging, with 46 out of a possible 54 respondents (85%) clicking the IT skills button.

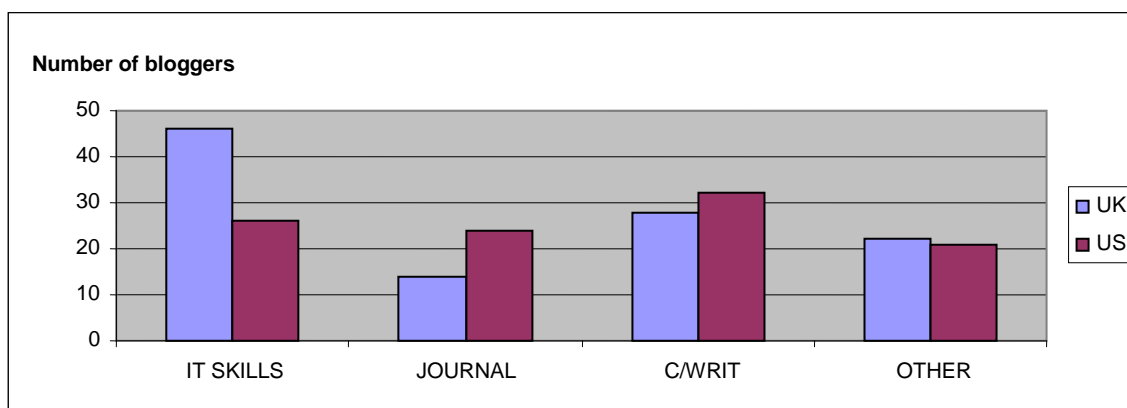


Figure 1: Skills necessary for current employment and relevant to blogging (by country)

This was in comparison to US respondents, with only 26 out of a possible 51 respondents (50%) either seeing their IT skills as relevant to blogging or even using such skills in their current job. American respondents were far more likely to see their creative writing skills as useful for their blogging.

Skills necessary for current employment and relevant to blogging (by country and sex)

In particular, US male respondents felt that they brought creative writing skills from their employment to blogging, as demonstrated in Figure 2, where the respondents are broken down by both country and sex.

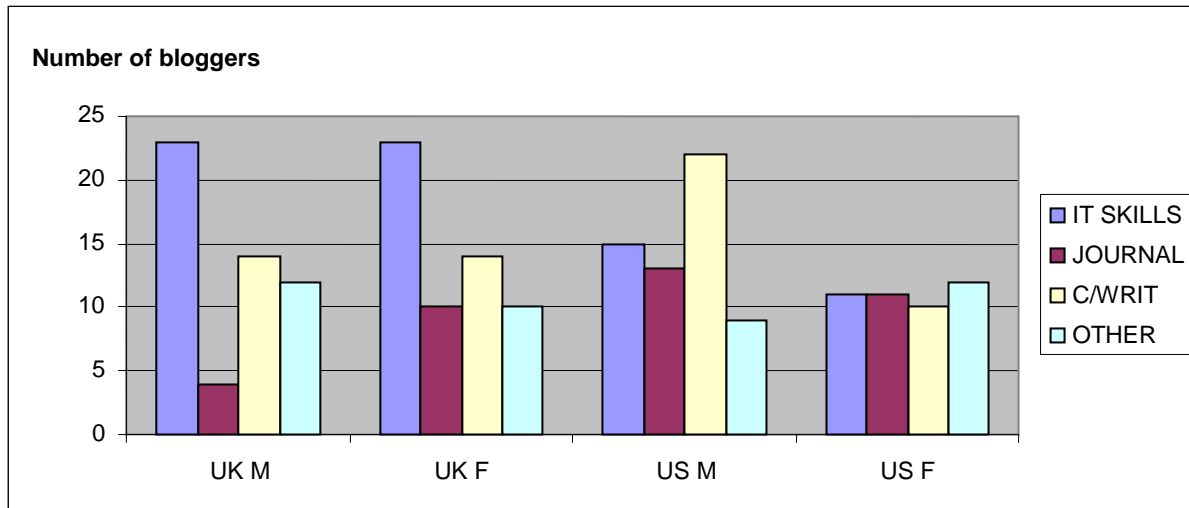


Figure 2: Skills necessary for current employment and relevant to blogging (by country and sex)

IT/creative divide

Further evidence of this IT/creative divide can be found in the 'other skills' category that respondents could select in answer to this question. Six UK respondents gave further details of particular IT skills they used in blogging and their work, such as webpage design or the use of specific software programs, in comparison to only two US respondents, both of whom were female. Four US respondents considered that they used marketing and promotion skills from their work in their blogging, but no UK respondents mentioned such skills. This suggests that US respondents, and US male respondents in particular, saw blogging as a much more creative process than the Brits, who saw it as more of an IT-based phenomenon.

What would you do with your time if you did not blog?

This conclusion was further strengthened when respondents were asked what they would be doing if they weren't blogging (see Figure 3). UK respondents were more likely to see blogging as an alternative to surfing the Internet, watching television or working, while US respondents were more likely to mention reading, creative writing and in particular writing in their journal.

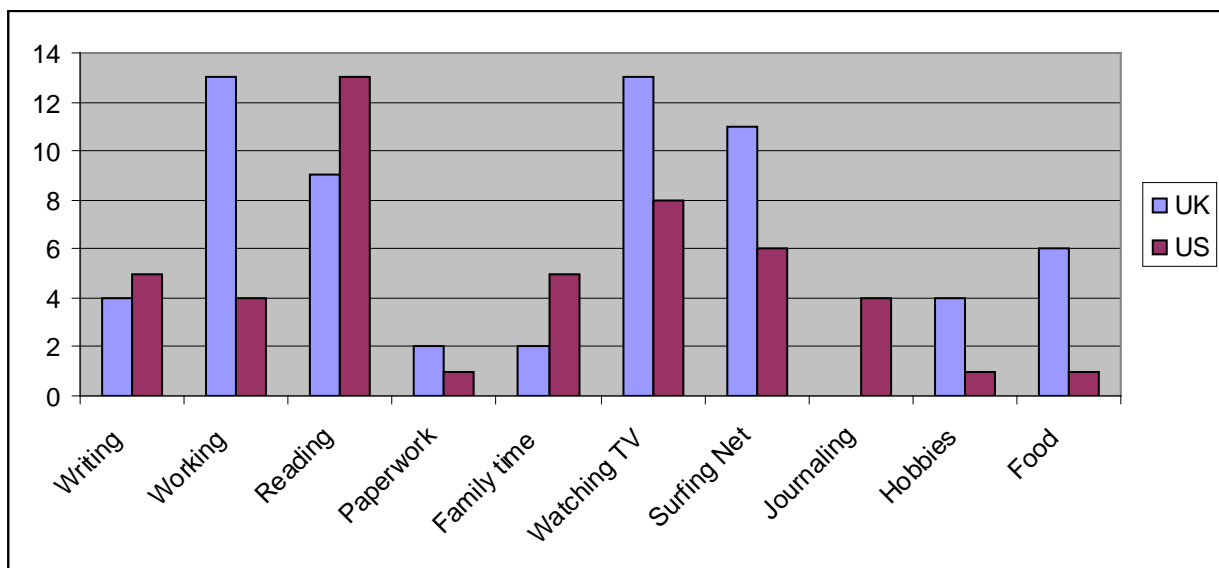


Figure 3: What would you do with your time if you didn't blog?

Comments from US survey respondents also emphasised the importance of blogging as a form of creative writing. As one female respondent explained: 'It satisfies my need to express myself through writing.... I feel compelled to write and blogging is a wonderful way to do that. I have written two books in the past and that is very hard work; blogging is more enjoyable and less demanding. I like the essay genre and blogging is perfect for short little essays about anything under the sun.' A young male respondent from the US said: 'If you write, you will find it easy to blog. Mostly, because that's all blogging is. Writing.'

British pioneers / American late-comers

The connection that British respondents made between blogging and IT is supported by the findings of a study by Lilia Efimova into what she calls the 'stickiness factor' of

blogging, by which she means the likelihood of a blogger continuing to blog after the initial start-up period. She argues that 'weblogging fits well with jobs focused on technology or weblogs: IT-related profession or any other job that requires studying or using technology in general or weblogs in particular for learning, collaboration or knowledge sharing.'⁴ It is interesting that her study made the connection between IT and blogging that this survey's British respondents seem to be making. The British bloggers' focus on IT is also interesting in light of the fact that the majority of British bloggers can be said to be in the second wave of blogging, which occurred after the introduction of easy-to-use build-your-own-blog software such as Blogger in 1999, and therefore they have little need for advanced computing skills. Analysing how long *all* the survey respondents had been blogging shows that 62 – over half – of all respondents had been blogging for less than two years, and these beginners were evenly spread throughout the two countries. Only one-third of the respondents, again spread evenly between the two countries, had been blogging for over three years. Therefore, the vast majority of the respondents would never have needed advanced programming skills in order to blog. Why, then, do the British bloggers associate blogging much more strongly with IT skills? Is it because blogging was a later arrival in the UK than in the US and therefore these UK bloggers are pioneers in a way that this group of US respondents, with their relatively late arrival into the US blogosphere, are not? Do British bloggers – and British culture at the moment – therefore see blogging as very much an Internet-based phenomenon requiring IT skills whereas the US respondents, coming relatively later to blogging, see it as more a tool for their own self-expression?

⁴ Efimova, Lilia. "[Blogs: The stickiness factor](#)." BlogTalk: A European Conference on Weblogs. Vienna, 23 May, 2003

Satisfactions from blogging

Figure 4 shows UK and US bloggers' responses to a question about the satisfactions they gained from blogging. Respondents were asked to select from a choice of statements about the satisfaction gained from blogging and could choose any number of these statements.

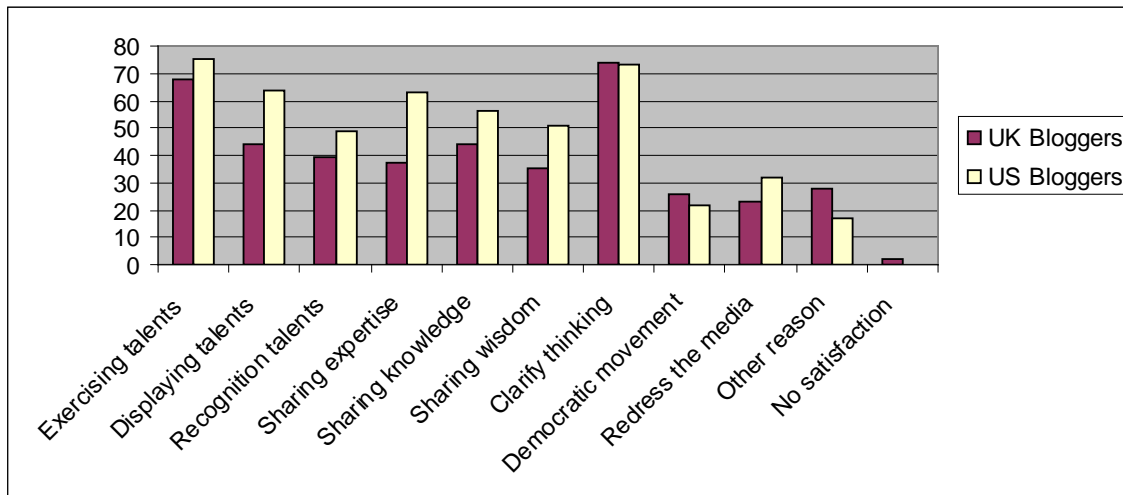


Figure 4: Satisfactions gained from blogging (by country)

As can be seen, the most popular statements chosen were that respondents gained satisfaction from blogging because it was a way of exercising their talents and clarifying their thinking. Ignoring the two UK respondents who claimed to find no satisfaction at all in blogging (then why *do* it?), the least popular statements were: redressing the biases of the media (32 respondents) and because blogging is a democratic movement (28 respondents). It is noticeable that, overall, US respondents were more willing to admit to finding a variety of satisfactions in their blogging, with US respondents selecting 502 choices compared to the Brits' 420.

Americans more satisfied

As can be seen from Figure 4, UK respondents only equalled US respondents in their enthusiasm for blogging as a way of clarifying their thinking, and were only more enthusiastic than the Americans when finding satisfaction with blogging as a democratic movement. The satisfactions that US respondents were particularly

enthusiastic about included exercising their talents, displaying their talents and sharing their expertise.

Satisfactions found in blogging (by country and sex)

Again, US male respondents stood out in comparison with the other respondents, as is shown in Figure 5 where the respondents are broken down by sex and country.

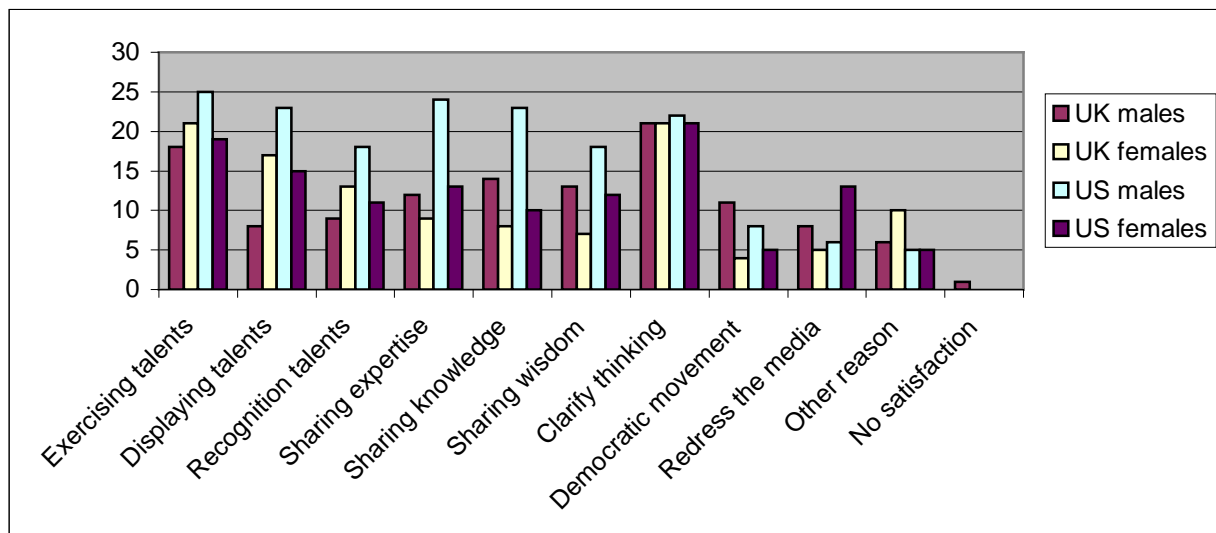


Figure 5: Satisfactions found in blogging (by country and sex)

US male respondents chose more satisfactions from blogging than any other group (172 in comparison to the next highest group, US females, who made 124 choices) and also found far more satisfaction in sharing expertise and sharing knowledge than any other group.

Why are US male respondents so satisfied?

What does this mean? Why might US male bloggers be so satisfied with the blogging experience? Part of the methodology of this project was to rank the 120 survey respondents' blogs in terms of popularity using data gathered from the blog-monitoring sites Technorati and The Truth Laid Bear and information concerning the number of links made to a blog's front page from Surfswax. The Truth Laid Bear (<http://truthlaidbear.com/>) and Technorati (<http://www.technorati.com>) are websites that use links from other blogs as the measure of the relative worth of a blog. Surfswax is a metasearch engine whose Site Snaps function offers a quick abstract of

any webpage, including the number of links made to that page. Since popularity, as demonstrated by number of links made to a blog, is used as the main criteria for success in the blogosphere, the surveyed blogs were ranked using the data collected and then the top and bottom twenty blogs in the listing were analysed to discern any common characteristics. The top 20 blogs in terms of popularity were as follow: 12 US respondents (10 males and 2 females) and 8 UK respondents (4 males and 4 females). The bottom 20 were 8 US respondents (1 male and 7 female) and 12 UK respondents (6 male and 6 female). What is suggested by this exercise is that the survey's US male respondents are on average more successful in the blogosphere than the other three groups.

Surfwax data

Surfwax data was also used to investigate the bloggers in terms of number of links, number of images used and number of words used in their blogs. In terms of number of links, again the US males dominated with six blogs in the top ten. These included a birding enthusiast, an evangelical Christian, an expert in global current affairs, an expert on German culture and an expert on American football. The two UK males included another Christian, this time a minister, and a blogger with a long blogroll relating to mental illness. The female bloggers were both promoting their businesses through the Internet, one as a children's book illustrator and the other as a sex therapist. If a high number of links in the blog is used as an indicator of success in the blogosphere, again we have more successful American male bloggers, but it is also obvious that bloggers who focus on one particular subject, which may or may not be related to their career or a source of income, are the most active in terms of links. Out of the ten most successful bloggers, five were blogging about some aspect of their career.

In terms of the number of images used on the blogs, the ten bloggers using most images included seven US males, two UK females and one US female. Four of the top bloggers here were also in the list of blogs with a high number of links above: the birding expert, the international affairs expert (who writes for a variety of magazines and journals on the subject), the evangelical Christian and another blogger whose blog focuses on funny and strange things to be found on the Internet. One UK female blogger uses her blog as part of her online shop which sells objects for the home and

therefore illustrations and photos are very necessary. It appears that US bloggers are happier to use photos on their blogs than UK bloggers.

The ten blogs with the largest amount of words in recent postings were those belonging to six US males, two UK males and one US female and one UK female. Again the blogs with the most words were dominated by those with a theme or focus. Of the two female bloggers, one discussed right-wing politics while the other reviewed crime novels. One of the two UK males wrote about military affairs, having been a soldier, while the other was a policeman writing anonymously about policing in the UK. Of the five US males, two were religious bloggers, one wrote about international affairs, one was the expert on the subject of American football, one was a soldier writing about military affairs and one was the German expat blogging about international culture.

As can be ascertained from the above descriptions, many of the bloggers who were in the top ten for amount of words were also in the top ten blogs for either use of images and links. The two bloggers who were in the top ten in all three categories were a young, evangelical Christian US male and a US male blogger who wrote about international politics, with an emphasis on technology. Bloggers in the top ten for at least two out of three: were a US male birding enthusiast; a German expat living in the US and writing about cultural issues; a group blog on American sports and betting (US male); and a US male minister writing from a Christian viewpoint. Thus all the particular dominant bloggers in the survey, according to Surfswax data, were US males.

Is it any wonder then that the US male respondents were most likely to find a high number of satisfactions from their blogging, or that such satisfactions were related to demonstrations of their knowledge, wisdom or expertise? This finding corresponds to the general tenor of research findings about gender in blogging and the dominance of male bloggers in the US blogosphere. (For references to the extensive online debate, see Pollard; Ratliff; Garfunkel⁵). It is therefore suggested by the findings of this

⁵ Pollard, D., Is the blogosphere sexist? How to save the world, 30 October 2003. <http://blogs.salon.com/0002007/2003/10/30.html> (accessed 9 March 2006); Ratliff, C., Whose voices get heard? Gender politics in the blogosphere. Culture Cat, 25 March 2004. <http://culturecat.net/node/303> (accessed 12 September 2005); Ratliff, C., *The* link portal on gender in the blogosphere. Culture Cat, 21 December 2004. <http://culturecat.net/node/637> (accessed 12 September 2005); Garfunkel, J., Promoting women bloggers: a timeline of relevant discussions. Civilities media structures research, 15 March 2005. <http://civilities.net/PromotingWomenBloggersTimeline> (accessed 23 February 2006).

survey that such a dominance of male bloggers in the US, as identified by many commentators in the last few years, also translates into a dominance of the international, anglophone blogosphere.

A financial motivation

Research into the motivations of bloggers has previously focused on intangible rewards such as influencing public opinion, sharing information with friends and family, and exercising creative skills. The work of teams led by Schiano and Nardi on the motivations of bloggers suggested that there are five main reasons for blogging. These are: documenting the author's life; providing commentary and opinions; expressing deeply felt emotions; working out ideas through writing; and forming and maintaining communities and forums.⁶ They note that such motivations for blogging are not mutually exclusive. Pedersen's work on the motivations of women bloggers suggests that another motivation may be the women's need for validation of their thoughts and actions.⁷

However, among many responses to this project's survey along the lines of the motivations outlined above, was the introduction of a financial motive. A large number of respondents, from both countries, indicated that one of their reasons for keeping a blog is the hope that it will generate income. Such financial recompense might come in the form of attracting new clients to an already established small business or new work or publishing opportunities. Bloggers might also be hoping to make money directly through the sale of advertising on their blogs. A few respondents could even be called 'professional' bloggers, supporting themselves entirely by their blogging. Such a financial motivation was particularly strong amongst women respondents who were looking for ways in which to generate income as an alternative to full-time employment outside the home. As one UK woman respondent willingly admitted when asked why she blogged: 'I hope to eventually make enough money from my blog to support my family, I see it as the beginnings of an online business'.

⁶ Schiano, Diane J., Nardi, Bonnie A., Gumbrecht, Michelle and Swartz, Luke (2004). Blogging by the rest of us. *CHI 2004, April 24-29 2004, Vienna, Austria*. [WWW] <http://home.comcast.net/~diane.schiano/CHI04.Blog.pdf> (accessed on 3rd June 2004); Nardi, Bonnie A., Schiano, Diane J. and Gumbrecht, Michelle (2004b). Blogging as a social activity, or, would you let 900 million people read your diary? *Proceedings of computer supported cooperative work 2004*. [WWW] <http://home.comcast.net/%7Ediane.schiano/CSCW04.Blog.pdf> (accessed on 23rd February 2006).

⁷ Pedersen, S. (2005). Women users' motivation for establishing and interacting with blogs (web logs). *International Journal of the Book* 3(2), 85-90, <http://ijb.cgpublisher.com/product/pub.27/prod.76>

The ways in which bloggers hoped to make money through their blogging differed. Some bloggers used their blog as a marketing tool for themselves or for their businesses. For example, one UK blogger stated: 'I started the blog as a way of promoting my online business, enhancing online word-of-mouth marketing for my business and developing my brand.' Her business sold home furnishings and objects d'art online and the blog described how she tracked such objects down, described how she furnished her own home and, latterly, how she and her family were moving to the United States but continuing to run the business from there. Another UK woman, who blogs about parenthood, stated that her blogging had started as a leisure activity but was now opening up serious work opportunities. One respondent, who worked as a children's book illustrator, reported that she showcased her work and sold associated greetings cards through her blog. Another respondent, who described herself as an English courtesan, stated that much of her clients came through her blog, which offered details about her rates and specialisms.

Direct financial reward was reported less often, but at least two women bloggers had managed to turn their blogging into a career – one UK respondent worked as a freelance blogger, setting up blogs for West End shows and individual actors. As she put it herself: 'instead of blogging to moan about my lack of a decent job, I blog for money!' An American woman respondent reported that her blog of film criticism, originally set up for her friend's amusement, was now syndicated across three newspapers in her home state. Of course, blogs can also make money through carrying advertising or requesting subscriptions. As one US male respondent pointed out bluntly:

Money from advertising is a very large reason that people stay blogging once they become popular, because it's very easy to make small or even large sums of money through advertising. Ask people who run popular blogs and some will even admit that it's the only reason they do it, or at least a large part. It's hard to say no to a simple buck.

Heather B Armstrong, the writer of the blog Dooce.com, famously supports her entire family through the advertising that her blog carries. While none of the survey respondents reported making enough money through advertising to give up working entirely, another male blogger from the US, whose blog specialised in advice about genealogical research, admitted: 'A successful blogger can earn a small income by hosting advertisements. While not enough to support a family, it may be enough to

pay for one's genealogical research fees, subscriptions, etc. I do consider blogging a part-time job.' Another male respondent's blog carried a section offering the possibility of running a banner advertisement at the top of his blog for a month with the guarantee that no other advertising would be accepted during this time. He charged £200 for this privilege. As well as carrying advertisements on their blogs, bloggers might also earn money through 'pay-per-post' advertising where bloggers write about certain products or services in their blogs in return for payment, although there is unease about this development in the blogosphere, which is seen as a morally gray area because of the damage it might do to the editorial integrity of your blog, and no respondent to this survey admitted to such activity.

Bloggers might even hope for income through the paper publication of their entire blog. Blogs which have been successfully published as books include *Belle de Jour: Intimate Adventures of a London Call Girl*; Tom Reynolds' *Blood, Sweat and Tea: Real Life Adventures in an inner-city ambulance* (taken from his blog 'Random Acts of Reality'); and *The World According to Mimi Smartypants*. In spring 2007 press coverage in the UK focused on the £70,000 book deal given to ex-*Sunday Times* education correspondent Judith O'Reilly for her blog *Wife in the North*. Although no survey respondent could report a publication deal for their blog, one UK respondent, who lectured in graphic design, credited his blog, focused on the same topic, with raising enough interest in his work to gain him a publishing contract.

Such a financial motivation for blogging was found on both sides of the Atlantic and, I would suggest, is a new and growing trend in the blogosphere demanding further investigation. The business press has already declared that blogs have the potential to be effective marketing and communication tools for small businesses. In 2005 both *Time* and *Business Week* ran special issues devoted to blogging while *Fortune* put blogs as number one in its '10 Tech Trends to Watch for'.⁸ However, so far there has been limited academic investigation assessing the financial rewards of blogging, in particular for the lone blogger rather than large corporations. Hill investigated the attitudes and experience of small business bloggers using blogs as a marketing and communication tool in his 2005 MBA dissertation.⁹ However, this was a small-scale

⁸ Quoted in Hill, J. (2005). 'The voice of the blog: the attitudes and experiences of small business bloggers using blogs as a marketing and communications tool'. MBA Dissertation, University of Liverpool, England.

⁹ Hill, J. (2005). 'The voice of the blog: the attitudes and experiences of small business bloggers using blogs as a marketing and communications tool'. MBA Dissertation, University of Liverpool, England.

research project surveying only 15 bloggers and focused solely on the marketing possibilities of blogging rather than direct income generation through advertising sales or other opportunities. Overall, Hill's findings suggested that blogs were used for relationship building with the business's clients rather than direct sales. Only one respondent was making any money through the sale of advertising and most found that the main constraint that acted upon their use of the blog was lack of time. From the reports of my survey in 2007, the situation may have changed slightly, with more bloggers at least expecting to raise a small amount of money from hosting advertising on their blogs, and many others hoping that their blogging will lead to greater things. Only two survey respondents, both male, explicitly stated that they were not looking to make money from his blogging, and one of these admitted that he had started blogging 'to see if I could drive traffic and earn money... now it's for pleasure and fun. Money doesn't matter'.

Conclusions

The aim of this research was to investigate similarities and differences between UK and US bloggers and to suggest possible reasons for any differences discovered. This paper has focused on some of the differences suggested by the survey of bloggers and analysis of their related blogs.

US respondents to the survey were more likely to perceive blogging as a form of creative writing, in comparison to UK respondents' image of blogging as an element of their information technology skills. While the majority of both sets of bloggers were comparatively recent entrants to the blogosphere, it might be suggested that, in the US, blogging is comfortably established and has now become more associated with self-expression in comparison to the UK where it is still seen as a comparatively new phenomenon related to the Internet and therefore necessitating the use of IT skills.

US male respondents were particularly likely to see their blogging as a form of journalism or creative writing. This set of respondents was also distinguished by the large amount of satisfactions they gained through their blogging. They listed more satisfactions than any other group and, in particular, gained satisfaction from demonstrating their knowledge, wisdom or expertise. Investigation of the popularity of the respondents' blogs in terms of links and also of the number of images and words in their recent postings has suggested that US male respondents found so

many satisfactions in their blogging because of the popularity of their blogs. North American research over the last few years has suggested that US males dominate the US blogosphere, and the findings of this survey suggest that such dominance stretches into the Anglosphere blogosphere as a whole, thus leading to the satisfaction of so many US male bloggers.

Finally, this research has uncovered a growing financial motivation amongst bloggers. With media coverage of book deals and a growing awareness of the possibilities related to income generation through advertising sales around a blog, more bloggers are seeing their blog as a way to raise money. While none of the survey respondents were able to support themselves or their family solely through blogging, several admitted to this ambition and many more reported a limited amount of income generation through their blog. How realistic such expectations are and how much income the average blogger can hope to generate is the subject for a new research project. However, it is true to say that the intangible benefits of blogging are now joined by a financial motivation for many second-wave bloggers.