

From the Bottom Up: A Social Network Analysis of the "Blogsphere"

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The "blogsphere," or universe of weblogs on the World Wide Web, is often claimed to be densely interconnected, with bloggers linking to other bloggers in their text entries and in blogrolls located in the sidebars of many blog homepages. Most attempts to characterize this universe take as their point of departure the most popular (i.e., the most linked-to) blogs, known among bloggers as the 'A-list'. However, recent research has shown that A-list blogs are atypical in a number of respects (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus & Wright, 2004). In this study, we investigate the extent to which, and in what patterns, blogs are interconnected, starting from the bottom up: that is, taking as our point of departure randomly-selected blogs and following links outward to other blogs. The initial (manual) application of this procedure to four random blogs coded for three levels of outbound links resulted in the identification of approximately 3,000 unique URLs, which were then analyzed using techniques of social network analysis (DeGenne & Forsé, 1999). The results show overlap of links among the four networks (e.g., all arrive at A-list blogs), with a shorter average path length than has been found in previous "small world" studies (cf. Milgram, 1967). At the same time, links directed to A-list blogs tend to be unidirectional, and many blogs contain no links to other blogs at all, suggesting that the blogsphere is not fully interconnected. We also find evidence of reciprocally linked, semi-autonomous clusters of blogs that tend not to be revealed when navigating from mainstream, popular blogs; such "cliques" are of particular interest for what they suggest about local community formation on the Web. We are currently in the process of automating the procedure for identifying blog links in order to analyze larger random samples, and are developing methods for visualizing social network patterns in the large corpora that result; these procedures will be employed for the data analyzed in the final paper.

References

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