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'Now Read This: Male and female bloggers' recommendations for further reading'

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Now Read This: Male and female bloggers' recommendations for further reading

Abstract

This paper investigates and contrasts male and female bloggers' use of one specific part of a blog – its blogroll. Most blogs carry a blogroll. It is a list of the blogger's favourite blogs or recommended reads. This research, part of a larger project, investigated the blogrolls of 120 US and UK bloggers, analysing both the sex and the geographical location of each recommended blog. Findings suggest that North American bloggers are far more likely to link to other North American bloggers while British bloggers are more willing to recommend overseas blogs to their readers, including a high number of US blogs. In addition, male bloggers are more likely to recommend other male bloggers to their readers. Such practices support the continued dominance of US bloggers, and in particular US men, at the more popular end of the blogosphere.

Keywords: blog; blogroll; gender; blogosphere

Weblogging or “blogging” has joined e-mail and home pages as a mass use of the internet. Blogs are usually defined as ‘frequently updated, reverse-chronological entries on a single webpage’ (Blood, 2000). The original blogs were filter-type web pages, essentially editing the Internet for their readers, directing the reader to other blogs and websites and offering commentary and often the opportunity for readers' discussion.

While blogging was initially restricted to those who had the necessary programming skills, the introduction of cheap and easy-to-use software in 1999, such as the commonly used Blogger, has resulted in the explosion of the “blogosphere” in recent years. The newer journal blogs have a commentary-concentrated style, which may also include links and reader responses, depending on the theme and purpose of the weblog. Links-driven filter blogs tend to be focused on external events, while journal bloggers write about events in their own lives.

However, it is important not to impose this filter/journal division too strictly when investigating the blogosphere, since most bloggers use a mixture of styles, with filter bloggers discussing their personal responses to external events such as wars or elections and personal journal bloggers recording and commenting on external events as well as their own interests.

While there were only 23 websites identified as blogs in 1997, by 2007 the blog-tracking directory Technorati claimed to be tracking 72.5 million blogs. In October 2006, Dave Sifry, founder and CEO of the blog-tracking

website Technorati, estimated that there were 100,000 blogs being created every day and 1.3 million postings a day (2006a). Of course, not all of these blogs are frequently updated and a high proportion of blogs are abandoned: Sifry estimated that 45% of the blogosphere was made up of abandoned blogs. Some are never used but are created as tests or as automatic features on social community sites such as MySpace or Bebo, which are particularly popular with teenagers (Henning 2005). Huffaker found that 43% of his sample of teenage bloggers had abandoned blogs (2004). An increasing proportion of all blogs – according to Sifry about 9% – are fake or spam (2006b).

Nevertheless, in 10 years blogging has evolved from being a specialist niche activity, indulged in only by those with advanced programming skills and known about by only a select few, to part of the global culture. Teenagers, politicians, lawyers, journalists, comedians and stay-at-home moms all blog. Events have their own blog – as do institutions. Blogging has been discovered by marketing and PR departments as a focused way to sell products to a particular audience: see the blog of the leader of the Conservative Party in the UK, WebCameron, for instance. Bloggers can even hope to make money through their blog. You can sell advertising on your blog; sell subscriptions to your blog; be paid for mentioning products (although many bloggers see this as a morally grey area); or even be approached by newspapers or publishers impressed enough by your blogging to offer you a contract. In spring 2007, press coverage in the UK focused on the £70,000 book deal given to ex-*Sunday Times* correspondent Judith O'Reilly for her blog *Wife in the North*. More recently, the author of *My Boyfriend is a Twat*, an Englishwoman blogging in Belgium, hit the headlines with her book deal.

This paper investigates and contrasts male and female bloggers' use of one specific part of a blog – its blogroll. Most blogs carry a blogroll. It is a list of the blogger's favourite blogs or recommended reads. The research, part of a larger project, investigated the blogrolls of 120 US and UK bloggers, analysing both the sex and the geographical location of each recommended blog. Findings suggest that American bloggers are far more likely to link to other American bloggers while British bloggers are more willing to recommend overseas blogs to their readers, including a high number of US blogs. In addition, male bloggers are more likely to recommend other male bloggers to their readers. Such practices support the continued dominance of US bloggers, and in particular US men, at the more popular end of the blogosphere.

Methodology

The blogs of 60 UK and 60 US bloggers were selected and their blogrolls analysed. The bloggers were selected randomly through two blog directories: Britblog and Globe of Blogs. Both directories offer the possibility of selecting blogs by state or county and so it was possible to ensure that all regions of the UK and US were covered. Equal numbers of male and female bloggers were selected. The criteria for selection were that the blogger had to have posted on the blog within a month of the start of the selection process; that the

blog be written in English; that the blogger be resident in either the UK or the US and over the age of 18. As part of the larger project, a survey was also sent to all participants, a section of which related to their blogrolls. In addition, a blog related to the research was established. This 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, an opportunity they took up with enthusiasm. It also validated the researcher as a member of the blogosphere in the eyes of the surveyed bloggers.

It should be noted that, during the period of research, two of the UK females moved to North America. Age ranged from 18 to 73. Forty percent of the UK respondents were under 30, in comparison to 26% of the US respondents. Four percent of UK respondents were over 56, with the US figure being 18%. Thus, for this random sample, the US bloggers were on average older than the UK bloggers.

The findings

Length of blogrolls

The average blogroll is not a long list of links. Fifty-eight (71%) of the blogrolls analysed had ten or less links. Interestingly, US male respondents were more likely to have longer blogrolls, only 10 (33%) having ten or less links. American male bloggers were also responsible for the two longest blogrolls in the survey, with 206 and 425 links. However, at least a quarter of the longest blogroll were links that did not work, suggesting that the blogger continued to add links to his blogroll without checking or pruning previous recommendations. Indeed, the whole idea that the blogroll represents the recommended reading or favourite reads of a blogger becomes a nonsense when a blogroll is this long. In addition, many of these excessively long blogrolls appear to have taken a large amount of their content from an extant list, for example the "Methodist blogroll," which two respondents used, and therefore their blogrolls do not reflect personal selection but rather an interest in or commitment to a particular group of bloggers. The Methodist blogroll, for example, invites readers to add their own blog to the list, thus encouraging a lengthy blogroll. This problem seems to have been acknowledged by another US male blogger who is a minister. His blogroll was divided into two sections. The first, and shorter, section was called "Daily reads" and seemed to be his personal recommendations, while the second was the "Blogroll of Reformed Bloggers" and again was a self-nomination blogroll. There seemed to be a connection between long blogrolls and religious interests. A fourth blogger with a long blogroll was an evangelical Christian from the United States who worked as a member of an online evangelical ministry. Most of the blogs in his blogroll were religious in nature.

Several female respondents on both sides of the pond were members of another self-nomination blogroll, "Women who blog," which was made up of 110 links, all of them to female blogs, but again with a high number

of failed links or abandoned blogs – just under a third (30 failed links).

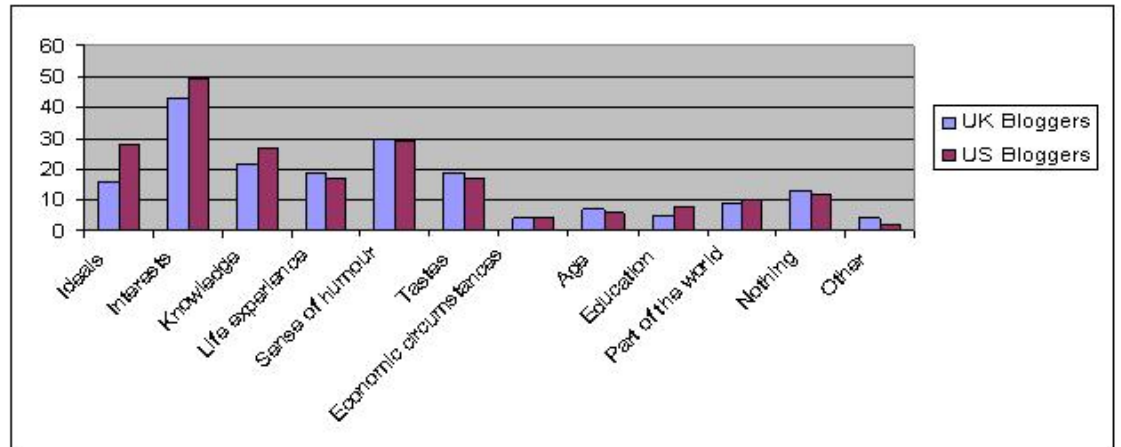
Other bloggers with long blogrolls, however, did seem to have taken a more personal approach to their blogroll. For example, a UK male respondent who discussed his mental health problems on his blog had a particularly long blogroll with many links relating to mental health. However, his blogroll was in no sense a one-issue set of links, and he also had many links relating to his other interests in politics and cultural issues. A US female blogger who wrote columns for local newspapers in her home state offered a long list of bloggers based in that state. One respondent who took a very active interest in tending his blogroll was a US male blogger with an interest in birdwatching. He aims to produce the definitive list of birding blogs and has made some thoughtful posts about birding blogs worldwide, including one state-by-state analysis of all the American birding blogs to which he links. However, even his blogroll of 206 links had a 15% failure rate, demonstrating how difficult it is for a blogger to stay on top of all the links in a long blogroll.

It seems that the blogs with longer blogrolls tended to be associated with a particular interest or hobby; in other words, were “filter” blogs. Longer blogrolls were much less likely to appear on the more diary-like journal blogs.

International links

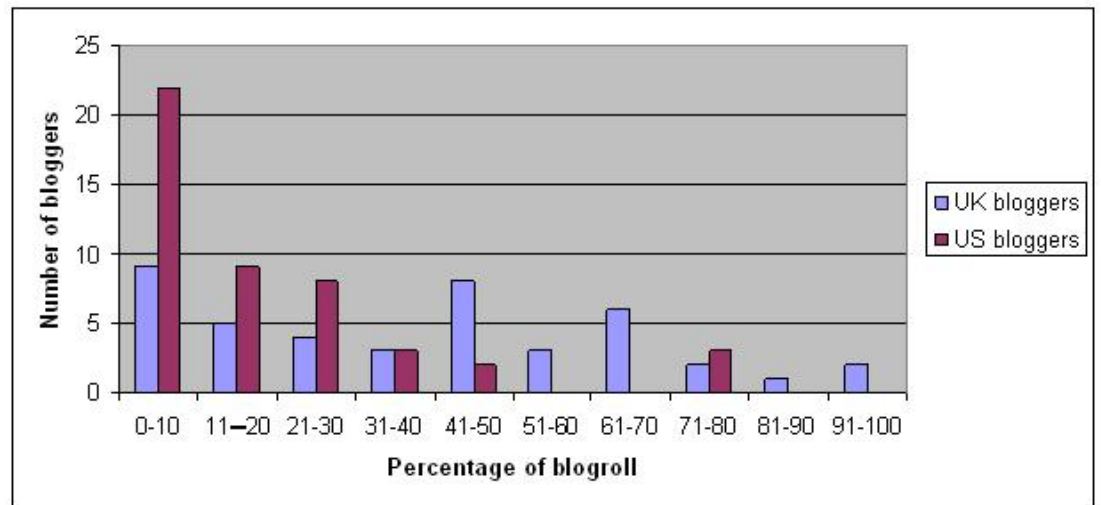
The majority (82) of the blogs surveyed for this project offered their readers access to a blogroll, although interestingly more than 82 survey respondents answered the questions about their blogroll, suggesting that some respondents' definition of a blogroll was wider than a list of links to other blogs and included any and all links on the blog. Respondents to the survey were asked what they had in common with the contacts on their blogroll. A variety of options was offered, and respondents were allowed to choose as many as they wished. Figure 1 shows the responses to this question.

Figure 1: What do the contacts on your blogroll have in common with you?



As can be seen, the most popular choice here was “Interests” (92 respondents). Fifty-nine respondents, just under half, also chose “A sense of humour.” The least popular choice was “Economic or domestic circumstances,” with only eight respondents. “Part of the world” was also an unpopular choice, with only 19 respondents. Bearing this in mind, an analysis of the blogrolls of all respondents was undertaken in order to ascertain how willing bloggers were to link to blogs from outside their own country. All links on the blogroll were followed and the geographical location of the linked blogger ascertained if possible. This was usually easily discovered by reading the blogger’s profile or reading through blog entries. The results are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Percentage of bloggers’ blogrolls containing links to foreign blogs



Of the 47 US blogs that carried a blogroll, 31 (66%) had less than 20% of their blogroll links to blogs outside the US. Fifteen of these bloggers had no links at all to blogs outside the US. The male blogger with the most links outside the US was actually a German expat living in the US who wrote a blog on international affairs and culture, primarily German. He was the only respondent to the survey whose blog linked to non-English language blogs. The female blogger with the most links to blogs located outside the US wrote a blog about Jane Austen and so linked to several British bloggers on the subject. Only three US bloggers had more than 50% of links in their blogrolls to blogs outside the US.

In comparison, of the UK blogs, only 14 out of the 43 that featured blogrolls had less than 20% of their blogroll linked to blogs from outside the UK. Of these, seven had no links to any blogs located outside the UK. Fourteen bloggers had more than 50% of their links to blogs outside the UK. It is not that surprising that UK bloggers link more to blogs outside the UK, since there *are* more blogs outside the UK. Riley estimated in July 2005 that there were 2.5 million British bloggers, compared to up to 30 million US bloggers, although there are difficulties in enumerating specifically British blogs, because of what Riley calls “the Anglosphere problem,” i.e. the existence of a common body of service providers and readership across the English-speaking internet (2005). However, the limited amount of linking that the average US blogger does to blogs outside the US should be noted. Is this a product of, or even part of the creation of, a particular national identity on the part of these US bloggers? Do these bloggers, who have their own particular world view, seek out other blogs to read that are relevant to that view and, if so, why do the Brits not confine themselves to the British blogosphere in similar numbers? It is significant that, where a US blogger *did* link to blogs located outside the United States, these blogs were frequently written by either an expatriate or a member of the US forces serving there. One of the ways in which nations set themselves apart from other nations is through the special nature of their internal communications. The media have always been a key element in the historical process of building national

cultures, and therefore it can not be surprising that new media such as blogs can contribute to the self-perception of a nation, even if such a contribution is mainly to reflect back a self-image.

While bloggers might prefer to link to other bloggers in their own country, there was less evidence that they preferred to link to bloggers within their own state or town. Sixty-four percent of all bloggers had less than 10% of their blogroll devoted to links to others in their area. Only 8% had more than 50% of the links in their blogroll devoted to local bloggers. However, all four of the bloggers whose links were 100% local were from the United States and only two UK bloggers had more than 50% of their blogroll devoted to local links.

Interestingly, while UK bloggers were more willing to link to blogs outside the UK in their blogrolls, they were also more likely to be members of geographically defined bloggings. Bloggings connect a circle of blogs with a common theme or purpose. A link to the blogging is displayed on a blog, and clicking on that link takes the reader to the bloggings page, where the other members of the blogging are listed. Alternatively, clicking on the link might take the reader directly to the next blog in the ring. UK survey respondents were more likely than US respondents to state that they used bloggings to promote their blog. Twenty-six UK respondents (11 men and 14 women) admitted to using bloggings, in comparison to 15 US respondents, only five of whom were male. The more popular bloggings were either those that linked bloggers of the same sex, such as “Blogs by Women” or “Crazy/Hip Blog Mamas,” or those that linked geographically similar bloggers. Twenty-four bloggers linked to bloggings related to location, such as “Bloggging Brits,” “Scots Bloggers” or “Expat Bloggers.” Male bloggers were more likely to belong to a blogging that promoted an interest or hobby, such as bloggings for birdwatchers, Methodists, or transvestites, which reflects the male bloggers’ preference for issue-based blogging, while female bloggers were more likely to belong to bloggings that celebrated their femininity (16 female bloggers belonged to female-only bloggings), which again reflects the female proclivity for more journal blogging with a focus on themselves.

The relative popularity of bloggings amongst the British bloggers – and the high number of bloggings related to the UK or regions of the country – is noteworthy in comparison to the lower interest from US bloggers, in particularly US male bloggers, and may point to a desire to mark themselves out as different, or a need to group together in the face of the much more numerous US bloggers.

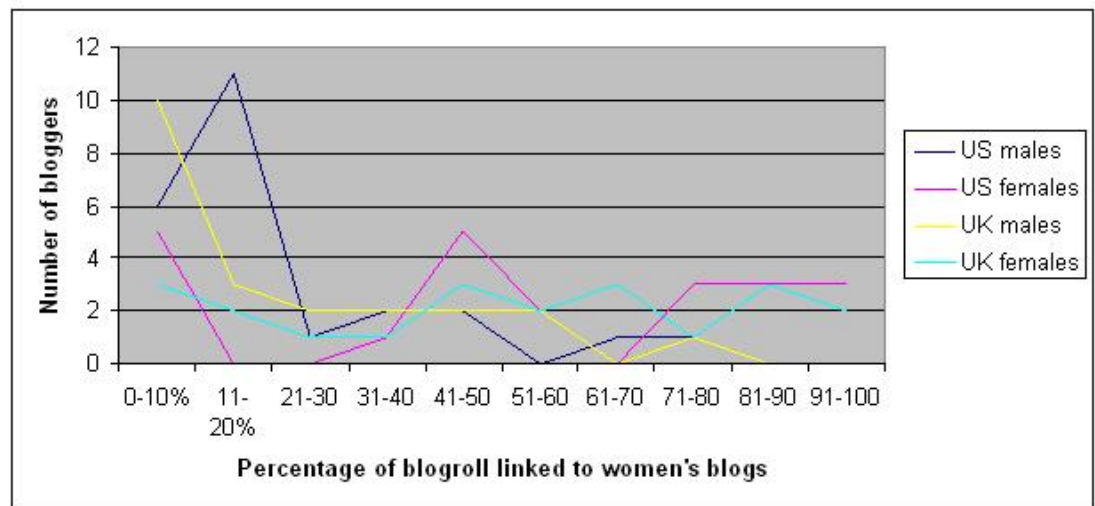
Gender and the blogroll

Finally, the blogroll analysis turned to the question of gender. All links on the blogroll were followed and the sex of the linked blogger ascertained. This was usually discovered by reading the blogger’s profile or reading through the blog for sex-specific information such as “my pregnancy” or “night out with the lads.” It was usually easy to discover the sex of a blogger, but blogs were not counted in this analysis if it was not possible to accurately decide the sex of the writer or if the linked blog was a group blog written by more than one person.

There is in fact a website that professes to be able to discern the sex of a blogger with 80% accuracy called Gender Genie (<http://bookblog.net/gender/genie.php>). Gender Genie uses a simplified version of an algorithm developed by Koppel and Argamon to predict the gender of an author. You put in a piece of text (they recommend that it is over 500 words for the most accurate results), choose whether it is fiction, non-fiction, or a blog entry, and then ask it to analyse the words and indicate the gender it thinks the writer is. Herring and Paolillo discuss the Gender Genie approach in a recent article on gender and genre variation in blogs (2006). Out of interest, I tried Gender Genie out on my UK respondents. For the male bloggers, it identified 70% correctly, but for the female bloggers only 46%. While Gender Genie does not analyse the subjects of posts, but rather the language, it was amusing to discover that it could decide that a woman blogging about going for her first pregnancy scan was male! (Columnist Alexander Chancellor of *The Guardian* newspaper utilised the Gender Genie to analyse samples of his colleagues' work in 2003 and also found that it correctly identified all his male colleagues but could only correctly identify one of his female colleagues, which suggests that this may be an on-going issue for the developers [2003].)

Figure 3 shows the percentage of bloggers' blogrolls linked to women's blogs, broken down by nationality and gender. Perhaps not surprisingly, women bloggers were more likely to link to other female bloggers. However, the extent to which male bloggers, plus some women, ignored female blogs was surprising.

Figure 3: Links to women-authored blogs in blogrolls



Of the 46 male bloggers who had blogrolls, 12 had no links at all to blogs written by women; in other words, their blogroll was 100% male-authored blogs. In addition, of the 43 female bloggers who had blogrolls, eight had no links to female bloggers. Four of the female bloggers had 100% of their links to women-authored blogs.

In all, 30 male bloggers had less than 20% of their links to female-authored blogs, while only five male blogs and 22 female blogs had over 50% of their links to female bloggers. This indicates that male bloggers are more likely to be linked to via the blogroll and confirms earlier research by Pedersen and Macafee (2006) and Henning (2003), who stated that women's blogs make up only 15% of all blogrolls. Female bloggers are more even-handed in their linking to male or female bloggers, while male bloggers are more likely to link to male bloggers.

North American studies suggest that more than half of all blog authors are women, that they persevere longer and write more (Henning, 2003), and that at least 50% of journal bloggers in particular are female (Herring, Kouper, Scheidt, and Wright, 2004). However, the most influential bloggers in the blogosphere tend to be white American males. This has led in recent years to fervent discussion amongst bloggers about the relative position of male and female bloggers and suggestions (accusations?) that the blogosphere is inherently sexist and that, while quality is measured in terms of popularity, women bloggers will never achieve equality of recognition.

Blogging is not the first form of computer-mediated communication (CMC) to be accused of inherent sexism. While research into CMC dates back to the 1970s, it was not until the 1990s that researchers turned their attention to the issue of gender. Despite earlier suggestions that online communities were gender-blind, democratic places where all were offered an equal opportunity to participate anonymously, researchers such as Herring (1993; 1996), Kramarae and Taylor (1993), Gurak (1999) and Hall (1996) suggested that, in fact, rather than neutralising gender, the electronic medium encouraged its intensification, and that participants in an online community were likely to bring with them pre-existing patterns of hierarchy and male domination conditioned into them early in life. In this they built on the work of researchers in the field of face-to-face communication such as Lakoff (1975), Tannen (1991), and Coates (1986). While the idea that women possess certain types of interactional and relationship styles has been criticised for a number of reasons, and empirical research does not consistently support such a dichotomy (see Cameron, 2007), the idea that women and men communicate differently and are oriented to different aspects of relationships has passed into popular knowledge.

In the blogosphere, popularity is measured in terms of links. We have seen that men tend to receive more links to their blogs from other bloggers. Having more links places a blog higher in the popularity ranks. Ratliff (2006) has recently produced evidence that men's postings also receive more comments than women's. It has also been claimed that a greater amount of attention is given in the media to male bloggers. British media coverage of blogging has focused disproportionately on men, and female bloggers are usually presented as a minority, unless, of course, the subject under discussion is sexual confession, in which case 100% of the bloggers discussed are women. Since it is now possible to make money out of blogging by selling advertising space on the blog, the perception that women's blogs are less popular than men's is putting women bloggers at an economic disadvantage. Such discussions have led to the establishment of the BlogHer movement in the United States with the mission to create opportunities for women bloggers to pursue exposure, education, and community.

North American commentators have suggested a variety of reasons for such an imbalance in the portrayal of the US blogosphere and in popularity rankings. Blogs about technology and politics, which are popular subjects throughout the Internet, are more likely to be authored by men. The apparent lack of women bloggers on political issues prompted Taylor (2004) to ask, "Is Blog a Masculine Noun?" It is suggested that men are more likely to blog about external events, rather than personal ones, and are therefore more likely to be found by prospective readers when using a search engine. Men are more likely to aggressively market their blogs to other bloggers and thus get them incorporated into a blogroll. The "A list" (top 100 blogs) is dominated by men and such a power curve tends to be self-perpetuating.

Conclusions

This article, part of a larger project investigating the differences and similarities between UK and US bloggers, has focused on one aspect of a blog – its blogroll. Blogroll links were analysed in terms of gender and geographical location.

The majority of the blogs investigated offered readers the recommended reading of the blogger in the form of a blogroll, but most of these were quite short, with under 10 links. Those bloggers who offered much longer blogrolls tended to be filter rather than journal bloggers, focused on a particular interest or hobby. Some of the longer blogrolls can not be said to represent the frequent reads of that particular blogger, since they incorporated self-nomination blogrolls; for example, the Methodist Blogroll. Most of the blogrolls investigated, of whatever length, had at least a few bad links, but the longer blogrolls had failed links for up to a quarter of the blogroll, particularly when using such self-nomination blogrolls. This suggests that, having made a link to a page, few bloggers find it necessary to update their blogroll when links fail, which raises the question of how far these blogrolls represent frequent reads for the blogger.

Investigating the geographical location of links in the blogrolls showed that US bloggers are far more likely to link to other US bloggers, while British bloggers are more willing to recommend overseas blogs to their readers, including a high number of US blogs. Part of the reason for this, of course is that there are so many more US bloggers in the Anglophone blogosphere. However, it may also be evidence of a need to reflect back to the blogger a particular image of his or her national identity. British bloggers' comparative willingness to link to US bloggers may also indicate a wider knowledge of the US and US politics and culture on their part, in comparison to US bloggers' knowledge of the equivalent overseas, but this is an area that will require more investigation before firm conclusions can be made.

Previous work focusing on the North American blogosphere has suggested that male bloggers dominate this part of the blogosphere for a number of reasons. These include the likelihood that they will be blogging about external rather than internal events; their enthusiasm for promoting their blog; and the linkage between male

blogs. This study has confirmed that male bloggers are more likely to recommend other male bloggers to their readers and more likely to be writing about external rather than internal events: i.e., they are filter rather than journal bloggers. Female bloggers are more even-handed in their linking to male or female bloggers, and such practices may be putting them at a disadvantage in terms of popularity in the blogosphere.

Combined together, the practices investigated by this project support the continued dominance of US bloggers, and in particular US men, at the more popular end of the blogosphere.

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