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The Decline of Experts in the Age of Web 2.0: Lay Blogger Perceptions of Experts

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Abstract

With the advent of Web 2.0 tools such as Weblogs (blogs), lay people can more easily share knowledge with the public and have far greater reach and impact. At the same time a literature review reveals that experts have been criticised on many fronts. This paper explores key criticisms of experts using 1) a literature review and 2) an interpretive study of lay blogger perceptions of experts. The paper provides important insights into lay blogger criticisms of experts. Findings indicate that a major lay blogger criticism of experts is class-based and power-based. Experts are perceived as elitists who wish to control the flow of knowledge. Interestingly, many of the lay bloggers studied held mixed feelings about experts and the value of lay knowledge on the internet. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

Keywords

Blogs, bloggers, Web 2.0, experts, amateurs, knowledge

INTRODUCTION

With the advent of Web 2.0 tools and the widespread use of Weblogs (blogs) (Technorati 2008; Universal McCann 2008), the collective knowledge of lay people (“amateurs”) has transformed the web (Kolbitsch and Maurer, 2006). Today’s amateurs have far greater reach and impact than ever before. In what many regard as exciting parallel developments, new participatory approaches to knowledge production and dissemination, based on amateur knowledge and the power of Web 2.0, have emerged. Such approaches are well-supported by convenient information access tools. For example, a blog search tool enables knowledge seekers to tap into the collected opinions of bloggers (both amateur and expert) on any given topic (Thelwall 2007). While many researchers applaud the plethora of amateur knowledge on the web, some argue that the bulk of the knowledge is low quality and will eventually crowd out valuable expert knowledge (Keen 2007). In his recent bestselling book *The Cult of the Amateur*, Keen cautions that the inevitable result of burgeoning amateur knowledge on the web is the decline of experts and the dumbing down of public knowledge (Keen 2007). Some other researchers reason similarly (e.g. Trewavas, 2008). However an opposing stream of thinking promotes the value of amateur knowledge, particularly when pooled (Frederiksen 2003; Gibbons et al. 1994; Nowotny et al 2001; Nowotny 2003).

Is the transformation of the Web from a source of expert knowledge to a source of amateur knowledge captured and disseminated to information seekers via Web 2.0 tools an undesirable trend, as Keen (2007) and some (e.g. Trewavas, 2008) argue? Or is there a case for sidelining experts and their expertise, and promoting collective amateur knowledge online and new participatory knowledge sharing and dissemination approaches? Clearly these are important questions for educators, information systems researchers, Web 2.0 developers, publishers and the wider public. To answer such questions it will be helpful to identify the key rationale that underpin criticism of experts. So far there has been scant systematic research on this important subject. Further, there has been very little research on the perceptions of amateurs sharing knowledge on the web, regarding their views of experts.

This paper aims to identify key criticisms of experts in the era of Web 2.0. It achieves this by way of 1) a literature review, and 2) a study of the perceptions of lay bloggers as revealed by blog entries. The paper proceeds by reviewing relevant literature and synthesising a set of criticisms of experts. Next the research design for the study of lay blogger perceptions of experts is described. The study of blogs is then discussed and key findings delivered including an analysis of amateur blogger criticisms of experts. Implications for theory and practice are discussed and the paper concludes with final remarks.

Fourth, there has been considerable debate as to whether accumulated practical experience or innate cognitive ability leads to superior expert performance. Some research suggests that greater experience does not yield superior expert performance and that experience is not, therefore, a strong indicator of expertise (Bradley et al. 2006). Rather, experts exhibiting superior performance think holistically and conceptually (Bradley et al. 2006) suggesting that the cognitive ability to structure experience well is important (Bradley et al. 2006). However other research suggests that expertise can be developed with practice. According to Ross, evidence suggests that experts are made rather than born (Ross 2006). Other theories appear to acknowledge difficulties with the concept of expertise acquisition and believe that the activity of knowing should be the focus (Hicks et al., 2009).

Fifth, experts' use of information for decision-making purposes has been questioned by researchers. According to Shanteau, experts use limited information to make judgements with some experts selecting irrelevant information as input (Shanteau 1992). Shanteau (1992) goes on to suggest that a superior expert will use more relevant information than other experts.

Sixth, experts have been deemed elitists. Habermas (1970) claimed that the privileging of experts prohibits democratic discussion and that experts leverage their expert privileges to maintain power. Scientific rules may be devised to privilege people afforded the status of "expert" who can then use their status to control others, for example by withholding information or sharing incorrect information knowingly (Gaventa & Cornwall 2001). Chan and Goldthorpe (2004) show that status order (rather than class structure) is developed from tiers of occupations in the UK with "higher professionals" (traditional experts in their fields) such as medical practitioners, chartered accountants and solicitors possessing the highest status. Fischer (2000) reviews extensive research that suggest experts are self-absorbed and represent the views of higher elites who supervise, control or monitor clients instead of serving their interests.

The above discussion highlights how experts have been critiqued by contemporary researchers and recent studies of public opinion. In response to such critiques, social theories of expertise have emerged.

Social conceptions of expertise

Some scholars believe knowledge is a social construct (c.f. Nowotny et al., 2001). Collins and Evans (2002; 2007) describe a social theory of individual expertise where knowledge is socially constructed and relative to a social group. They explain that as knowledge is associated with social groups, expertise is the result of successful socialisation within a group or other human structure. Collins and Evans believe people need a certain amount of expertise relating to a group in order to learn the language of the group, research its domain, and ascertain what is true - or not true - in that domain. The researchers divide expertise into "contributory expertise" and "interactional expertise". A person with contributory expertise can contribute knowledge in conversation and also use tacit knowledge to apply that knowledge in practice whereas a person with interactional expertise can 'talk the talk' but not 'walk the walk'. The researchers further distinguish between substantive- and meta-expertise. Substantive expertise is domain expertise, whereas meta-expertise is the critical ability of an information consumer to determine whether an expert is credible.

Emerging social approaches to expertise are often participatory and draw on the collective intelligence of lay people. According to Gibbons (1999), expertise emerges from the bringing together of many knowledge sources, with the authority of the expertise linked to the pattern of self-organising connection of sources. New knowledge emerges from interactions between knowledge sources. Nowotny et al (2001) propose a modern application of this concept where scientific knowledge claims are debated with the marketplace, potentially improving outcomes.

Clearly social media can provide important support for social conceptions of expertise. Using social media, lay people and experts alike can share thoughts and opinions with other internet users. One popular social media tool is a publicly accessible blog used for knowledge sharing and knowledge dissemination to the public, as discussed next.

Public Blogs and Amateur Knowledge Sharing and Dissemination

A blog is a set of dynamic web pages with dated entries organised in reverse chronological order (Herring et al 2004). Blogs facilitate regular or casual publishing of personal or topical information. A set of blogs dealing with a particular subject can be linked explicitly or by search, and represents the collective intelligence of the bloggers. The entire network of blogs on the internet is referred to as "the blogosphere".

Google Blog Search with the search keywords “Keen” and “The Cult of the Amateur”, with many blog entries returned in the search results (the number of entries returned was not recorded). This result suggested that amateur blogs could provide a useful source of research data to understand the views of a key stakeholder group relating to the research topic – amateurs who regularly share knowledge online with the public via blogs. Similarly other researchers are beginning to recognise the value of blog entries as research data sources (Jones & Alony 2008).

Between 15 July 2007 and 15 November 2007 the researcher collected relevant blog articles and website addresses by conducting monthly blog searches using Google’s Blog Search tool and the keywords, “Keen” and “The Cult of the Amateur”. The researcher copied a blog entry into the research database provided that it indeed discussed ideas in the book by Keen (2007). At the end of the period of data collection, 317 blog entries and website addresses had been collected. The blog entries in the database and blogs themselves were then reviewed by the researcher as follows. Blog entries authored by experts, professionals or institutions were eliminated from the research database, along with their website addresses. After this review process, 241 blog entries and corresponding blog addresses remained. The researcher then reviewed each blog entry in order to ascertain whether the blogger had clearly commented, favourably or otherwise, on experts. All blog entries which did not include such content were culled. At the conclusion of this review process, 165 blog entries remained. In March 2009, the researcher checked each blog’s active/inactive status on the web. If the blog was no longer active, the relevant blog entry was culled from the database as the blogger was considered uncommitted to sharing knowledge by blog. 122 blog entries and website addresses comprised the final data set.

The researcher employed qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2000) to analyse the blog entries. Each blog entry was analysed for themes representing criticisms of experts, using deductive and inductive qualitative content analysis as follows. First, two columns were added to Table 1. Column 3 stored a counter for the number of times a particular criticism was identified in the dataset of blog entries. Column 4 captured relevant text from the blog entry. For each blog entry, the text was analysed and if a phrase was interpreted as an expert criticism, the extended table was consulted to determine whether the criticism was already present. If the criticism was already in the table, the relevant counter (in column 3) was incremented and the phrase was stored in the fourth column of that row. If it was a new criticism, a new row was added to the table and columns 3 and 4 completed. A summary version of the final table is presented in this paper (Table 2), showing the number of occurrences of each criticism.

FINDINGS

This section first discusses key findings on criticisms of experts by 122 lay bloggers (summarised in Table 2). The first six rows of the table list the literature-based set of criticisms from Table 1 while the remaining four rows list four new criticisms identified from the analysis of blog entries. The discussion below is illustrated with quotes from the blog entries to properly convey the tone of bloggers.

By far the most common criticism of experts was that they are elitists, or represent elitists. More than fifty per cent of the blog entries which commented on experts expressed this viewpoint. The sub-theme of control featured strongly in this category, with bloggers expressing the view that experts were trying to subjugate lay people:

“Evidently, Keen is an elitist who argues that only ‘experts’ should manage the news, create art, and, I guess, control the rest of us”.

In particular, there was a feeling that information was regarded by experts as theirs to control, monitor and dispense as they saw fit:

“internet-born free market forces have burst the elitists’ monopoly on information”
and

“It’s the typical argument of a certain type of schools administrator or teacher who just doesn’t think that mere mortals should be given the opportunity to say what they think, unvetted, not quality controlled and verified by ‘them’, the powers that be”.

Some bloggers felt that lay people were silenced if they were not recognised experts. These bloggers felt that they were regarded as lower status than experts:

“talking is best left to those self-selected elite whilst the rest of us pig farmers should keep quiet - a sort of ‘Stop all that chattering! I’m talking’ approach”.

Other comments related directly to a perceived class issue where experts were accorded higher intellectual status:
“So it’s a closed garden for experts, then? Well, of course. One possibly could not imagine that the great unwashed might have a brain”.

Experts make subjective decisions	0	2
Public doubt in scientific methods	0	3
Value of innate cognitive abilities vs. practice/experience	8	4
Unreliable use of information by experts	0	5
Experts are elitists, or represent elitists	67	6
Experts cannot be trusted (new)	23	N/A
Experts are not the only people with valuable knowledge (new)	11	N/A
Experts are a failed "institution" (new)	5	N/A
Experts are not independent (new)	21	N/A

Finally, a small number of bloggers (5 in all) felt that experts were a failed institution which should be discarded:

"We've had the Cult of The Expert for centuries now. And we've seen how and why it breaks down, why it fails."

Interestingly, the remaining four criticism types in the table were not identified in any of the blogger entries: experts frequently disagree; experts make subjective decisions; public doubt in scientific methods; unreliable use of information by experts.

Other important insights were gleaned from the blog entries. In addition to the criticisms discussed above, some bloggers had mixed feelings about the thesis that amateurs were flooding the Web with amateur knowledge. They saw a trend towards low quality content and were concerned. For example, one blogger wrote:

"The internet is shifting towards a medium where it's becoming increasingly filled with narcissistic rants. But it hasn't gotten to a stage yet where this type of content - personal blogs etc - is overpowering the really useful content on the web. The day when i use google and the first page are all results from personal blogs - that's the stage i don't want to get to"

while others identified underlying problems with Web 2.0 such as:

"Web 2.0 can ... be a game that people learn to play in an attention seeking economy. Global village idiocy, banalisation, hive mind, self censorship and chasing popularity are all real problems "

Some bloggers looked past the issue of experts versus amateurs to higher ideals such as liberation of the people:

"What seems at stake, besides professionalism and expertise, is the nature of our democracy, whether political and familial power controls the flow of information, or whether the liberating attempt to give the flow of information to the individual succeeds."

Others looked past even the flow of information towards a transfer of power from experts to the common marketplace.

"Yes, I'm sure that some artists will suffer from the opening up of the means of expression They will not adapt, but then I'm sure many will benefit. The crowd will be the arbiter, not Keen and his fellow 'old guard' Unless, of course, the crowd choose them to be so."

DISCUSSION

The findings from the empirical study, set out above, suggest that some lay bloggers may have negative perceptions of experts and that these perceptions may positively affect blogging motivation and commitment. The lay blogger criticisms of experts as identified in the study (Table 2) also support and extend previously identified criticisms of experts (Table 1).

could find ways to link amateurs and experts collaboratively - ways that do not threaten egos, and do not permit power imbalances. To conclude, unless this issue is faced and addressed, Keen's (2007) prediction of the decline of experts on the Web may gather momentum and head towards reality.

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