

Measuring the Effectiveness of TV Station Blogs with the Conversational Index

Abstract

The Conversational Index (CI) is a simple measure to gauge the effectiveness of blogs. The number of comments to blog posts is added to the number of trackbacks, and that sum is divided by the number of posts. The result suggests how much conversation is taking place between the blogger and audience. This paper applies the Conversational Index to blogs on local U. S. television station web sites. Blogs dealing with items in the news registered the highest CI's, while weather blogs had the lowest. While measuring the quantity of responses to blog posts, the CI does not measure quality of the comments, opening the potential for further refinements to this metric in the future.

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Introduction:

Local television stations in the United States have been developing ways to drive viewers to their web sites, in the hope of keeping audience that is watching less news on the air. Observers in trade publications (Granju, 2008), on blogs (Heaton, 2005) and in academia (Niekamp, 2007) have noted the efforts stations are making in the online arena. One strategy is the creation of station weblogs, or blogs. The intent of these blogs is to develop a relationship between the station and its viewers, by means of an online "conversation." But is that conversation actually taking place? A simple metric known as the conversational index can help answer that question. This article uses the conversational index to determine whether people are reading TV station blogs, and whether they are actually interacting with them.

Literature Review:

A blog is a form of online journal in reverse chronological order, with the most recent entries, or posts, at the top of a web page. Blogs usually include the opportunity for readers to comment on individual posts. Such use of the interactive characteristics of online media is one form of conversation. A "comment" link at the end of each blog post invites readers to interact with the blog's author(s). Not including a comments link could make blog readers feel their opinions have little value to the blogger (Cass et al., 2005). However, one study (Herring, 2005) found that most blogs contain neither links nor comments. Some researchers contend that a blog must include comments, or it is not a real blog, but just an online journal (Blood, 2002). Since the beginning of blogging, bloggers have noted the conversational qualities of blogs (Blood, 2002; Herring, 2004; Heaton, 2005). But conversation on blogs is not limited to person-to-person exchanges. The presence of interactive elements, such as links to other web sites or blogs, is also considered a form of conversation in the blogosphere (Herring et al., 2005). Herring contends that simply linking to another blog is a form of conversation.

Trackbacks allow two different weblog articles to cross-reference each other (Taylor, 2006). A trackback link at the bottom of a blog post would take the reader to another blog that has linked to that particular post. Because trackbacks bring other blogs into the audience's information mix, they're considered a conversational element, as suggested by interactivity scholars (Carey, 1989; Wu, 1999; Burgoon et al., 2000; Lee, 2000; McMillan, 2000a, 2000b) and bloggers themselves (Zeigler, 2006).

At local television stations, blogs offer station employees the opportunity to comment on stories or issues within the industry. Employee blogs are becoming a fact of life throughout the business world (Kirkpatrick & Roth, 2005), and can be integral to a company's customer relations efforts. But these ventures can backfire, too. Some companies have shut down employee blogs for posting items that put the company in a bad light (Kirkpatrick & Roth, 2005). However, employee blogs have been found to be beneficial to a company's relations with its customers, by connecting with audiences on a personal level, building trust, and collecting feedback (Cass et al., 2005).

Measuring blog effectiveness is a concern to marketers whose strategy includes corporate blogs. Many suggestions for measuring effectiveness are still in the formulation stage. Some writers suggest combining qualitative surveys of blog readers with the kind of online monitoring of blog use, such as comments and trackbacks (Rodgers, 2005). A more quantitative way to measure effectiveness was suggested by social media consultant Stowe Boyd (Boyd, 2006a). Boyd said the most successful blogs were those whose comments plus trackbacks outnumbered the number of posts to the blog. He coined the label, "Conversational Index," to track the relationship. His formula had the number of posts divided by the number of comments plus trackbacks, resulting in a Conversational Index (or CI) of less than one when comments and trackbacks outnumbered posts. Boyd later accepted a suggestion to reverse the formula, dividing the number of comments plus trackbacks by the number of posts. Under his formulation, blogs with greater amounts of conversation would have CI's of greater than one (Boyd, 2006b).

Few formal studies of blogs have been done using the conversational index, but one that looked at public library blogs (Crawford, 2007) found that of 252 blogs, only 118 registered any comments. The resulting average CI was 0.3 (three comments per 10 posts). Only one had a CI of greater than 1 (comments outnumber posts). In Australia, the Gold Coast City Council Libraries conducted a study of their blog, aimed at teens. Over a three-month period, the blog had a CI of 0.95 (Davis, 2009), which the study noted was better than the results of Crawford's study, and close to the benchmark CI of one set by Boyd.

The purpose of this study is to use the conversational index to determine if television station blogs are actually engaging an audience – one that might be attracted to the station's other programming, especially its local newscasts. It intends to answer the following three research questions:

RQ1: What is the average conversation index of television station blogs?

RQ2: What kinds of blogs achieve the highest CI?

RQ3: Do specific topics drive up the CI?

Methodology:

This study is based on a content analysis of blogs found on the web sites of television stations in 44 randomly-selected television markets over a one-month period. The unit of analysis is the individual blog. The number of blogs examined for each market varies, because some stations do not feature blogs on their web sites, while other web sites feature many blogs. A total of 157 blogs made up the sample. Station blogs that did not enable comments were excluded.

Content analysis coded for the number of posts on a blog, the total number of comments found on those posts, the number of trackbacks, and the type of blog, whether news, weather or sports, or those written by the station's news anchors. Another category called "show" was created for blogs put up by talent and/or crew from a specific newscast. These are usually morning newscasts, rather than the main evening shows. A catch-all category labeled "other" included blogs on topics that didn't neatly fit into the four main types. These ranged from blogs about raising young children, to health topics, to musings by a station's general manager. For each blog, the Conversation Index was computed using comments plus trackbacks divided by posts. As a reliability check, a graduate student trained in the coding process coded 25 randomly-selected blogs. Holsti's coefficient of reliability was .92.

Results:

When the sample is broken out by market size, it consists of eight stations in large markets (1-25), 23 in medium markets (26-100), and 13 in small markets (101-210). The number of blogs per station varied from a low of one to a high of 19. The sample consists of 18 anchor blogs, 46 news blogs, 27 sports blogs, 23 weather blogs, 5 show blogs, and 38 in the "other" category.

The first research question, the average Conversational Index for TV stations blogs, is answered by computing the CI for each blog and averaging the CI's for all the blogs. All 157 blogs considered as an aggregate had an average Conversational Index of 5.82 indicating that each blog post received between five and six comments. It must be noted that not one blog post in the entire sample received any trackbacks, and most station blogs did not enable trackbacks. Therefore, the Conversation Index in this study is simply the number of comments divided by the number of posts. Another useful figure is the median Conversational Index of 1.66. Half the sample had CI's lower than 1.66, and half were higher.

More than half the blogs, 98, had CI's of 1 or greater. By this measure, conversations of sorts were taking place. That is, the number of comments matched or exceeded the number of posts. Seven large market station blogs fell into this category, along with 44 from medium markets and 37 from small markets. Seventeen blogs had CI's of zero, meaning no comments to any post on the blog. Of these, seven were from large market station blogs, eight from medium market blogs, and two from small market blogs. Table 1 shows the CI results.

Table 1: Average Conversational Index

	<i>Conversational Index</i>	<i>CI=0</i>	<i>CI=0-1</i>	<i>CI ≥ 1</i>
All blogs	5.82	17	42	98
Large market blogs	2.48	7	17	7
Medium market blogs	9.04	8	20	44
Small market blogs	3.57	2	5	37

Research question 2 asked what kinds of blogs have the highest conversational index. Of the 96 blogs with a CI of 1 or higher, four stood out for having far and away the highest CI's. Those four were from only two different stations, and had CI's ranging from the mid-50s well into the 100s. Three of the four were news blogs – or blogs dealing with discussions of current news stories. Table 2 lists the stations, their blogs, the type of blog, and the Conversational Index for each.

Table 2: Blogs With Highest CI

<i>Station</i>	<i>City</i>	<i>Blog</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>CI</i>
WTNH	New Haven, CT	Notes from the newsroom	News	54.88
WOAI	San Antonio, TX	Beyond the Headlines	News	79.40
WTNH	New Haven, CT	Web Sites Blog	Other	109.25
WOAI	San Antonio, TX	Too Much Coffee	News	115.60

Breaking down blogs by type gives similar results. When the CI is computed for each type of blog, the news blog has the highest CI, at 9.79. Weather is the lowest, with 2.22. The CI's for each blog type are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: CI's by type of blog

<i>Type of blog</i>	<i>CI</i>
News	9.79
Other	5.67
Sports	4.26
Show	4.03
Anchor	3.51
Weather	2.22

The final research question asked whether specific topics in the blogs drive up the Conversational Index, and the findings are open to interpretation. The single post that drew the most comments was on Too Much Coffee, a blog written by Jaie Avila, an anchor and investigative reporter for WOAI-TV in San Antonio. It dealt with a couple who had been denied an apartment rental because the man was heavily tattooed. Such a practice is not illegal in San Antonio. The post, "S.A. Couple Branded as Bad Tenants Because of Tattoos," drew 1,472 comments. Many commenters posted multiple times, so the number of unique commenters was much less, but the number is still remarkable. Most Avila blog posts drew comments in the single digits.

Another WOAI blog, *Beyond the Headlines*, recorded hundreds of comments to several different posts. “Principals and Teachers: Which Ones Don’t Make the Grade?” brought 833 comments to an item concerning school principals and teachers that have failed their state exams numerous times. Another post, “Spurs Want More Tax Money to Upgrade AT&T Center,” drew 252 comments.

Several posts on blogs hosted by WTNH-TV, New Haven, CT, drew more than 100 comments each. The WTNH Web Sites Blog, which discusses changes to the station’s web site, “technical things,” “general stuff and nonsense,” and “what’s in the news,” ran a post called “Did flawed laws contribute to teens’ deaths?” The post noted that the driver of a car that killed three teenagers had a DUI conviction and several citations on his record. That post had 523 comments. A post immediately following, “I can’t even imagine the grief,” showed a picture of the parents of one of the teens at the scene of the accident. It drew another 269 comments.

All of these blog entries dealt with hard news stories. News blogs also led among blogs getting more than 100 comments overall. Thirteen news blogs were in this group, while four sports blogs got more than 100 comments, and only one blog from each of the weather, anchor, and show categories registered more than 100. It is also worth noting that five of the ten blogs attracting the most comments were on the WTNH web site, while WOAI accounted for three of the top ten.

The bottom end of the scale is less clear-cut. Of the 18 blogs receiving no comments at all, for a CI of 0, six were sports blogs, five weather blogs, and four in the “other” category. One anchor blog and one news blog rounded out the 18.

Discussion:

The results of this survey indicate that a blog-reading audience is interacting with television stations—having “conversations” as defined by the blogosphere. This finding contradicts an earlier study of television station blogs (Niekamp, 2007), which found that the lack of commenting opportunities limited the possibilities for conversation. A little less than one-third of all blogs in that study accepted comments. Zeigler (2006) points out that that finding is not unusual; several of the top ten blogs ranked by the blog search engine, Technorati, do not accept comments. What is not apparent is whether the original poster at the station ever answered any

comments online. Quick scans through pages of comments found no evidence that they did.

The possibility that bloggers can comment on their own posts also raises the spectre of “comment fraud” and “trackback fraud.” If the Conversational Index develops into an important metric for measuring blog effectiveness, some bloggers may yield to the temptation of padding their comment and trackback numbers to raise their CI’s (Parekh, 2006). Spam may also be a concern. Once an e-mail address or URL is posted, it can easily become the target of spammers. Stations and blog administrators may feel it’s necessary to disable the comment feature, just to cut down the amount of spam the station’s computer network must contend with.

A cursory examination of the blog posts found that those drawing comments heard frequently from the same people. These “faithful few” who make up the core audience of a particular blog comment often enough that they can affect the CI number. In such a case, is the conversation wide-ranging enough to be meaningful? Ellsworth (2006) suggests that for two blogs with equal CI’s, the one with more unique commenters should somehow garner a higher CI than the blog with the smaller number of mostly the same people, because the conversation is fed by more participants.

An important concern regarding the conversational index is that it treats all comments equally, by focusing on quantity rather than quality. A blog can have a relatively high CI, but most of the comments can be banal (Ellsworth, 2006). Ellsworth and others would like to see a way to examine the content of comments, to determine the level to which they contribute to the quality of the blog.

Zeigler (2006) notes that different categories of blogs attract different levels of participation. This study’s results partially support that contention, in that blogs from all different categories ranked both high and low in terms of CI. Bhargava (2005) contends that personal blogs outscore business blogs in terms of the number of comments per post. But a high number of comments on a “mommy” blog, about 80, pales in comparison to the hundreds of comments encountered on some of the news blogs in this sample.

This study found no trackbacks on any blogs in the sample. That’s consistent with the earlier Niekamp study, which noted that most people don’t understand what a trackback is, or its purpose. However, sophisticated bloggers value trackbacks, because of their potential to open up new avenues of discovery and discussion (Zeigler, 2006).

The study is limited in several areas. First, no distinction was made between new blogs and those that had been established for awhile. New blogs take some time to build readership; those that had been around for only a month at the time of the study generally had a low comment-to-post ratio, bringing down the overall CI. Another limitation is that some blogs had been established by corporate directive. In the case of one small market station, a blogger wrote that all the newsroom employees had been ordered to write blogs. Niekamp's (2007) study of TV station blogs found that 11 percent of blogs on station web sites had been abandoned, either because no one ever commented, or because the authors were never committed to the blogs to start with. Blog commentator Glenn Reynolds (2006) says that blogs written as a requirement, rather than an opportunity to express oneself, could lead to a loss of interest on the part of their writers. Finally, unequal numbers of posts from each blog were tabulated. For example, some stations display as many as 20 blog posts on one web page, before the reader is asked to click to the next page. Many blogs have complete archives, going back to the creation of the blog, which may have been several years ago. In other cases, web sites displayed only the most recent four or five posts, and provided no access to archives. If equal numbers of posts had been compared across all blogs in the sample, the results may have been different.

However, the main finding of this study is that television station blogs are indeed engaged in a conversation with their audiences. Blog readers are interested in local news items, and make their feelings about those stories known. This can only be encouraging for newsrooms and their stations, since it means a relationship is in fact developing between them and their audiences. Such a relationship could slow the defection of viewers from local TV, while providing additional communication channels for station and viewer.

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