

Sharing Experiences and Helping Others: Examining the Activity and Motivations of Healthcare Bloggers

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Introduction

According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, nearly 113 million Americans have searched online for health-related information (Fox, 2006). This statistic clearly indicates that the Internet has had a significant impact on how patients, caregivers, medical professionals and others seek and consume healthcare content.

As the Internet has evolved, individuals have moved from passively consuming healthcare information to actively creating it and shaping its interpretation. Traditionally, online bulletin boards have been the most popular places for medical professionals and patients to comment on pharmaceuticals, hospital systems and other topics. In recent years, health-related online real estate has significantly expanded as thousands of people have begun to write blogs focusing on healthcare issues. In 2006, Pew estimated that 120,000 Americans were writing weblogs on this topic (Lenhart and Fox, 2006).

As the “healthcare blogosphere” has grown, so has its influence. Major search engines, including Yahoo! and Google, favor content produced on blogs. With millions of people turning to these resources for information about healthcare, it is very likely that they are viewing and being influenced by blogger-produced content.

While blogs are slowly emerging as a force in healthcare, little is known about the motivations, opinions and behaviors of large numbers of healthcare bloggers. To fill this knowledge gap, this researcher, in conjunction with the Medical Blog Network (<http://trusted.md>), a leading community of health blogs, fielded a global online survey from July 31 to September 29, 2006. Individuals and organizations devoting at least 30 percent of posts on their weblogs to healthcare-related topics were invited to take the survey.

The study provided information about a diverse group of health bloggers. Based on this research, this paper compares the U.S. and non-U.S. healthcare blogging communities and addresses the following questions:

RQ1: *Who is blogging about healthcare?*

RQ2: *Why do they blog about this topic?*

RQ3: What are they writing about?

RQ4: What are their blogging habits (i.e., frequency of posting, anonymous blogging)?

RQ5: What are respondents' views of healthcare blogs?

Methodology

The survey was promoted and made available via a combination of media and blogger outreach, email invitations and posts on popular healthcare blogs. A total of 214 healthcare bloggers took at least a portion of the survey. One hundred seventy-one respondents answered every question in the poll. Seventy-six percent of bloggers hailed from the United States and between three and five percent were from Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and the Netherlands (Table 1).

Data was collected via Survey Monkey (*www.surveymonkey.com*), an online survey research tool. Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS version 13 for Mac OS X.

It is important to note that this study is based on a non-randomized convenience sample. Because of this, it is not appropriate to apply the results of this survey to the general global healthcare blogging population. However, the findings provide valuable new insights about the behaviors and beliefs of a broad group of active healthcare bloggers.

Literature Review

Over the past several years, a number of articles have appeared in academic literature focusing on healthcare blogs. Much of this work has focused on:

- How and why physicians are embracing blogs and using them to share information (Siegert, 2005)
- The benefits of blogs for medical education (Maag, 2004)
- How blogs can aid health librarians in their research (Barsky, 2006)

In addition to the academic literature, journalists and industry experts have explored how blogs are influencing patients, healthcare professionals and the pharmaceutical industry. Most notably, Laura Landro of the *Wall Street Journal* wrote two major articles in 2005 focusing on healthcare blogs. In her first article, she outlined how patients are using blogs to share information and cope with their illnesses (Landro, 2005a). In her second story, she highlighted the efforts of physicians blogging about patient care, the healthcare industry and other topics (Landro, 2005b). In 2006, Envision Solutions