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Information and food blogging as serious leisure

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Abstract

Purpose-To explore aspects of creating, seeking, sharing and management of information in food blogging as serious leisure.

Design/methodology/approach-Participants' conceptualisation of food blogging and the role of information in it is interpreted through in-depth interviews and analysis of activity on the UK Food Bloggers Association website.

Findings-Food blogging as a leisure pursuit resulted in the creation of new information sources, for which existing information is a source of inspiration. The content and style of blogs, and so their nature as information sources, was influenced by the extent of involvement in a professional – amateur – public (PAP) system. Information about publics or audiences was of great concern and a focus of collegial information sharing. The management of content implies greater personal information management needs, but the data did not show great awareness of this, rather interviewees were concerned with access management. Pre-professionals had an intensified concern with Intellectual Property Rights (IPR).

Research limitations/implications-Food blogs may be better understood by placing them in the context of the PAP system.

Practical implications-Food bloggers are sophisticated users of information and ICTs, but have unrecognised access management and information management requirements that have potentially significant design implications.

Originality/value-Adds to the growing literature on information aspects of serious leisure by examining activity within Stebbins' professional-amateur-public system.

Keywords Foodies, Food blogging, Photography, Serious leisure, Information needs, Information sources, Personal information management

Paper type Research article

Information and serious leisure

In the last five years there has been a growth of interest in the role of information in “serious leisure”, defined by the principle theorist of the field as:

...the systematic pursuit of a [...] core activity that people find so substantial, interesting, and fulfilling that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a (leisure) career centred on acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience (Stebbins, 2009a, p. 622).

This interest has been reflected in work on such pursuits such as collecting (Case, 2009; Lee and Trace, 2009), genealogy (Yakel, 2004; Fulton, 2009a, 2009b), back packing

(Chang,2009), gourmet cooking (Hartel, 2006, 2010), knitting (Prigoda and McKenzie, 2007), quilt making (Gainor, 2009) and photography (Cox *et al.*, 2008; Spurgin, 2009). Purposive information seeking may not always be central to such activities, but there is a range of information seeking, sharing, and use and management issues encountered. Chang (2009) points to the intensive information related activities in different tasks relating to backpacking. Fulton stresses the amount of time people spend in information seeking in the “wonderful obsession” (2009a, p. 252) of genealogy and the direct pleasure genealogists gain from the information seeking process. For information seeking in this context is not merely a cognitive process as construed by much information literature. It is also one powerfully linked into participants’ construction of their identity, often through imaginative engagement with their own history, not necessarily in ways which would be regarded as legitimate by experts on genealogy or scholars (Lambert, 2006). Often in serious leisure pursuits information is important but does not involve systematic or even purposeful information seeking. For example, Hartel (2006) suggests that information activities and resources are important to the social practice of gourmet cooking, woven throughout the process, but are relatively secondary aspects of them. Similarly, Lee and Trace found that only the most serious collectors sought information intensely, but all collectors needed information to pursue the hobby, “It was almost impossible to extricate information needs from object needs” (2009, p. 633).

Of the leisure activities that have been studied only genealogy seems to involve intensive use of information services, such as libraries and archives. The Internet is of importance to a number of them. Thus the internet is central for genealogical information seeking, and Fulton (2009b) identifies in genealogy the importance of networks of information sharing governed by a strong social expectation of reciprocation. Partly by virtue of the amount of time spent on such leisure pursuits, those practising them can feel quite isolated. The importance of internet online communities for support, as well as learning and as an audience is well known (e.g., Ploderer *et al.*, 2010). The qualities of the community are likely to reflect the unique ethos of the leisure pursuit itself.

Spurgin’s work (forthcoming) on photography indicates the potential importance of personal information management (PIM) activities in leisure pursuits. Although a concept usually applied to work contexts the scale of content produced in digital photography creates a need for personal information management. Organizing the information collection is a challenge for other hobbyists, for example, genealogists (Yakel, 2004). In gourmet cooking the amassing of a “personal culinary library” of books and magazines, etc., is as much for aesthetic and symbolic purposes as informational ones (Hartel, 2010).

This paper contributes to this growing body of work on the role of information in serious leisure by investigating information aspects of food blogging. Unlike most other leisure pursuits studied, a central activity in food blogging is the creation of an information source. There are also characteristic concerns about the management of information and also control over content. The paper also explores how to categorise blogging within Stebbins’ taxonomy of types of leisure pursuit, and links this to patterns in the role of information.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. Firstly, Stebbins’ serious leisure perspective is reviewed, in particular his distinction between hobbies and amateurism. The nature of blogging is then briefly discussed. Food blogging as typically an aspect of foodie culture is described. The paper moves on to the research design and data used in the study. Findings explore how different identity positions and practices suggest some food bloggers are

amateurs, others hobbyists, and shows how this shapes information aspects. The discussion brings together findings about how the role of information is shaped by the nature of the leisure pursuit. The conclusion summarises the contribution and suggests directions for further work.

Serious leisure

Stebbins' (1992, 2009a; Stebbins and Hartel, 2010) serious leisure perspective recognises the personal and social value of leisure when pursued intensively. Serious leisure is differentiated from casual leisure by six features. Those participating in it have patterned careers; they exert effort to acquire knowledge and skills; they persevere despite problems. They also receive durable benefits in terms of self-actualisation and gratification and, further, they identify strongly with the activity. Each pursuit has its own unique ethos. Serious leisure pursuits are themselves of a number of types. Most of the information related studies to date have been of hobbyist activities, such as collecting. But another important category is amateur serious leisure, defined by the existence of a professional equivalent to the pursuit. Here the complex inter-relation of the professional and amateur worlds shapes such pursuits in very significant ways. Amateurs do not make a livelihood from the activity and have less time to spend on it than professionals. They are probably less specialist. Stebbins also finds that amateurs and professionals are differentiated attitudinally, and by self-conception (amateurs see themselves as amateurs). Amateurs are rather marginal to both the professional world and to society because of the difficulty others have of understanding their depth of commitment to their pursuit. However, there are many similarities of values. Furthermore, the worlds of the amateurs and the professionals are strongly interconnected, for example, professionals set standards of performance that amateurs respect, professionals often train amateurs, while amateurs are often a key, critical audience for professionals. Amateurs perform for the same public as the professional, to a certain extent, as well as for a collegial audience of fellow practitioners (and friends and family). Hence amateurs operate within a professional-amateur-public (PAP) system. Some amateurs, "pre-professionals", have a career that takes them on to become professionals; "pure amateurs" have no such intent.

Serious leisure, especially its amateur forms, may be particularly interesting in light of the current perception of the changing relation of professional and public produced content, expressed in such works as Leadbeater and Miller's (2004) "ProAm Revolution", which points to the economic and social benefits of serious amateur production or Bruns' (2007) concept of the "produsage". More pessimistic accounts of such alleged change include Keene's (2007) view that "user created content" undermines professional quality standards in the media and Peterson's (2008) suggestion that content created by participation in blogs, etc., primarily profits big companies, that it is "loser generated content". Much of this literature uses the concept of amateur more loosely than Stebbins, but it is exploring claims that there are significant changes occurring in the relationship between the professional, the amateur and the public. For example, in new media contexts, such as in bedroom Disc jockeying (Joo, 2008) the boundaries between professional and amateur and between public and private seem to have become much less distinct.

Blogging

Another case where these boundaries between professional and amateur and public and private seem to be less clear than before is the context of the current study, blogging. Blogs are typically personal websites, consisting of brief text and sometimes links and images, and with reader comments, and organised in reverse chronological order. As Bruns and Jacobs (2006) argue, there are many different types of blog and they cannot all be understood within

a single framework. Probably the most popular form of the blog is the blog as a personal diary, yet it is one exposed to public view. Some blogs have also been significant because of their impact on the professional media. For example, news blogging has been seen as a vehicle to refresh news provision, simply through a speedier response to important events. More fundamentally, such amateur created content may also embody different news values: be more partisan or willing to blow the whistle on corruption, because the author is less implicated in official information networks. Enthusiasts for blogging have hoped that through it a news media can emerge in which the public are more active in creation and in which multi-perspectives on the news can be represented (Bruns, 2006). Although such expectations for the impact of “participative journalism” or “citizen journalism” seem to have been inflated (Haas, 2005), professional journalism’s response to the potential threat posed by blogs has been complex, varying from incorporation (blogging by journalists or their use as an information source) to harsh dismissal of their value. Lowrey’s (2006) analysis explains both these kinds of response, by pointing to the vulnerabilities of professional journalism to encroachment by non-professionals. Journalistic work does not require accreditation. There are limitations on treatments of subjects that journalists can adopt, arising from their employers’ need to reach a mass market. Such vulnerabilities may explain the degree of vitriol in the media treatment of blogging, at times. Interestingly, much of the critique of bloggers revolves round failures of information use, such as not using appropriate or sufficient sources or failures to check information. Reich’s (2008) study confirms differences in information source usage: bloggers tended to rely on a few friends and their own experience. However, though news bloggers are outsiders from formal information networks, Reich argues they are competent information users.

Food blogging

The same issues arise in food blogging. Food blogging typically represents a complex interweaving of “foodie” or gourmet interest in cooking, blog writing (and so internet use) and photography. Most food blogs use photos taken by the author and some accounts of food blogging (e.g., Not Quite Nigella, 2009a, b) seem to focus on photography in particular.

Food bloggers tend to write about travel and restaurants as well as publish domestic food diaries and their own recipes (Robinson, 2009).

Some also write cook book reviews. Thus multiple aspects of consumer culture are reflected in writing that draws also on genres from the professional media such as cookery writing, restaurant and book reviewing and travel writing. Food blogging, like news blogging, seems to reflect a shift from media consumption to production (de Solier, 2006).

Food blogging is part of a wider growth in forms of writing about food (Brien, 2007), a topic that can be the “locus of personal, physical and emotional matters, including concerns about health, well-being and self-esteem” and can also engage with global concerns around environmental issues and community building (Brien, 2007; Johnston and Baumann, 2009). However, much blogging about food specifically reflects “foodie” culture (Watson *et al.*, 2008; Johnston and Baumann, 2009). Foodies focus on the aesthetic and the sensual appreciation of food as a form of claim to cultural distinction (Watson *et al.*, 2008; de Solier, 2006). Thus Watson *et al.*’s (2008) analysis of one food blog sees it as part of the blogger’s search for personal significance and identity through “skilled consumption” experiences, shared with a “community of consumption”, other bloggers. Although Stebbins’ (2009b) recent work has argued that consumption and leisure have “common ground” but are “separate worlds”, here the two merge. Complex, sustained practices around inventing

recipes, making food, appreciating the results, writing about food, and taking pictures combine consumer consumption (food, internet use) and a serious leisure pursuit.

The dedication to the activity, the “obsession” (Berne, 2005) reflects the personal investment involved in a serious leisure pursuit, its durable satisfactions and its centrality to identity. Those who maintain a blog over a number of years have to show the perseverance characteristic of serious leisure and have the patterned experience of a leisure career. The gourmet cooking hobby gives the pursuit part of its unique ethos, but food blogging as such has its unique practices as illustrated in in-jokes (Not Quite Nigella, 2009a, b). There are local communities of food bloggers, in big cities such as London, and globally. One of the biggest specialist portals foodie blogroll (<http://www.foodieblogroll.com/>) listed 8,200 blogs, in August 2010. While many foodies’ blogs should probably be seen as hobbyist, some could be seen as an amateur pursuit, within Stebbins’ definitions, because it has professional equivalents in the media, newspapers, books and TV. As de Solier (2006) reports a number of food bloggers have been successful in gaining incorporation into the food industry.

Stebbins argues that a key feature that distinguishes amateur practice is the inter-relation with professional practitioners. PR companies increasingly contact bloggers to promote food products. Many journalists blog, so that connections are made between bloggers and professional writers. Amateurs respond to “standards of excellence set and communicated” (Stebbins, 1992, p, 38) by professionals. Although most often reported with interest, criticism of food bloggers as information sources is a theme in journalistic treatments, witness a recent *Telegraph* article (Prince, 2010). Here food bloggers are portrayed as oddballs: photographing food and then withdrawing socially behind their computers. The caricature thus draws on discourses of the anti-social and addictive nature of the Internet (conveniently glossing over the increasing dependence of journalists themselves on the Internet as a source). The author toys with the idea of food bloggers’ voracious passion for food being “heart-warming”, but concludes that it is “frightening”. And by constructing the supply of food blogs as “endless” the value of each one is diminished. The key aspect of the portrayal is presenting bloggers as somehow “elusive” and so unaccountable. Doubts about the expertise and neutrality of bloggers are put into the mouth of the restaurateurs whose establishments the bloggers review, symbolically building distance between the blogger and the food industry (and placing the author inside the circle of trust). The unaccountable, arbitrary quality of the food bloggers allows them to be compared in an extraordinary way to a secret police force, to the Stasi – though it is acknowledged that their anonymity compared to professional reviewers does give them some potential advantage in terms of objectivity. It is notable that so much of the critique of food blogging again turns on their failure to use information to professional standards and on their unreliability themselves as information sources. Not all professional media coverage of food blogging is hostile “gatewatching” (Bruns, 2006) of this sort. Indeed having blackened their character, Prince (2010) herself goes on to list “the top blogs”. As a real journalist, this seems to imply, she has the right to adjudicate on their quality.

Thus there has been a growth of scholarly interest in the role of information in serious leisure pursuits. This has revealed intense and complex information seeking in some hobbies; in others information seeking is threaded through as an important but secondary aspect. Information sharing is an important feature of serious leisure, especially online. Personal information management issues could also be important. Amateurism, as one form of serious leisure, is a particularly interesting type of serious leisure, given the rhetoric around such ideas as “citizen journalism” and debate that seems to reflect changes or challenges to the

professional-amateur-public system. Some food blogging, it will be argued, could be seen as amateur-serious leisure. Hartel's (2006) work has already established key features of the role of information in gourmet cooking. Information seeking as such may be relatively limited and confined to one main information type, recipes. Food blogging implies knowledge of restaurants, as well as a need for information about blogging sites and about audiences. Hartel focuses on information use and the way gourmet cooks create new information through new recipes and records of meals created. Food bloggers are likely to be even more focussed creating and organising such information sources for others. Hartel (2010) has further investigated how gourmet cooking results in the creation of large collections of material and the information management challenges these pose. Food bloggers have to manage a mass of textual and digital image material that also implies considerable personal information management issues. Food bloggers support each other and share information with others through collective websites. The aim of the paper, therefore, is to explore the creation, seeking, sharing and management of information by food bloggers, in the context of Stebbins' serious leisure perspective.

Research method

This paper reports the result of a small scale exploratory study. One of the primary data sources for this paper is six, in depth, hour long interviews conducted with UK food bloggers in July and August 2009 and the rather large collection of material on their multiple websites. The interviewees (referred to as 11-16 below) were selected on the following criteria: that they were in the UK (and so available for face to face interview); had a relatively sustained food blog; and had a collection of photos on Flickr (<http://www.flickr.com>). This means that they cannot be claimed to be representative of all food bloggers, who do not necessarily have many photos or use Flickr as such. Our initial interest was the way that the practices of photography, and food were integrated, hence the stress on photo collections. The choice of interviewees was also purposeful in seeking to represent a range of practices, within the general category of food blogging. In the interviews, questions explored attitudes to food, the mechanics of computer use, blogging and photographic related activities. We also explored with interviewees how they saw themselves as bloggers, cooks and photographers. The mode of analysis was thematic, developing themes grounded in the data, but also driven by our interest in information concepts and the serious leisure perspective (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The other source of data for this paper was content on the UK Food Bloggers Association (UKFBA) (<http://www.ukfba.co.uk/>) website. This is a social network site for food bloggers in the UK established in 2007 and with around 1,400 members as at August 2010. The site contains member profiles, 3,000 photos, groups and forum discussions and an events listing. Forum activity, as well as giving a quick flavour of foodie concerns, suggests something about the relative importance to food bloggers of different activities. The sheer volume of comments could be influenced by several other factors than the general interest of a topic (such as the reputation of the person who asks or the topicality of an issue); nevertheless, it seems reasonable to interpret frequency of responses to forum postings as a broad indicator of the relative interest of different topics. This qualitative scale could also be correlated with the topic areas of the 32 groups on UKFBA and the subject matter of a national meet-up.

The research followed University of Sheffield ethical guidelines. Blogs are apparently publicly published material, yet this might not be how participants see them. The text and images concerned were not password protected but actors' own understanding of the nature

of this “publication” had to be taken into account (Ess and AoIR Ethics Working Committee, 2002) allowing the research to be conducted in such a way that did not alienate participants’ from their own material (Bakardjieva and Feenberg, 2001) but also allowing researchers to conduct unbiased critical analysis. In this paper, as a result, the participants are anonymised. This also helped respect the interviewees’ concern with intellectual property rights. Terms of use of UKFBA preclude direct quotation.

Findings

Blogging is a rather flexible practice; some blogs are purely personal; other examples (like news blogging) are very public orientated. Considering food blogging as such, most food blogging probably springs from gourmet cooking interests, which Hartel identifies as a hobby activity, in Stebbins’ taxonomy. There are certainly some people who make a living from food blogging, but this is probably rare. Nevertheless, people do make a living writing about food and in food journalism. If the blogger defines themselves as a writer and aspires to operate in a world of other writers, then since there are professional writers, we might wish to argue that they are amateurs, particularly if the other relations between amateurs and professionals that Stebbins identifies are evident. The next section considers what the six interviewees said about their identity as food bloggers, to consider where each could be positioned within Stebbins’ taxonomy.

Identity and motivation

“I’m not a cook writer, I’m a writer who cooks”

13’s use of the word “writer” to name herself makes an explicit claim of an identity as more than a cook or blogger and she seems to be locating the pursuit relative to professional work, namely writing and journalism. She showed a strong concern with status and recognition: for example, listing of awards she had received and giving prominence to any recognition by the mainstream media. Involvement in a collaborative book writing project was also a marker of professional intent (though it was a charity book). 13’s extensive elaboration of profile information constructed an audience interested in her background and motivation to blog. Perhaps because a lot of food writing is by celebrities and celebrity cooks, the serious intent is marked by a need to construct herself if not as a celebrity, as a personality. This fits with her description of her blog as about “glamour”, her life “with the boring bits edited out”. We could argue, on this basis, that 13 could be considered a pre-professional amateur.

Like 13, 16 also had a strong identification with food:

Obsession. Food is what I do. If I’m not cooking or eating I’m thinking about it or writing a recipe or going out somewhere to a restaurant.

For 13 and 16 the intensity of interest in food blogging was accompanied by a little weariness with their paid jobs. 16 said she needed food twitter just to get through the day. Yet such intensity is perfectly consistent with any serious leisure pursuit, hobbyist or amateur. 16 was evidently re-evaluating her blogging image, but saw herself as a “homecook”. She saw the blog as partly a personal record of cooking and of her “adventures”. This implied distance from more pretentious aspirations, indeed she was dismissive of celebrity chefs, but was attracted to writers firmly based in a community. So here the professional model available seems present but to have a different quality. Amateurs would be expected to have growing

relations with professionals (rather than other bloggers). In the interview, 16 told a long story about the genesis of a blog entry stressing her comfortable movement within a food world, restaurant owners, PR companies and bloggers. She could possibly be seen as a “pure amateur”, i.e., someone caught up in a serious leisure pursuit with a professional equivalent, within the PAP system, but without an intention to ever become a professional.

In contrast, 11 and 15’s accounts of their blogging focussed much more on relational and self/documentary intents. Actually all the interviewees had keeping in touch or making friends as an initial motive for blogging. They were all “immigrants” into London, be it from abroad or other parts of the UK. All had been seeking and found friends through the blog. Stebbins suggests that amateurs are rather socially marginal due to their intense, time consuming hobby, but here blogging seemed to be a largely successful attempt to overcome pre-existing marginality. However, although all the bloggers had made friends, most of 11’s account was focussed on such relations, whereas 13 was much keener to talk about mass audiences and projects. 11 kept quiet about the awards his photos had won. His profile information was minimalistic. Whereas 16 was keen to talk about her contacts in the industry, 11 often mentioned his close relation with particular eating places, because of return visits, but these were local food stalls, off the beaten track, far from the media spotlight. The relations were rather personal.

15 stressed the value of the blog to her. She recorded recipes and restaurant experiences “for her records”. The purpose was construed as self-documentation:

Oh its so beautiful. Oh I want it for my records. [...] I bought it; its fine. And in five seconds it will be destroyed. So I must get that photo now. Its just so beautiful.

The blog was “as much for herself as everyone else”. This construction of motivation makes it feel much more hobbyist. Nevertheless, again there was a more anonymous audience of traffic that came in from Google searches for recipes.

A few weeks before the first interview for the present study was conducted, *Time Out*, the London listings magazine, published an article attacking food blogging as “meal blagging” (Mok, 2009). The article suggested that bloggers were taking freebees from restaurants they were reviewing and therefore not trustworthy. The article received a furious response from bloggers and had to be changed to qualify some of the criticisms. 11, 15 and 16 all mentioned the article in their interview. On the one hand it seemed to reinforce their desire to distance themselves from any pretensions to professionalism. Yet their very awareness of it suggests at some level of incorporation into a PAP system.

What can be argued is that 13 positions herself squarely as an aspiring professional, a pre-professional. The intensity of 16’s engagement in the practice and her links to the industry hinted that she had such aspirations. 11 and 15 pointedly placed themselves as hobbyists, though some of their discourse, such as their strong concern with audience, reflected pervasive use of media discourses within amateur practices.

12’s blog was different again. It was dedicated to a comprehensive treatment of themes about pubs and based on a large collection of photos. It was very much construed as an information service. He likened the pursuit to collecting:

Obsessive in the sense of – I’ve got an idea of the things I want to take photographs of and then I collect them. Its all very – the collector impulse to it. I’m not looking for interesting artistic shots. [...] Its an obsessive project [...] so I’m trying to give a certain standard to everything.

The style of the photos was objective, informational. And although he used blogging software, rather than organised as a series of dated entries, it was organised as a more systematic treatment of general topics, drawing on a photographic resource, as one might expect in a wiki based site.¹²’s concerns seem somewhat other than typical foodie ones.

The sixth interviewee used the food blog in a rather different way again.¹⁴ used photos to record accurately how much she ate each day, as a dieting strategy and had created a support group of others who shared the practice. This blog was part of a complex set of blogs and Flickr accounts exploring her personal identity and interests in photography and creative writing. Whereas the other five food blogs could be seen as foodie blogs, 14’s food blog was not really a leisure activity at all, though closely implicated with photographic and writing practices that were.

Thus food blogging is a fluid practice, and its meaning arises partly from where the author positions themselves. Much of the rest of the paper is concerned with exploring the ways that some bloggers’ involvement in the PAP system was associated with features of their food blogging practice, and the contrast with those described by the other food bloggers. This tells us about how deepened involvement with professional practices within the PAP system changes strategies of justification and also the pattern of creation, use and management of information.

Public, audience, traffic

The public, or audiences, are an important aspect of serious leisure. Amateurs will have some role with the general public, but a “collegial audience” of fellow amateurs (plus friends and family) are often a more immediately important audience. They are the main audience for hobbyists.

All the interviewees were rather pre-occupied with the question of who their audience was.¹³, consistent with her professionalising project, and although the food writing originated in long regular newsletters home to the family (back in the country of her birth), thought friends and family “the last people” who would read her blog. It was now of specialist interest. Blogging had eaten up so much time that she had stopped writing the letters home. Instead, her audience was international and mostly people she didn’t know: “complete strangers”. She had invested a lot of time in examining who these audiences were. Thus a new information need, accompanying a pre-professional career, is an interest in systematic information about the audience.¹⁶ was also very concerned with audience. The timing of the release of blog entries was carefully staged to fit in with when she thought people were looking at the Web (in breaks at work, not at the weekend).¹⁶ commented: “Twitter is my third top traffic source.” Thus a new media discourse of web “traffic” contrasts with relational discourse, making friends.

Many of the interviewees managed a complex of inter-related sites, with news feeds from blogs, twitter, photos on Flickr and links on Facebook, but often all for subtly different audiences. From an information perspective, food blogging is as much an access management challenge as a PIM one.¹⁵ was aware of managing flows of users from Flickr to her blog; but

given her orientation towards blogging as self-documentation, she was scrupulous about protecting access to personal content for friends and family. She did have an audience coming from Google searches for recipes that was not fellow bloggers. She was certainly interested in wider traffic, yet she deliberately eschewed installing a page counter, because she knew she would become “obsessed” with it. Thus she shared some of the interest in reaching wider audiences. Again in much of the interview 11 explored his fascination with the question of what was popular with audiences, but he didn’t systematically study the audience. 11 did not seem very interested in the anonymous audiences, more the commenters, usually identifiable as fellow bloggers. For her food blog, 14’s audience was herself and others following a photo diet. Thus without there being an entirely clear cut distinction, 13 was much more concerned with growing an anonymised, international, mass audience; 11 or 14 were much more concerned exclusively with relational contacts and personal uses.

Interestingly, it was apparent that a key concern also on the UKFBA website was getting traffic. Two of the top four discussions and three of the top ten threads were about this. Listing opportunities for blogs and twitter were the two most popular threads, again implying a collective concern with traffic. Certainly, sharing understanding of getting hits was a key form of information sharing going on in the community. Threads about food related topics as such were much shorter. Looking across the blogging sites the need to differentiate in the competition for “attention” was evident. Most of the blog names encapsulate a desire to corner one very specific specialism or unique orientation to food, be that through a style of cooking, a geographical location or some other unique hook. The practice is competitive, yet bloggers are also competing for each other’s attention and seeking to be linked from fellow bloggers’ sites, as well as public traffic. The convention of reciprocation meant that if you received a comment you were obliged both to respond and to look at and comment on the commenter’s blog. If someone linked to your site, there was a similar sort of obligation to link back. Commenting and linking was an attention seeking strategy. This led to a little bit of weariness and irritation with commenting and led to blogrolls (lists of other favourite blogs) being dropped. Nevertheless reading other blogs remained a source of “inspiration”.

The “collegial audience” was important to all of the interviewees. All the interviewees had made friends with other food bloggers. Getting together also produced very warm feelings, for example, expressed on UKFBA after the 2009 Connect conference for food bloggers (<http://www.foodbloggerconnect.com/>), especially by those most actively involved. Yet although 13 had lots of photos of meetings with fellow bloggers, she seemed to have begun to construe them more as professional, specialist contacts than friends; the links are international, whereas 11’s and 16’s connections were local, in London.

Again, both 16 and 11 were very focussed on tracking information on fellow bloggers, but in different ways. 16’s approach was more comprehensive. She said she monitored 150 other bloggers; this was to gain news of new developments (such as new restaurants opening) but also to “keep an eye on them” even ones she thought were “rubbish”. In contrast, 11 was keenly interested in cultivating a rather mysterious and controversial image among the other bloggers. His interest was more in a few individuals. So whereas 16 felt the need to watch all bloggers, out of a concern to gather information and watch potential rivals, 11 was mostly interested in a few that were friends or potential friends.

4.3 Style and content

13 acknowledged that becoming more professional implied fundamental changes in the style and content of her blog, and so the nature of her blog as an information source for others

changed. She had adapted her writing style to a general web audience, writing much more concisely, constructing careful hooks at the beginning of each entry and removing a lot of personal circumstantial detail. There was also a concern to create “something that they will want to come back to. That will last.” Her target number of blogs per week was higher than the other interviewees. She also tried to be more regular in her postings (though all recognised the importance of frequent activity to maintain audience interest).

Professionalisation as such implies specialisation, hiving off of secondary tasks to specialise on a pure area of practice (Abbott, 1988). Professionals are more specialist than amateurs (Stebbins, 1992). In dropping restaurant reviews in favour of recipes, 13 showed some concern to specialise. The specialisation was chosen because recipes were thought to be more interesting to a global audience; restaurant reviews only of local interest. 14 specialised only on eating places in London, presumably for the opposite reason, i.e., because he was most interested in the local audience. 15 and 16 continued to do both reviews and recipes. However, 13 also continued to take photos (not all of food) and to try and sell them on the same site. 13’s investment in a pre-professional project led to intense activity: with a great variety of content on the site, such as games and extensive links. So intensification of the pursuit could run counter to the desire for specialisation.

Even though photography was central to the practice of all six interviewees and had indeed been the starting point for all but 16, none of the food bloggers mimicked professional photographic practice or seemed to be interested in professional practices in this area. None had invested any time in formal training. Their learning had been by trial and error. Though stylistically they mirrored the current fashion in food photography towards the informal (Manna, 2005) none were interested in the elaborate methods of the food stylist. Time taking photos was seen as in tension with the desire to start eating. 16 saw photos as proof of what a recipe should look like, of authenticity, whereas professional practices of food photography and styling are nothing if not fabricated. One of the principles Bellingham and Bybee (2008) lay down for professional practice is “do not eat the hero”, because the hero, the piece of food being photographed, is likely to be rendered inedible by the treatment it undergoes. For example, it may be drenched in diesel oil because to the camera it looks more like gravy than using real gravy. 16, a rather accomplished photographer, even stood out against the purchase of photographic equipment, borrowing cameras to take his photos and also having a free account on Flickr, so that the number of photos available to browse was limited.

Another aspect of 13’s specialisation was her move away from the generalist photosharing of Flickr to a specialist site that only included food photos, Tastespotting.com. The others still used Flickr. Despite the professionalising project, 13 also continued to use standard blog templates, rather than pay for specialist ones; 16 had just commissioned some new ones (from a friend); she also had her own domain name.

Advertising and Intellectual Property Rights (IPR)

Not surprisingly issues around making money through advertising and sponsorship were central to the differences between those in the PAP system and those who seemed to be better understood as hobbyists. 13 had developed complex ways to make money including sponsorship and a micro-payments system to purchase photos. Nevertheless, she had mixed feelings about advertising. This was further linked to an intensification of concern with IPR. 13 had quite a lot about her ownership of her content and terms of reuse on her website. Yet protection of IPR was not only a concern for the pre-professional. 15 was also worried about

content being appropriated without attribution. This is a common concern among Flickr users. It also came up as an issue several times in threads on UKFBA, though not frequently.

Significantly, 16, despite the sub-text of fascination with professionalisation, after the *Time Out* article, had dropped ads from her blog because it did not “sit right”.¹¹ talked about how he would refuse sponsorship, however prestigious the company, if it was offered, because it would affect his independence. This was linked to also refusing freebies, to claiming independence of judgement.

Information seeking and information management

Food blogging was seen as fundamentally “creative” and little mention was made of activities around finding information such as recipes or locating new restaurants. Though clearly this went on it was not central to how the interviewees wanted to present the pursuit. This seems to confirm Hartel’s (2006) observation that seeking in gourmet cooking is a quest for inspiration not information. 16 specifically said she flicked through cook books for inspiration but had stopped- “got over” - using the recipes of others and now just made them up. Again other blogs inspired recipes, though also a desire to differentiate, for example, not to repeat a new restaurant everyone was doing.

The interview schedule did not ask directly about participants’ personal culinary libraries (2010). On the UKFBA website information sources were the topic of three of the 32 groups: food books, websites and magazines. Food books was one of the largest groups, with the second largest number of members of any group and a lot of discussion. Websites was the fourth largest group. There were some passing comments in these discussions reflecting on the complex storing of recipes from many sources: in Excel, cuttings, notebooks, on PC, as web favourites. Some collections of recipes had been maintained for many years and were valued possessions. There was also some discussion about the relative value of books and the Web. It was difficult to take a laptop into the kitchen and the quality of the experience of browsing books was felt to be unique. Books were good if you did not know what you wanted to cook, but if you did, finding a recipe on the Web was easier.

Food blogging involved the creation of a lot of content, especially photos, and the processes of selecting and editing images were mentioned as time consuming but also very enjoyable. Yet issues around retrieving and storing information did not really seem to be a central concern for the interviewees. This pattern seems to be partly confirmed by there being only a couple of short threads on the UKFBA site about backing up and printing of the blog. But interviewees could well have visited other sites to explore concerns with personal information management of images. Yet one could argue that the blog itself acted as a form of information organisation, through which text and carefully selected and edited images were organised in an easy to retrieve way. If so, just as information seeking seemed to be inherently pleasurable (as for genealogists), there was direct pleasure in personal information management processes too.

Discussion

There is increasing interest in information aspects of serious leisure. Some serious leisure involves complex and intense use of information, in other cases it is more in the background, an essential warp through the pursuit, but not the object of the exercise. To date studies undertaken have been chiefly of purely hobby activities (as defined by Stebbins (1992)), but amateur activities may be particularly interesting because of the indications of change in the

professional-amateur-public system suggested by the debate around notions such as “participative journalism” and the “rise of pro-ams” that suggest the erosion of barriers between the professional and non-professional producer. The current study fits into this research context by examining the activities of food bloggers, especially information related aspects, in the context of serious leisure. I thought food blogging was becoming more professionalised and commercialised. Some blogging can certainly be understood via the PAP system, though much is hobbyist.

From this preliminary investigation a number of patterns seem to emerge. For the pre-professional the personal and relational discourses drawn on to explain blogging are replaced by concerns to be seen as a writer. The type of content and style of writing change so that as a result blogs change as information sources. There remains a strong interest in reputation within the collegial public, but a less personal interest and a more intense concern with measuring and expanding an audience of strangers. Information on an anonymous mass audience becomes a new information need. Collegial information sharing is pre-occupied at a meta-level with how to increase the audience (though of course information about food, in the form of recipes and reviews is also being intensively shared). Pre-professionals seem to be more likely to seek greater specialisation, but the intensification of the pursuit can also lead to multiplication and diversification of the content they produce. Thus the nature of food blogs as information sources (for their audiences) can be better understood by understanding authors’ positioning in the PAP system.

The preliminary findings of the paper seem also to confirm Reich’s (2008) suggestion that bloggers use a narrow range of usually personal information sources, unlike journalists. Actually, interviewees did not mention much about information seeking, rather, creative processes of “discovering” interesting eating places and the “invention” of new recipes (Hartel, 2006). This may not actually be in contradiction with more intense information needs. It does suggest that as in genealogy (Fulton, 2009a) the “information seeking” is an inherently enjoyable process and here one experienced as creative. Blogging is marked by competition in an attention economy, as well as generous sharing as seen in genealogy or quilt making.

It can be inferred that with so much content spread over many websites, food bloggers, like photographers (Spurgen, forthcoming), would have intense PIM needs, such as keeping track of content and backing up material. The need may certainly exist, but there was limited evidence to suggest awareness of such needs in this data. Perhaps the blog itself should be seen as a PIM tool, in that it is the focus of organisational activity that effectively ensures that the individual themselves (and others) can retrieve information in the future. If so it is a case where much of the pleasure of the activity specifically arises from PIM processes, such as choosing photos and organising the blog. Certainly though there is a concern with access management in food blogging. This involves both a focus on preservation of a private-public separation, to protect friends and family (the main concern of the pure amateur and hobbyist), while also managing flows of audience attention, shepherding in “traffic” to the blog from microblogging, photo storing groups and social networking sites. Not surprisingly, the pre-professional has an increasing concern with intellectual property rights, with a desire to gain from the reuse of what they have produced, whereas hobbyists are probably primarily concerned simply with the integrity of their own material.

Food blogging is a good example of where media consumers have turned to production. The UKFBA, and sites like it, can be seen as a collective effort to exploit the Internet to lower

barriers to entry of enthusiasts to the food industry (especially food publishing), by making content more visible through listings and helping to pick out the best material through awards and more informal reputation building. They offer a focus through which the food industry can more easily contact a mass of individual bloggers. This does seem to broaden the basis of the PAP system, with even those who are essentially hobbyists having some access to a mass audience and potential connections to the professional world. Nevertheless, as in other areas (Haas, 2005) the professionals continue to operate as gatekeepers, or at least gatewatchers. Food blogging seems unlikely to produce a major change to how food is covered in the media, but does offer greater possibilities for participation in media production.

Conclusion

This paper makes a contribution to the growing literature on the role of information in serious leisure practices. A link is made between how individuals position themselves relative to the pre-professional and pure amateur categories in the professional-amateur-public system and how this shapes their motives, ways of presenting information and information needs and personal information management, access management and IPR concerns.

The study helps to better understand blogs as widely used information sources. Although blogs are easy to set up, the complexity of managing them suggests one reason why they are often not maintained, and perhaps helps to explain low participation in Web2.0 activities in general. The interviewees were long term and sophisticated users of Internet technologies, but the complex coordination of multiple websites, material and virtual practices, text and photos is challenging. The low awareness of personal information management concerns might be seen as having significant practical design implications.

Given the relatively small amount of interview data available for the research, the focus in this paper has been exploring the applicability of the PAP system to some foodie blogs, rather than attempting to generalise about all aspects of the role of information in all types of food blogs. Collecting more interview data could explore personal information management activities that could help fill out that part of the picture.

The paper has not explored perspectives from the media itself, except through a few published newspaper articles, or the point of view of other players in the social world of food, such as PR companies and restaurant owners. It would be interesting to look at patterns of incorporation of food blogging into the food industry, particularly in London. This would tell us about the likely impact of participative journalism on the media and the wider food industry. It would also be interesting to look at the patterns in blogging outside London, because of the weaker organisation of the food industry there. An audience perspective on food blogs as information sources would also be interesting to show how far blogs had gained parity with professionally produced media.

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