Chris Anderson
The Long Tail

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"Blogging is a way to make myself smarter."

—*Chris Anderson*

Chris Anderson is the editor in chief of *Wired* magazine, for which he was named Editor of the Year by *Advertising Age* magazine in 2005. Before joining *Wired* in 2001, Anderson held editorial positions in Hong Kong, London, and New York with *The Economist*; he's also held positions at *Science* and *Nature* magazines. Educated in physics, Anderson has also done research at Los Alamos National Laboratory.

The Long Tail
A public diary on themes around a book

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Long Tail comment elsewhere...

Might the Long Tail actually reduce choice?
Nick Carr notes a NYT column that suggests that if all content is "unbundled" and forced to fend for itself, the cultural products subsidized by commercial junk may go away. Carr writes: "It's not a sure thing, in other words, that an a la carte menu will end up giving us the widest possible array of choices. Rather than promoting the creation of a "long tail" of diverse products, unbundling may end up pushing even more economic rewards to the "hits," squeezing out a lot of the good stuff." My take: unless he's referring to the number of mediocre album tracks that piggyback on the singles, I think Carr is overestimating the amount of subsidization that actually takes place.

Long Tail software development mailing list
There's a mailing list for people who want to discuss the Long Tail of software development,

June 15, 2007

HOW BIG WOULD THE MOVIE INDUSTRY BE IF THERE WERE MORE SCREENS?

One of the examples I use in the book to illustrate the distorting effect of limited "shelf space" in traditional markets is Hollywood box office revenues. The American megaplex theater network has only has enough screens to show about 120 films per year. Meanwhile, there are about 13,000 films shown in film festivals each year. So only a tiny fraction of the movies made get enough theatrical distribution to register any sort of significant box office revenues.

How much bigger would the movie industry be if it didn't have this distribution bottleneck suppressing measured demand

About

The Long Tail

How Endless Choice Is Creating Unlimited Demand

Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More

CHRIS ANDERSON

Now available!

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RSS Feed

www.thelongtail.com

Early in this century, Anderson was struck with the vision that new effi-ciencies in manufacturing and distribution (particularly distribution via the Internet) will bring about fundamental changes in choice, creating niche mar-kets that would not exist without the new technology. The opportunities to serve those markets promise a new world for small business—a world of trade unlimited by shelf space, price, and the other considerations that have, in the past, limited the portion of demand that can be profitably served by retailers.

The phenomenon promises long-term effects in economics, culture, and more. Anderson dubbed it "the long tail" because when graphed on a stan-dard demand curve, the niche market of low-demand products looks like a tail hanging from the fat rump of best-selling products, or "hits."
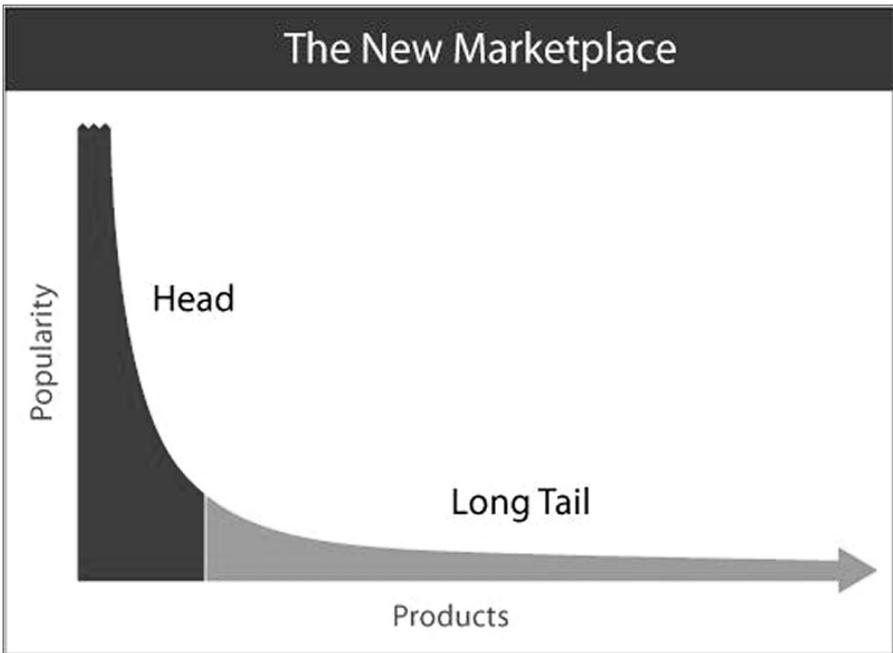
The Long Tail

Anderson began presenting this concept as a series of speeches in early 2004. On the basis of positive feedback, he turned his speeches into an article for *Wired*, which appeared in the September 2004 issue. Because the article became the most cited article *Wired* ever ran, Anderson decided to turn his speeches into a book.

Blogs Are the Long Tail of Media

By the end of the year, Anderson had closed a book deal, and his blog, The Long Tail: A Public Diary of Themes around a Book, was open for business. This was Anderson's first public blog, though not his last. The book, titled *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More* (Hyperion, 2006), would not be published for nearly two years. Meanwhile, the concept was out there (thanks to Anderson's speeches and the *Wired* article). To keep the Long Tail concept from being co-opted by others—and to keep interest in the book alive—Anderson turned to the Internet and blogging.

The Long Tail blog achieved far more than Anderson intended. As described in this interview, blogging helped him research and write the book, and provided a "beta test" and marketing platform for it, among other benefits.

More than a year after publication, the buzz about *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More* continues unabated. A *New York Times* bestseller, *The Long Tail* received the 2007 Audie Award as the best business information/educational audiobook, and the Gerald Loeb Award for Best Business Book of 2006.

Why the Long Tail? Why such a focused blog?

There are three reasons I started the blog. Not all three of them were obvious to me in the beginning, but in retrospect there are three reasons.

The main reason I started the blog was simply that there was going to be a two-year gap between the article and the book. And I just didn't want the momentum to fall off or the conversation to go on without me, nor did I want to lose ownership of the meme during that quiet period. So I really started the blog just to keep the conversation going and keep it going around me. It was really quite selfish, but meme ownership was the main reason.

In time it became clear there were two other reasons to have started the blog. The first is that the conversation I was having was basically me sharing my research and reporting—in progress—and my thinking and some of my analysis on a semi-daily basis. What happened was that the Long Tail blog established quite a large readership, which helped me with the research. They corrected my errors, suggested applications I hadn't thought of, and gave me feedback on what was working. They wrote the subtitle for the book, et cetera.

So it became kind of a distributed research project. I essentially open-sourced the book research to the readers. I gave them something for free, and they gave back much, much more to me for free. There were some people who thought that I was giving away my ideas, that it was highly inappropriate to share the details of a book before publication. But in the software business, you wouldn't release a program without beta-testing it. And in science, you don't release a paper without peer-reviewing it. So why would you release a book without doing the same? In retrospect, it seems obvious that, of course, you would write a book in public if you could, because doing so will make it a better book.

The third reason was only evident at the very end—which is that the community I built around the idea became the greatest marketing platform for the book. What I did was give an advance review copy to anybody who wanted one, anyone who had a blog and was prepared to review the book. We sent out hundreds of those, and got hundreds of reviews back in return. It was fantastic word-of-mouth marketing, which I could not have done had I started the book blog six weeks before the book's release. I had to build a community over time, because it took time for the blog to become an efficient marketing platform for the book.

And now the community is taking the idea far beyond *The Long Tail* concept, pursuing [new] concepts that weren't in the book.

Do you see the blog as a platform for other things, like your `booktour.com`**?**

Oh, yes. The blog is now my personal platform. You'll notice that at the moment I'm blogging about a little snafu we had at the company website [referring to a *Wired* advertiser's pop-up window misbehaving]. I'm using my blog to do that because that's where I communicate directly with people. I don't do it on the `Wired.com` site because that's not a personal platform—it's an institutional platform. Discussing the problem at the *Wired* site is really an exercise in being transparent, [which is] something I believe in. My posts are critical of certain rules in the company, and that might not work on the `Wired.com` site. So I believe a personal platform is transparent in a way an institutional one isn't.

I also use `thelongtail.com` to market my events. I use it to communicate with my audience. And it liberates me to not have to satisfy commercial interests.

So you aren't concerned with just pulling in readers?

I'm not trying to maximize my audience here. I'm trying to keep it focused on my interests. I feel that I don't have to worry about boring 90 percent of the audience—because [the audience for my blog] self-selected themselves as wanting to read this, I can be much more authentic and much more liberated to talk about what I really want to talk about, rather than trying to anticipate the needs of a scattered, diverse audience like a magazine has.

By the way, I find blogging ruins me for magazine writing. It's difficult to write for magazines right now, which is ironic given that I'm a magazine editor. It's difficult because magazines are a kind of one-size-fits-all product, and the audience is large, with differing interests. You have to write something that tries to satisfy all of [your readers] or many of them, whereas a blog is very self-selecting. If you're interested in what I have to say, fine. If you're not, that's great—go somewhere else.

The book is also self-selecting. If you're not interested in the concepts in the book, don't buy it. If you are, I'm going to go deep, and that's great. But books—and

> *"I think I do my best thinking via my blogs."*

blogs—are focused, whereas magazines are not. Obviously the magazine [*Wired*] is doing very well, so there must be something, some asset that satisfies a general audience. I'm just saying that my failing as a writer is that I don't do [magazine writing] well. I edit well, but I can't write for that platform well. So I don't write for the magazine very often.

But you are writing.

Yeah. I write a lot—more than I've ever written. You only know about one of my blogs. I have others—and I have a big audience. But when it comes to the magazine, I just edit. Different writers have different styles—it turns out that my style is better suited for books and blogging.

What are the other blogs?

One of them is group blog that I started called Geek Dad. And you can find it at `geekdad.com`. That is a *Wired* blog. And the other ones are geeky and narrow—not important to talk about yet. They're not meant for public consumption. They are public, and I'm not hiding them, but they are other aspects of my life that are really, really geeky—and if I have a readership of more than a hundred people, I am doing something wrong.

www.geekdad.com

You have a lot on your plate, what with editing, traveling, and all. Doesn't blogging require a significant time commitment?

You know, I don't spend that much time blogging. I feel guilty about how infrequently I post. I've got this massive backlog of draft posts for The Long Tail blog, for example, that I feel guilty about.

As you've heard from probably everyone you talk to, having a blog is this beast—a monkey on your back. It wants to be fed every day, but we all have jobs and it's hard to do. So I don't blog as much as I'd like. I try to post on one of my blogs every day. But that doesn't mean that on every single blog, I blog once a day. But I feel like I'm blogging all the time, and I also feel like I'm under-blogging.

Basically I devote an hour a day to blogging-related functions. That is, either writing posts, or editing other people's posts, composing drafts, or thinking about or pulling together research that will go into drafts. I wish it were three hours a day. I'd love to spend more time. It's a really satisfying process. I think I do my best thinking via my blogs. Because that is

really what a blog is about: a blog is a scratch-pad, and a discipline to collect your thoughts, compose your thoughts, advance your thoughts, and do it in public in a way that can amplify your thoughts by not only reaching an audience, but also getting feedback on your thoughts. Blogging is a way to make myself smarter.

Blogging is incredibly satisfying. I'd love to be blogging full-time. But blogging is an avocation—I don't make a penny from it. I have to balance it with my day job. We have colleagues here at the magazine who have taken blogging sabbaticals, which is to say they've taken sabbaticals from work so they can blog more. I'd love to take a blogging sabbatical.

What is your most gratifying experience as a blogger?

The most gratifying experience is just seeing my idea, which I put out there on The Long Tail blog, resonate in communities I had no idea about. Watching the flood of e-mails about the long tail of churches, the long tail of crafting,

> *"The first rule of the blogosphere is not to generalize about the blogosphere."*

the long tail of travel, the long tail of warfare, the long tail of beer, etcetera. Who knew? Who *knew*? I had no idea!

What happens when you put an idea out there is that people receive it and then translate it to their own world. And they find resonances in their own experience that I never would have anticipated.

Looking at discussions on your blog and elsewhere, one sees many variations on the Long Tail theme—new ideas like the railroads being the long tail of the 1860s, and Wal-Mart having long-tail experiences.

Yes. All this stuff came from the readers. The book is richer, the blog is richer, and the idea is now, fundamentally, held collectively between me and my readers. That idea is richer because people mashed it up with their own experience.

Do you spend much time looking at other blogs?

I pretty much exclusively read blogs. I don't actually visit any of the blogs—I just get them in the feeds. I subscribe to about 220 feeds, almost

exclusively blogs. There may be some exceptions, but I can't think of any offhand. Maybe 180 of those 220 are blogs.

Of course, what I'm reading on those blogs often consists of pointers to mainstream media, so I'm reading mainstream media via the blogs. But virtually everything I read is either blogs or micromedia sites that are essentially blogs—things like PaidContent [`www.paidcontent.org`], GigaOM [`www.gigaom.com`], or the Gawker site [`www.gawker.com`]. Those are what I call the micromedia sites, but they can be called blogs. They're kind of commercial blogs.

So the blogs act as a filter for mainstream media?

Yes. I use the blogs as a filter. I don't read any mainstream media directly. I don't subscribe to any newspapers. The magazines I subscribe to are not mainstream. We don't watch television. I never go to `newyorktimes.com` or `wallstreetjournal.com` by typing an address into the browser bar. I read a ton of mainstream media when the blogs point me to it. So I read a lot of stories from *The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times*, and many others, but only because somebody I trust brought them to my attention.

Do you get some feeling for the *gestalt* of the overall blogosphere from these feeds?

No. There is no one blogosphere. There is an infinite number of blogospheres. My 220 feeds are not your 220 feeds. Nobody shares my specific combination of tastes. I have no idea about what the blogosphere thinks. One of the things I've written about it is that the first rule of the blogosphere is not to generalize about the blogosphere. You can quote me on that. It is a cardinal error.

Any time someone generalizes about the blogosphere, it eliminates them intellectually, as being unwilling to have a kind of a nuanced discussion. If someone says the blogosphere is irresponsible, or the blogosphere is left-wing, or the blogosphere is right-wing, or the blogosphere hates anything—any time they say that, it means they don't understand. They don't understand a truly heterogeneous, unbounded marketplace of opinion, which is what the blogosphere is.

So, you know, I wouldn't *presume* to say anything about what the blogosphere thinks, or how it feels, or whether it *has* a *gestalt*, because my 220 feeds are a statistically insignificant sample that's randomly assembled.

Is 220 a manageable number?

It's too many. Once upon a time, I tried to keep it at a hundred. A hundred was manageable, but I kept finding great new blogs. The information they provide is all highly relevant to me, which means I can't just flip through it as quickly as I can *The New York Times*. I can glance at a couple of headlines and toss *The New York Times*, because it's not relevant, it isn't targeted to my interests. Unfortunately, these feeds are. They are all highly targeted to my interests, and I've got a lot of interests.

So I am suffering from too much information (I realize this is a somewhat clichéd complaint), and it is difficult to manage. In the same way it's taken us decades to perfect inbox management (which we still haven't gotten right), I think that what I call "bloglines management" or "feed management" is going to take us decades to get right, too.

Do you post on blogs other than your own?

No. Never.

Being editor in chief of *Wired* gave you a highly visible platform for launching `thelongtail.com`. Did you have a supplementary strategy for bringing in more readers?

Sure. I did the same thing everybody else does: I whored myself shamelessly. [Laughs] I'm joking. What I did was I e-mailed people.

You know there's sort of an underground economy of begging for links. We all do it: "I started a new blog. I thought you'd be interested." Or "Here's the post that mentions your post; I thought you'd be interested."

> *"Blogs are wildly imperfect, and therein lies their beauty, because they are wildly authentic."*

All bloggers do it—or all good bloggers to it. They market themselves. We teach it internally at *Wired*, with courses on self-promotion.

Bloggers shamelessly self-promote, but they do it in an appropriate way. They e-mail people they know, regarding things that really are of interest to those people, and ask for links. They're not just begging for a random link—they're actually adding value, because this link is in fact complementary to something the blogger they're e-mailing has already done.

Do you have any advice for somebody who's starting a blog?

I think the only advice I'd have is, "Have a focus." The one thing a blogster can do that mainstream media can't do is be in focus with laser precision on something—anything. It doesn't matter what—*something*. It's best that the "something" not be you.

[Pause] Actually, that's totally unfair; I take that back. Focusing on yourself is totally fine. It's not a good way to maximize your audience, but it's totally fine if that's what you want to do. But if you want to maximize your audience, it is best to focus on something else.

Maximum, by the way, doesn't mean 1 million. As I said, I've got blogs whose target audience is 100 people—the *right* 100 people.

Among your carefully selected feeds, do you see many posts that could stand improvement?

Sure! Every blogger blows it all the time. Everybody needs improvement. There are people I admire tremendously who occasionally ramble on too long, or whatever. Blogging is not perfect.

This imperfection is the difference between blogging and what I do in my day job. In my day job, we create this perfect object. It is polished to perfection. It is error-free. It is reviewed by professionals to be the best it can be. Blogging is not that at all. Blogging is a work in progress. Every post could be better, and the errors of omission are worse than the errors of commission—things that we're not blogging about, but we should.

Blogs are wildly imperfect, and therein lies their beauty, because they are wildly authentic.

Blogging is a Turing test for humanity.

Points to Review

As you can see from Chris Anderson's interview, you, too, can become part of the Long Tail phenomenon. To better serve the low-demand niche markets (or just to increase the quality of your own blog), consider these points:

- There is no one "blogosphere." There is an infinite number of blogospheres, each shaped by the tastes and experiences of individuals.

- A blog is a thinking tool, a means of collecting, composing, and amplifying your thoughts—while getting useful feedback. Ideas are enriched by the experiences of blog readers.
- A personal blog presents a better platform for communicating honestly and transparently than a company blog, where a writer is constrained by commercial considerations. However, remember that self-promotion is more effective when it includes a value-added element.
- A blog, especially one with a large community, can function as a distributed research project and become an efficient marketing platform.
- A carefully selected set of feeds can make blogs function as an information filter.
- When blogging, focus on specific interests. You don't have to appeal to an overly diverse audience. Focused blogs are self-selecting, in that they draw readers who have a legitimate interest in the blogs' subjects. Such readers are more likely to forgive errors and omissions, and will contribute more than someone just passing through.
- Every blog, and every blogger, can be improved. To maximize your blog's audience, focus with laser precision on your subject.