Blogs: A Powerful Tool for Accessing Information

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ABSTRACT

The article defines blogs (also known as weblogs), their history, characteristics, and functions. Different types of weblogs have been discussed especially their contents which change daily and the issues discussed by the users on the blogs. Some of the weblogs software like Really Simple Syndication (RSS) and the Library Weblogs and their uses in libraries have also been discussed. The article analyses content coverage, updation users, creators, and maintenance of the blogs. The future trend of Blogs with the challenges librarians have to face to meet the users requirement, have also been discussed.

Keywords: Blogs, weblogs, RSS, blogger, cyberslapp, Internet

1. INTRODUCTION

The information landscape has changed dramatically over the past 10 years the way of communication. The e-mail, Internet and the world wide web have changed the communication and learning habits of the society. Blogs are the latest form of mainstream personal communication. They are popular in the fields like technology, marketing, media and law, with professionals using these to write about everything from gardening to politics. While some are very personal, others a focal point for people to express their views of the current news. Blogs have become the perfect platform to espouse ideas, publish thoughts online, influence society, engage in global discussion, and promote oneself as a thought leader online. Blogging tools have brought new capabilities such as web publication and communication to average people, especially non-technical users. These are designed to facilitate simple and fast creation of web content without much technical or programming skills. Many companies are recognising the marketing potentials of weblogs. A blog is a web-based publication consisting primarily of periodic articles, normally in reverse chronological order.

A weblog is a website or page that is the product of (generally) an individual or of non-commercial origin that uses a date-limited or diary format, and which is updated either daily or at regular intervals with new information about a subject, range of subjects, or personal

details. This information available on a weblog may have been written by the author of the log, obtained from other sources on the web, or can be contributed by others, or a combination of all these. The information is usually topical and timely, and can be viewed as a developing commentary on a situation, event or subject. Weblogs are also referred to as logs, blogs, web logs, and so on[1].

The Webopedia defines blogs as, 'a web page that serves as a publicly accessible personal journal for an individual'. In 2005, the word blog was included for the first time in the US. Merriam-webster dictionary although it has entered the Oxford English dictionary in 2004. Typically updated daily, blogs often reflect the personality of the author[2].

Canadian weblog expert Peter Scott has developed a widely-accepted definition of a blog or weblog as, 'a web page containing brief, chronologically arranged items of information'. Some commentators insist that a weblog is a personal web page. The success model of a web blog is given below.

2. HISTORY OF BLOGGING

Weblogs are a relatively recent Internet phenomenon, dating back to late 1990s. The success model of a weblog is depicted in Fig. 1[3]. The term weblog was initially coined referring to a server's log file and then expanded to include the meaning of online personal journaling. Later on, the word blog was adopted to refer to personal journaling[4]. The shorter version, blog, was coined by

Peter Merholz in 1999. He pronounced it 'web-blog', which was inevitably shortened to blog. He broke the word weblog into the phrase 'we blog' in the sidebar of his weblog. This was interpreted as a short form of the noun, and also as a verb 'to blog' meaning 'to edit one's weblog or a post to one's weblog'. The weblog editor being referred to as 'blogger. Dave Winer contributed with setting up servers, which weblogs would ping to update themselves. Blog reading utilities such as blogrolling use the aggregated update data to show a user when their favourite blogs have new posts. A blogroll is a list of links that create a context for a blog. Bloggers normally share a blogroll to increase their online presence[5].

The emergence of the blogger, i.e., the weblog development software (made available by Pyra Labs in 1999) started the beginnings of blogging. With the slogan push-button publishing for the people on its home page, blogger made an enormous impact on the world wide web. The blogger home page's promise of instant communication power by letting users post their thoughts to the web whenever the urge strikes was something that many people found attractive[6].

According to Winer, the first weblog was the website, http://info.cern.ch/, built by Tim Berners-Lee at CERNER Corporation. From this page Tim Berner-Lee pointed to all the news sites as they became online. In 1999, the first free build-your-own weblog tool was developed. Since then several blogging software packages have been created, which
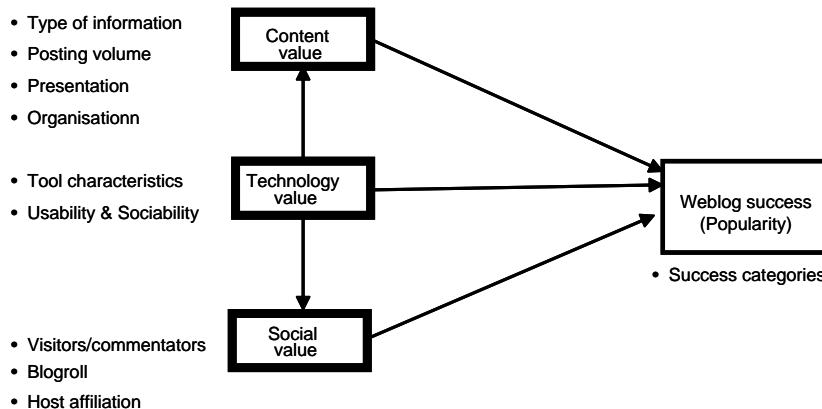

- Type of information
- Posting volume
- Presentation
- Organisationn

Content value

- Tool characteristics
- Usability & Sociability

Technology value

Weblog success (Popularity)

- Success categories

- Visitors/commentators
- Blogroll
- Host affiliation

Social value

Figure 1. The Success model of a weblog.

combine user-friendly interface and format flexibility. With server-based systems, bloggers don't need to manage the software, while with web interfaces, travellers can blog from anywhere on the Internet. Blogging enables news feed to be updated on a site from different locations quickly and easily[7].

3. BLOGS SEARCH ENGINES

Specialised search engines have responded to the rapid growth of blogs. Google blog search (http://blogsearch.google.com), Technorati Feedster (www.feedster. com/), and Blogpulse (www.blogpulse.com/) being some of the top choices. Blogpulse performs another valuable function by graphing trend results based on keywords in blog postings, a useful way to see what the blogosphere is currently buzzing about[8].

4. FORMS OF WEBLOGS

Weblogs may take many different forms–a diary, a news service, a collection of links to Internet resources, a series of book reviews, reports of activity on a project, the journal of an expedition, a photographic record of a building project, or any one of a number of other forms. Most weblogs display material for the current month or the current week, with older material being archived on the site for browsing and/or searching. Some weblogs have other useful features–like links to similar weblogs, or links to the most important Internet resources in the field of coverage of the weblog, or a way to make contact with other people who read the weblog, or access to software and services. Weblogs may be a single-person effort or cooperative projects. Some are a one-way mean of communication between writer and audience; others allow readers to post comments to the weblog. One of the reason that commentators tend to disagree about the usefulness of weblogs is that they discuss a particular type of weblog rather than weblogs as a whole[4]. There are a variety of weblogs, all doing different things. The single most popular weblog is probably Slashdot, created by programmer and graphic artist Rob Malden and his colleagues. Slashdot is an extended weblog, which carries discussion threads contributed by individuals in many subject areas such as hardware, programming, games, and so on. The Weblog, the Shifted Librarian, http://www.theshiftedlibrarian.com is a personal weblog created by Jenny Levine, an information professional[9].

Weblogs are therefore virtual soapbox or personal journal to community space for learners or any community with a shared interest. It is a democratic and enabling medium, which enables people without web authoring skills or technical knowledge to publish their views and share them. It can also host features including links to external websites and news feeds. Weblogs can complement existing library services, and could be used to support local reading groups, clubs and other special interest groups, adult learning, and homework activities for children.

5. WEBLOG CHARACTERISTICS

Blogs are characterised by the following:

�֍ Blogs are intended for general public consumption.

✖ Weblogs allow readers to enter their own comments to individual posts.

✖ Weblogs links generously, allowing readers to follow conversations between weblogs.

✖ Weblogs are serial.

✖ The style is informal and personal.

✖ Blogs are like a short public lecture.

According to Winer (www.scripting.com), weblogs have the following characteristics:

✖ **Personalised:** Weblogs are designed for individual use (multi-person weblog is also possible through collaboration, such as the ''team blog'' offered by www.blogger.com). Their style is personal and informal.

✖ **Web-based:** Weblogs can be updated frequently. They are easy to maintain and accessible via a web browser.

✖ **Community-supported:** Weblogs can link to other weblogs and websites, enabling the linkage of ideas, and hence

stimulating knowledge generation and sharing between bloggers.

- **Automated:** Blogging tools help bloggers to present their words without the hassle of writing HTML code or program; instead, bloggers just need to concentrate on the content[10].

6. FUNCTIONS

The basic functions/activities which can be carried out using a Blog are:

- It is easy to use and bloggers with little know-how can set it up with blogging software. The basic technology effectively allows access to a website via a back door and people to add content

- It allows people to have conversation and give their rapid feedback not only in the same blog, but also in other blogs. Newspapers and journals are not able to print comments from the readers immediately and reply instantaneously

- It is subject to self-correction. It is easy to retract a statement and/or to provide the parties with their right to reply. It facilitates ease of publication and correction of information which might be false or damaging and makes it difficult for bloggers to ignore requests to take down defamatory or illegal materials

- They have a wide reach enabling bloggers to link everywhere around the world

- It has the ability to disseminate specialised knowledge, although the accuracy of the news cannot be guaranteed, unlike conventional news. Blogging combines the functions of an editor and author

- Blogging is an effective way to make people notice

7. KEY ELEMENTS

Despite their differences, weblogs have several key elements in common:

- Content changes on a daily (sometimes hourly) basis

- There is a personal point of view

- There is an opportunity to contact/ collaborate with the author

- Viewers will find topical material that will (usually) relate to them

- Issues of the day are generally those that are discussed in detail

- They respond to, rather than create news

- They are written in a format with the most recent material at the top, while older material is further down the page, or stored in an archive, which is almost like reading backwards through a book

Blogs can be maintained by one person or a group of people and can be from personal or business purposes, but they almost retain the key feature of having a list of articles or posts in reverse chronological order. Most Blogs allow readers to post comments, creating an interactive environment with multiple points of view[1].

8. BLOGGING TOOLS SOFTWARES

Weblogs started to gain popularity after Pitas.com launched the first free build-your-own-weblog tool, and few others like blogger released their blogging tools. These tools provided the ease and affordable opportunity for non-technical persons to communicate online.

Nowadays, most eblogs are powered by hosting services or standalone software; although a few bloggers like Rebecca Blood (www.rebeccablood.net), still hand code their sites. Many popular weblog hosts such as Blogger, ModBlog, and Xanga offer basic services free, which are good for new bloggers or general users who are happy with limited server spaces and standard features. Blogs are terrific information resources, but their companion software Really Simple Syndication (RSS), is what really makes them powerful.

9. LIBRARY WEBLOGS

A number of Internet search engines and directories (such as Yahoo! and Google) provide information about, and lists of, weblogs, and some include pages from weblogs in their search results. In addition, weblog creation sites such as Blogger maintain lists of weblogs that have been created using their service. There are now some specialist weblog search engines, the largest of which, Technorati, claimed to be "watching" 1,064,313 weblogs in October 2003. The library weblogs were found through just three specialist directories. The first was Scott's "Library weblogs" page, which lists weblogs (professional and personal) that are maintained by librarians, and weblogs that deal with library and information related topics, as well as library weblogs per se. It is arranged in alphabetical order by country. The second was the DMOZ Open Directory Project page of "Organizational weblogs", which lists library weblogs, weblogs from other organisations, and some librarian-maintained weblogs. It is arranged in alphabetical order by the name of the weblog. The third was the author's (Clyde) own teachingWeb page of "Weblogs", on which the list of library weblogs is arranged in alphabetical order by the name of the library. The Yahoo! weblogs directory listed no library weblogs that were not already on at least one of the three specialist directories[6]. The top ranking site from Libdex, which contains a list of library weblogs by country, also features articles on weblogging by and for information professionals, most of whom are based in the U.S. and Canada.

9.1 Subject Weblogs

Some library blogs are more expert-oriented with a specific subject focus. Canadian John Dupois runs Confessions of a Science Librarian (http://jdupuis.blogspot.com/) and posts items of special interest to academic science librarians, but with a sense of humour. Another Canadian, Randy Reichardt, has set up The (sci-tech) Library Question which features information for engineering and science librarians, including reviews of science-related websites and traditional print reference sources.

Michelle Kraft's The Krafty Librarian (www.kraftylibrarian.blogspot. com/) regularly looks at medical librarianship issues. Library legal issues are approached by several blogs. Englishman Paul Pedley's Keeping Legal (www.keepinglegal.com/) contains legal issues of both UK and US. Sabrina I. Pacifici focuses on law and technology news in bespacific (www.bespacific.com/). Daily postings provide updates on issues including copyright, privacy, censorship, the Patriot Act, ID theft, and freedom of information. Her blog's subject organisation includes a category for libraries. Also Mary Minow's LibraryLaw Blog (http://blog.librarylaw.com/librarylaw/) covers issues concerning libraries and the law with latitude to discuss any other interesting issues[11].

9.2 Library Weblogs for Young Readers

Many public library weblogs seem to be devoted to children and teenagers. Several are described as teen pages or teen news, and are linked to library reading activities. Spring Valley library has a teen page which offers a prize to readers who have read ten books. The Caestecker Public library, Wisconsin, USA, is a library which serves a population of 3000 residents but still provides a weblog devoted to children's literature. Weblogging, in a controlled environment, can provide young people with a safe, shared web space to develop writing skills and share experiences.

9.3 Local Councillors' Weblogs

The local councillors in the UK (often referred to as elected members were ill-informed about the role public libraries play in progressing local and national government agendas. Library managers in the UK were urged to remedy this situation by ensuring that councillors with responsibility for public libraries, well informed and by getting them involved in library activities. This led to the development of local councilors weblogs. Some forward-thinking local councillors already have weblogs and use these as a simple communication channel between them, the local authority, and people working and living in the area. Councillors and libraries share

a virtual space and have closer contact to the communities they serve. The weblog might also feature links to other weblogs provided by council services, such as social services, the police, and school[12].

10. ANALYSIS OF LIBRARY WEBLOGS

Library weblogs (55) were found in only three countries: the USA, Canada, and the UK with by far the largest number being in the USA (46), Canada (6) and the UK (3). Given the popularity of blogging in countries like Australia, New Zealand, France, and Iceland, it is surprising that more countries are not represented in the list. However, checks of local search engines and professional websites in these and other countries failed to find any evidence of library blogs. This does not necessarily mean that there are no library weblogs in other countries; rather weblogs that may exist are inaccessible through search engines and directories. Out of the 55 weblogs, 25 are maintained by public libraries, 21 by academic libraries, 5 by special libraries, 2 by multi-type library network and one each by national library and school board library. The purpose of the weblogs are to provide news and information for users, links to recommend internet resources, book reviews, information about new books, provide entertainment for users, news or information for librarians, book discussions, research tips and communication among librarians (in a library system)[6].

11. USES OF WEBLOGS

Blogs are easy to use as these require no knowledge of html or configuration of systems. Generally, they offer searching, indexing, categorisation tools, and trackback/ shareback mechanisms, whereby content on a given topic can be aggregated and tracked. These are used by librarians in reference work and information provision more so because weblog entries also result in the pages of search presented by some of the public search engines. In the reference setting, their strength lies in their general acceptance and their references to a range of opinions,

as well as to new sources of information and commentary. Few libraries have created weblogs to communicate with their users or for publicity and promotional purposes.

There are many ways in which blogs and RSS feeds can be used in the academic library environment to promote and market library services and resources to faculty and the students. A feed reader is a lightweight open source aggregator that supports RSS and ATOM formats. To access RSS feeds from different blogs, one need to download a feed reader on their computers. There are several RSS readers available. A web-based free service called Bloglines, can also be used to subscribe to different RSS feeds indicated by either an RSS or XML icon from variety of blogs. Once the URL associated with these icons is copied and pasted onto the Bloglines account or in any feed readers, feeds for that site become available. Feeds from blogs can be accessed from anywhere and anytime. Bloglines is a news aggregator of many online information sources, such as websites, weblogs, and news services, now broadcast their content to the web in so-called 'syndicate feeds' or 'news feeds' with RSS.

Librarians are using blogs in unique and diverse ways. Using an RSS feed, librarians are customising blog posts for their departmental liaisons, or using RSS to html converters to incorporate blog posts into educational software such as Blackboard. Blogs such as Jenny Levine's site and Shifted Librarian (www.theshiftedlibrarian.com/) are widely read and dealt frequently. Other blogs, such as the director's blog that appears on the home page of the Ann Arbor Public Library (www.aadl.org), offers announcements and an immediate, shareable chance for feedback. Another unique blog, Superpatron (http:// vielmetti.typepad.com/superpatron/) is written exclusively by library patrons[13].

Some possible uses of blogs in an academic environment are:

✂   Personal knowledge management

✂   Class/cohort (announcements, schedules, readings etc)

- ✂ Posting student work for viewing/comment by peers

- ✂ Personal journal with viewing/comment by teacher/tutor

- ✂ Publication of tutor essays, links or commentary to seed discussion

- ✂ Community forum

- ✂ 'Citizen' reporting

- ✂ e-Portfolio/PDP

But all these uses in an academic environment are at an early and exciting stage of development.

12. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

The biggest problems arise when bloggers reveal proprietary or confidential information, and post content that defames the person. Increasingly, a number of employees are losing their jobs for violating company policies over their blogs giving rise to a new term called 'dooce dodging'. According to Macmillan English dictionary to be ''dooced'' means losing your job over something you wrote in your Internet weblog.

Corporate blog is a blog published by, or with the support of an organisation. The main concern of Corporate blog is the lack of editorial control and the danger of an inadvertent disclosure of company trade secrets. More and more employees are using their personal blogs as a vehicle to vent frustrations about their work situation and company policies. However, they risk recriminations from their employers, even though their blogs and PCs are privately owned and blogging is conducted outside of their working hours. There have been cases of people being fired for writing about life inside their companies on blogs not affiliated with their employers. Companies are grappling with how to deal with workers who write personal blogs that discuss their employers. To prevent possible reprisals from employers and censorship, many organisations are recommending that bloggers remain anonymous to protect themselves from

recriminations and censors. The Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) recommends bloggers to remain anonymous maintain their personal identity and to preserve their right to anonymous online speech and freedom of expression. A new form of lawsuit, called CyberSlapp, is increasingly being used by companies and public figures to compel the Internet service providers to reveal the identities of their anonymous critics.

Copyright protects the form of expression of a creator against copying. Copyright protection is given to the authors of 'original works of authorship,' including literary, dramatic, musical, artistic, and certain other intellectual works. Copying the whole, or nearly the whole of a text written by someone else on their blog, or putting a copyrighted picture on the weblog without the right holder's consent is copyright infringement[14].

13. FUTURE TREND

A new form of blogging activity is moblogging or mblogging or phone blogging, to create a moblog. Moblogging is done from a mobile phone or a handheld computer. Moblogging might involve updating a traditional weblog via sms or e-mail from a phone or adding photographs or sound to a traditional weblog from a camera phone. Or it might involve the creation of a moblog using specialist moblog software, and maintaining it only by mobile. "The trend is set to transform an already successful web medium into something new, at-hand, and suited to our increasingly mobile lifestyles", says Amy Cowen[15].

14. CONCLUSION

Blogging is still a grey area, but it is already showing signs of being the next battleground for litigation with arrests being reported and cases being lodged before the courts. Blogging has allowed millions all over the world to exercise their right to legitimate free expression. However, freedom of expression, though an absolute right, is bounded by the rights of others. Bloggers who write anything negative, false or defamatory about a corporation or an individual are opening themselves and

their companies up to the possibility of libel suits. For other bloggers, the law has been used to stifle legitimate speech. Weblog success may not simply be determined by the content that created the interest in the earlier blogging days. Instead, the embedded ability of weblogs to create popularity and to nurture social interaction through its technological features may also be a significant contributor to weblog popularity.

In essence, the choice of the right technology or development of more appropriate technologies may create a distinct advantage in the highly competitive top-levels of the blogging world. Moreover, the findings may be applied to the design, development, and implementation of other types of interactive and/or dynamic websites or web applications.

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