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Weblogs as a Disruptive Technology for Extension

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Weblogs as a Disruptive Technology for Extension

Abstract
Over 2 million people already use weblogs (or blogs) to voice their opinions, brainstorm, update projects, tell stories, and filter knowledge. Bloggers include journalists, academics, students, librarians, CEOs, and lawyers. Weblogs "underperform" traditional communication media in terms of layout, editing, design and professional review, but they provide immediacy, personal voice, and knowledge filtering, which a growing number of Web users value. Weblogs in Extension offer the potential to promote trust, create new conversations, filter and disseminate knowledge, and build strong internal networks. In the process they will also change who our clients are and how we interact with them.

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Introduction

Weblogs are everywhere. Technorati <http://www.technorati.com/> watches over 1.2 million weblogs every day. Blogcount <http://dijest.com/bc/> estimates 2.4 to 2.9 million currently active weblogs. Weblogs influence journalism, technology transfer, knowledge filtering, research, and business-to-customer communication. In the fashion of disruptive technologies, weblogs underperform by traditional measures, but they also create brand-new possibilities and eventually change the measures entirely.

What Is a Weblog?

Among people who care about definitions, there's often spirited discussion about the exact definition of "weblogs." Weblogs come in all shapes and sizes--personal, business, single-topic, eclectic. Generally, however, a weblog is a personal publishing system with chronological entries containing collections of links. Weblogs tell stories, share knowledge, provide reviews, analyze news, and link to others whose interests they share. Microsoft employees, university professors, research librarians, unemployed technologists, and high school students all produce interesting, entertaining weblogs that people access and learn from daily.

A weblog is pretty simple technologically. All weblog software does essentially the same thing: it allows you to make "posts" which it then arranges in chronological order. These posts can be accessed by date, by individual post, and by category (usually). The posts generally consist of a title, a post body, a permalink, and sometimes an image. The content of a post can be source quotes, links, and author commentary.

Despite their seeming simplicity, weblogs do several things extraordinarily well, and it's these characteristics that make them disruptive.

What Is a Disruptive Technology?

New technologies are generally either sustaining or disruptive. Sustaining technologies are those technologies or ideas that sustain an organization's focus, goals, and customers. Successful organizations, like Extension, are good at recognizing and exploiting sustaining technologies, even when those technologies require radical change. Sustaining technologies maintain value systems,

improve existing products, and offer clear benefits to existing customers.

Disruptive technologies are innovations that often don't improve existing product performance. Current customers neither know nor care about the initial benefits of the disruptive technology; those benefits don't fit their current needs. Disruptive technologies often turn out to be things an organization dismisses initially as not worth the time, not "good enough," or not what the customer wants.

Weblogs, which might easily be dismissed according to the criteria above (not worth our time, not good enough, not what our customers tell us they want), have the potential to change Extension radically and in some instances may already be doing so. There's no barrier to starting a weblog. I can go to Blogger <http://www.blogger.com/>, enter my name, pick a password, and presto! I have a blog (weblog). Other applications (Typepad <http://www.typepad.com/>, Radio Userland <http://radio.userland.com/>, and Movable Type <http://www.movabletype.org/>) allow me to set up an organized, functioning weblog in a couple of hours with little financial investment. If someone in Extension wants to start a weblog, they can, and they will, and it's very possible they already have.

Why Are Weblogs So Popular?

While weblogs often can't provide application forms or detailed program information, they can promote interaction, filter vast quantities of information, and create relationships. Weblogs, more than any other network application, are about interaction and networking at an individual level.

The Cluetrain Manifesto (Locke, Levine, Searls, & Weinberger, 2001) characterizes the Web as a conversation. And that conversation is disruptive to our traditional ideas about communication. We can process information, run it through committees, discuss it, edit it, and format it, but once we put it on the web, we give it over to everyone else. On the web, people talk about information they find, sift it through their own experience and expertise, and pass new information, built from the original and their additions, on to friends, who reinterpret it, pass it on again, and so on. . .

People blog because they have something to say, because they want to bring attention to certain resources, or, as Cory Doctorow (Doctorow, 2002) says, because a weblog is like an "outboard brain," a place to highlight things that are important and worth remembering. Though often professional, weblogs are not heavily edited, peer-reviewed, or couched in official language. They are immediate, emotional, and interactive.

Blogging has several implications for Extension.

1. Weblogs Promote Conversation

The "killer apps" on the Internet are all about conversation and connection--e-mail, instant messaging, chat, newsgroups, etc. eBay <http://www.ebay.com/> is wildly successful, not simply because it lets people buy and sell stuff, but because it lets them talk about buying and selling stuff and lets them communicate about who's good at buying and selling stuff and who isn't. People don't just want a company to tell them their hours and the customer service number. They want to know who the company is, what kind of people work there, and how real people answer direct questions. They want to make contact, to tell someone what they think and to hear from them directly.

Weblogs promote conversation through:

- **Blogrolls** --links to other weblogs
- **"Post and response" conversations** --one post generates another post on another weblog, which in turn generates a response on the original weblog
- **Comments** --readers respond with questions, additional information, and feedback
- **Backchannel communication**--continuing the conversation via email

Extension has long understood the importance of conversation, networking, and interaction. Extension has traditionally had a local presence in each county or region and has emphasized direct contact with local residents and businesses. However, with shifting demographics, changing organizational structures, busy lives, and Internet information "gluts," it's difficult for traditional relationship building to satisfy the needs of many people.

Weblog conversations don't happen in real time. They occur over several days and can even start anew when someone finds an old post. Weblogs promote interaction without the time and space constraints of meetings or office visits. In addition, they are public and allow people to know something about the blogger before initiating or joining a conversation and in that sense are more approachable than sending email to a stranger to ask a question.

2. Weblogs Promote Individual Voice

One of the consequences of an Internet that provides "content everywhere" is that we don't know whose content to trust. Whose information should we use? Who's telling us something that's accurate today rather than 3 years ago? In Extension we like to think of ourselves as trustworthy,

as the place people go when they're looking for good, practical, unbiased information. But we also know that many people don't know who we are. With the whole of the Internet to choose from, why come to Extension for information? How will people know us?

One way is through weblogs. Each of us has our own particular criteria for judging how much we trust an individual person, but some of the common factors for establishing trust include: credentials, references; usefulness of the information they filter; recommendations from others; strong, clear writing; and personal glimpses of the person behind the information. This last factor is increasingly critical (Coates, 2002).

Traditional Extension clients are accustomed to individual voice. They trust their own County Extension Education Director more than they trust the campus specialist. While a county director understands and speaks for Extension as a whole, each county director is also an individual with his or her own unique experiences and knowledge, and most county directors use all of that when working with their clients, building trust and strong networks.

Traditional clients aren't necessarily looking to extend those conversations to the Web; they already have a medium (face to face) that's ideally suited for conversation. But there are other people we don't reach through local offices who want more than just a publication. Just like the people who meet us face-to-face, they want people they trust, helping them find information they need.

Weblogs can provide some of those traditional benefits for people who do much of their knowledge building online. Weblogs provide information not just about what a person knows, but about what they value, what interests them, and what experience they have.

3. Weblogs Reduce Data "Smog"

Extension has traditionally been heavily invested in a linear connectivity, "content is king" scenario (Reed, 1999). Publications and state fair booths and even farm visits are built around the idea of giving information to people who need it. This is a valuable and necessary service, but the Web has moved well beyond the restrictions of linear connectivity and content availability as a bottleneck to progress.

There is content everywhere. Excellent, filtered material is available in a timely manner from a variety of responsible sources. So much information is available that we have new concerns--data "smog," unreliable information and myriad distractions that interfere with and frustrate people when searching for the answers they need. Group-forming networks, which allow people to establish their own interconnections, not simply receive information, can address these concerns by allowing users to promote jointly constructed value, build relationships, establish trust, and find focused information specifically useful to the individual.

Weblogs reduce data smog through:

- **Knowledge filtering**--pointers to news and Web pages that interest the individual blogger
- **Analysis and commentary**--context for linked items
- **Links to others** --experts link to those they trust, providing sources to build other knowledge networks

By providing knowledgeable, timely pointers to information, individual Extension staff can easily become the "go-to" place on a particular topic.

Weblogs can generate XML or RDF pages that can be read by news aggregation programs and presented as a list of updates to users. In this way, updates come to the user instead of the user constantly checking a growing list of "favorites." Services like Syndic8 <http://www.syndic8.com/> and Blogstreet <http://www.blogstreet.com/> provide lists of weblog RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds.

Finally, the populist nature of weblogs, coupled with Trackback (providing connecting links to related weblog posts) and comments, provide places for others to participate in our conversations. Experts don't just provide knowledge; they rely as well on input and feedback from others.

Conclusion

Professional weblogs must be professional. But they must also be individual. And it's this combination that is both truly disruptive and a reflection of things that Extension has always done well. One of Extension's strengths has always resided in its local presence and in building trusted relationships. We don't speak with one voice in our program meetings, in our newspaper columns, or in our radio shows. We need not speak with one voice on the Internet, either.

The Web is about conversation, and the conversation is going on now. The conversation is only momentarily interested in static Web pages and online forms. People want to ask us questions, tell us who they are, find out who we are in turn, and learn new things. We can choose to participate in the conversation or not, but if we don't participate as individuals, the conversation will go on without us.

Getting Started

The best way to learn about what weblogs can do is to read existing weblogs and then go out and start your own. Here are some resources for getting started.

Weblogs to Visit

Tech, Knowledge and Community (Deb's Blog) <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/mt/dcoates>

TechNews <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/mt/technews>

Extension Daily at Alabama Cooperative Extension <http://www.aces.edu/mt/news/>

The Shifted Librarian <http://www.theshiftedlibrarian.com/>

elearningpost <http://www.elearningpost.com/>

Weblogg-ed <http://www.weblogg-ed.com/>

mamamusings <http://www.mamamusings.net/>

Seb's Open Research <http://radio.weblogs.com/0110772>

Information on Getting Started

Weblogs as Trusted Sources and Knowledge Filters <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/mt/dcoates/extras/weblogs2002_part_one.html>

The Art of Blogging--Part 2 <http://www.elearnspace.org/Articles/blogging_part_2.htm>

How to Start a Weblog (For Professional Journalists) <http://davenet.scripting.com/2002/05/07/howToStartAWeblogforProfessionalJournalists>

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💬 **Discussion**