Chapter 3.10
Blogging Technology and its Support for E–Collaboration

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INTRODUCTION

Weblogs, commonly known as "blogs," are Web sites that feature a series of dated posts appearing in reverse chronological order. They may be authored by individuals, groups, or organizations, and may be used to share writing and Web-based media of any kind. Although there is nothing inherent in the basic technology behind blogs specifically to facilitate community, as with many other technological media, blogs have been used to support e-collaboration and have become known as a form of Web-based discourse (Fleishman, 2002). This article discusses how blogs and their various enabling tools and technologies can be used to foster and maintain e-collaboration.

BACKGROUND

Blogs have evolved over time, from Web pages that were updated manually in the late-1990s to full sites with archives and labels that are generated using specific blogging tools. The original blogs were not collaborative in nature. Instead, they represented the work of individuals who posted dated entries to Web pages. Although these earliest blogs have been considered not all that different from personal home pages (Weiss, 2004), blogs are distinct from regular Web sites in a number of ways. The manner in which they are updated is different, with new items being added but not replacing older ones. Typically they have a clear sense of voice or authorship (Gill, 2004).

Significant growth of the blogging trend did not begin until around 1999 when several build-your-own-weblog tools, most notably Blogger (www.blogger.com), were released. These tools enabled the general public, specifically people with minimal technical knowledge, to create weblogs quickly and easily (Blood, 2000). All that was needed was the ability to fill out simple forms on a Web page, much like sending e-mail.

The practice of blogging has seen exponential growth since that time. Technorati (www.technorati.com/, 2006), a Web-based tool that tracks blogs, suggests that there are 75,000 new blogs created each day and, as of October 5, 2006, the tool is tracking 56.1 million blogs across an array of disciplines and fields, connecting people from all over the world.

The content of blogs varies widely. Some resemble online journals, whereas others may be more topic-focused. Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, and Wright (2005) found that most (70.4%) blogs could be categorized as journals; with filters, which provide links and metacommentary on other sites, constituting 12.6%; and k-logs, recording items relevant to a given project, also being found (3.0%). Additionally, they found blogs that served mixed functions (9.5%) as well as some that did not fit into any of these categories. While some of these blogs exist in relative isolation, many others have linked together. These blogrolls or lists of links to other blogs bring together bloggers who share common interests or enjoy each other's writing.

HOW BLOGS FOSTER E-COLLABORATION

Blogs can be used to support e-collaboration among people who know each other prior to blogging and are committed to engaging in a shared task, but they can also provide a forum through which individuals might find each other and form new collaborative partnerships. In the former case, a work group might elect to start a blog to document progress on a particular task or enable brainstorming and resource sharing. In the latter case, individuals with like interests may find each other through blogs and begin working together to achieve a particular goal.

Blogs enable people to interact and collaborate in four different ways: (1) publishing; (2) coauthoring/coediting; (3) social bookmarking; and (4) online discourse. In the most basic of senses, blogs provide a mechanism for an individual author to publish his thoughts or links to resources he has found in a forum where they can be accessed by others. Publishing may be considered one component of e-collaboration in that the blog author is submitting his work to a public audience for comment and use. In other words, it is an e-collaboration enabler.

Collaborative blog authoring and editing may take one of two forms. In the most common one, all authors can have access to the blog, compose their own posts and, depending on their permissions, may be able to edit all posts. Through the edit functions, collaborative writing can be done and feedback can be left in the comments regardless of one's permission status. Alternately, authors can have their own blogs, and these blogs can be combined via a feed into one master blog. In this second version, authors cannot readily access each other's posts to edit or delete them.

Social bookmarking is not about writing a blog but instead about finding, organizing, and sharing blog-based resources with others. Individuals can either compile their own lists of blogs and Web sites, and then share them with others, or they may collectively contribute to the same lists of bookmarks. Regardless of how it is done, the practice of social bookmarking greatly facilitates information searching and sharing.

Finally, blogs are an online forum in which discourse may be generated amongst many participants. Discourse may be initiated or prompted by remarks made in a blog post and further continued via the comments or other posts. It may look very much like dialogue, with iterations of statements and responses between particular interactants, or it may take the form of commentary without any direct form of responsive discussion.

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