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## Evaluate the history, usage and potential of Weblogs

Where relevant, include examples of Weblogs to illustrate your evaluation.

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### INTRODUCTION

Writing and reading Weblogs has become a part of modern lifestyle. People all over the world have become able to make connections and build communities in this new mode of expression where everybody can vocalize their thoughts, opinions, ideas and personality on different levels and with different methods. In the following paragraphs history of Weblogs will be evaluated from several points of view. The difference between HTML coded and software supported Weblogs will be mentioned while need for specialized search engines and web content syndication formats will be described. Next, political issues will be raised, as Weblogs became a subject to censorship, and in addition self-disclosure of Weblog writers will be described as an important aspect of personal publishing. In final paragraphs some new usages of Weblogs will be evaluated since they have been adopted in business environments and advertising.

### HISTORY OF WEBLOGS

Generally Weblogs are defined as web sites with chronologically ordered posts, where the latest post is always at the top of a web page. They are written regularly and frequently, sometimes even several times a day.

First Weblogs were built in the middle of the nineties and were designed by people who had background in programming and web design in that all content had to be coded in HTML. Blood (2000) states the term Weblog was firstly used by Jorn Barger in December 1997 while shorter term blog developed from Peter Merholz's

pronunciation of Weblog – “wee-blog” or as it is explained in Wikipedia (2005) Merholz devided “the word *weblog* into the phrase ‘we blog’”.

The year 1999 was groundbreaking in many aspects – the first Weblog communities emerged, for instance MetaFilter.com, Pitas, and Blogger. Easy to use interface of software supporting these communities enabled many more people to get involved in writing Weblogs. Besides Blood (2000) acknowledged a difference in content between early blogs with links to web pages, news articles and description or comment and blogs after content management software and pre-designed templates became available. It was a period when content changed its form to diaries written in short posts. Since then millions of Weblogs were created and indexes became an indispensable tool for finding information contained in Weblogs. Perhaps the most known is technorati.com which currently indexes around 20 million Weblogs. In September 2005 Google Inc. offered new Weblog search engine “which catalogs the latest blog postings by looking at the Web feeds they generate” (Google unveils blog search engine 15.9.05). This is a revolutionary technique, however successful only if Weblog has a RSS or Atom XML feed. RSS (Really Simple Syndication, Rich Site Summary or RDF Site Summary) and Atom are different XML file formats for web syndication used by Weblogs. They enable distribution of latest posts (title, content and other information) via news aggregators, email and websites. This principle of extracting new posts from Weblogs was later adopted by

many major organizations (especially news related) where periodic updates are common.

## **FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION**

Weblogs had and still have a great impact on social life, culture, media, and politics or better to say on almost every aspect of people's lives. Albeit the Internet is a democratic medium, writers of Weblogs face various obstacles while expressing their opinion, viewpoints and comments. In general, distinction between several reasons for protection of personal information of author could be made.

Firstly unfavourable political climate should be mentioned. As Handbook for bloggers and cyber-dissidents (Devilette 2005) described governments of China, Hong Kong, Iran and Nepal among others are imposing laws that are restricting use of Internet and are limiting freedom of expression. As Fowler and Fong (2005) reported, "the Chinese government is imposing new regulations that will attempt to centralize all China-based Web news and opinion under a state regulator" and will affect the authors of Weblogs who would publish unauthorized news, reports or comments. As a result international community is making efforts to help so-called dissidents to avoid technical obstacles and protect their anonymity.

Secondly disclosing personal details while discussing specific content can also be harmful to individual. In the history of Weblogs several people were fired from their jobs because they published in company's view inappropriate or harmful content. Even term dooced, derived from the first such case where Heather Armstrong was fired from her job in 2001 as result of writing about her work and colleagues on her Weblog dooce.com (Armstrong 2005). In the latest years at least two similar cases were publicized firstly

Delta Air Lines flight attendant Ellen Simonetti who had posted pictures of herself in her uniform on an empty plane on her personal Weblog Queen of Sky – now called Diary of a Fired Flight Attendant (Simonetti 2005) and was later fired because of alleged misuse of uniform and besides Mark Jen, an associate product manager in Google's AdSense advertising unit, was also fired due to his writing on Weblog (Jen 2005) in January 2005.

Reasons for self-censorship can also be of personal nature of the bloggers. In interview Armstrong (Blood 2005) describes her process of setting the boundaries and realization that actually she could not write about everything she wanted as it affected her personal life.

## **QUALITY CONTROL**

Weblogs, as a form where usually only one person, its author, is involved in writing and editing, has not many mechanisms for quality control. Besides author's good taste, there is actually no effective quality control, however we can mention a form of feedback that can be useful regarding content evaluation. First of all, comments and their content should be emphasized while in them agreement and disagreement with author can be expressed. Besides, number of page hits could also show the level of quality, however it should not be mistaken for popularity of the Weblog. In addition quality in terms of enhanced user experience can be achieved by examining organisation and design of Weblog, regularity of updates and language used.

## **WEBLOGS AND SOFTWARE**

From the software point of view Weblogs can be divided into two groups. First would contain Weblogs hosted by service providers such as Blogger (2005), LiveJournal (2005), MSN

Spaces (2005) where service provider gives user possibility to use software that generates Weblog and hosts its contents on a web server. Second group of Weblogs is generated by software, for example DotClear, MovableType and Wordpress, which is installed on hosting provider's server used by the author of a Weblog. The major difference can be noticed in size and number of advertisements that free providers usually place on a Weblog, in addition users of services by service providers are usually not so experienced in web design as bloggers of the second group who therefore usually pay more attention to design, organization and content of their Weblogs.

### **K-LOGS**

An interesting development concerning use of Weblogs has become evident when organizations and institutions started to use Weblogs as environments where knowledge could be shared. K-logs or Knowledge Management Weblogs are regarded as a part of knowledge management where documentation and discussion between experts or employees can be archived, searched or browsed (Stone 2002). Although Weblogs are used in both personal and business environments the difference between them is evident in terms of content and accessibility. Even in business environment a distinction can be made. For example, Weblog of a project team working on product development will most certainly be accessible only through Intranet while a Weblog containing general news about company and its' products "will be made available on the web in order to help publicize the company's expertise" (Stone 2002).

### **ADVERTISING**

Advertisers are also becoming more interested in advertising on Weblogs especially in

niche communities where a product or service can reach larger number of potential customers (Boulden 2005). Not only Weblog service providers are interested in potentially greater financial benefits but also writers of Weblogs. Stone (2002) considers micropayments, for example PayPal and Amazon Honor System, affiliate programs (e.g. Amazon Associates Program), merchandising, hosting advertisements and wish list common ways bloggers can cover expenses of web hosting provider. However covered expenses are still rarity among bloggers and only Weblogs with large number of visitors have prospects of being self-financing. In the future it can be expected some Weblogs will be password protected and subscription will be needed for viewing the content.

### **CONCLUSION**

The popularity of Weblogs is motivating more and more people to get involved in personal publishing. Consequently personal web pages were replaced and outnumbered by Weblogs and according to recent developments in Weblogs a vibrant future can be predicted. It is expected that content management software supporting Weblogs will be morphing into whole-site management where authors will be able to publish essays, articles, photos and additional pages (Stone 2002). Moreover the format of Weblog and its use in business environment shows its true potential value although one of the most positive outcomes of Weblog popularity is that people who were before not familiar with creating on-line content became involved and participated in building communities.

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