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Topic (i) Communicating effectively on the Web

BLOGS: ARE THERE APPLICATIONS FOR STATISTICAL AGENCIES?

Invited Paper

Submitted by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)[1]

I.   INTRODUCTION

1.   Weblogs, or 'blogs', are fast becoming an important form of online communication. Starting as a way to share personal views, a powerful blogging community has emerged, capable of influencing public opinion and mass media.

2.   What is blogging, and are there business applications for statistical agencies? This paper will explore these questions with a simple introduction to the technology, and some relevant examples of its application. It considers possibilities, and provides a list of resources for those that want to know more.

II.   WHAT ARE BLOGS?

3.   There are as many definitions of a blog as there are 'bloggers', the people that write them. Derived from 'weblog', a blog is a particular type of website. Frequently described as a personal online journal, their most distinguishing feature is that content mainly consists of dated entries, known as posts, appearing in reverse chronological order. New posts are added regularly and often include links to other blogs or websites, forming a network of opinions and people.

4.   Blogs fall within the family of 'social software', along with instant messaging, internet relay chat (IRC), and other tools for online communication. Blogging systems have the optional feature to allow readers to respond to posts with their comments. This ability to interact, along with the personalized style of writing, is what sets them apart from other websites.

5.   Since their inception in the mid 1990s, the growth of blogs has been rapid. There are nearly 50 million blogs currently in existence, with about 75,000 new ones being created every day[2]. In 2004, United States dictionary publisher Merriam-Webster made 'blog' its word of the year, based on the number of searches for the term[3].

6.   Blogs have made publishing on the internet easy, free, and accessible to anyone with a computer and an internet connection. This has revolutionised communication and mass media, by providing a means for unbiased reporting and voicing opinions.

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[2] As reported by Technorati, search engine and monitor of weblog activity (http://www.technorati.com/about/)
[3] Miriam-Webster's Words of the Year 2004, http://www.m-w.com/info/04words.htm

A.   Business applications

7.   There are good reasons why businesses and organizations are starting to take notice of blogs:

- **They represent a new communication channel** – organizations are using blogs as a new medium through which they can communicate in a casual, readable fashion. Readers can leave valuable feedback through comments.

- **There is useful information in the blogosphere** – the blogosphere, jargon for all blogs, can be searched to reveal discussions about your organization, products, and/or services. Public opinion about particular issues can be monitored.

- **Blogging systems are good for knowledge management and internal communication** – useful applications are emerging from within organizations. Blogging systems are being used for 'grassroots' knowledge management and internal communication, and can deliver results faster than complex systems implemented from the top down. They are inexpensive, simple to use and quick to deploy.

"…you can look at blogging as a disruptive pain in the neck that's just for kids or egomaniacs who want to write about their hobbies. Or you can say, wait a minute, this is a new channel and a new form of communication that can improve productivity…"

John Patrick, expert on Weblogs[4], 2003

B.   Issues and challenges for organizations

8.   Publishing on behalf of an organization, on the internet, or any medium, carries particular responsibilities. Policies should be written or revised to ensure blog content complies with organizational expectations. For major technology supplier Sun Microsystems, blogs have caused a shift from a company policy of no public comment without legal clearance, to open slather. Realising that blogging is particularly popular with ICT specialists, Sun encourages their staff to create individual blogs, as long as they follow company guidelines[5].

9.   "Unbiased reporting" is mentioned as an advantage of blogs, but it is also a criticism: there is no control over biased reporting. In bureaucracies there is a hierarchical system of clearing information for release that supposedly eliminates bias. Who controls this in a blog? The boundary between official statistics and unauthorised comment can become blurred. This is likely to be an inhibitor to statistical agencies embracing blogs. To counter this, Wikipedia (see paragraph 17) does not have the "normal" controls that traditional encyclopedias have, but has proven to be remarkably robust, reliable and accurate, with peer pressure ensuring this. It also is very comprehensive and up to date. Yet, it is still a long way short of being accepted as an authoritative information source by bureaucracies. Normal bureaucratic controls have been turned on their head by blogs, as has been the case with the internet.

10.   Like every software tool, blogging systems take time for technologists to maintain. Using blogging software, such as WordPress, or Blogger, can greatly reduce the time required to create and maintain a blog. Organizations can choose between user-hosted systems, where control of software and hosting is in-house, or developer-hosted systems, hosted externally and accessed through a web interface. Each differs in terms of pricing and features. Refer to the links in section VI to discover more about blogging systems.

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[4] 2003, *Expert Voice: John Patrick on Weblogs*, CIO Insight, viewed 24 July 2006, http://www.cioinsight.com/article2/0,1540,1387819,00.asp.
[5] 2005, E. Cone, *Rules for the Unruly*, CIO Insight, viewed 24 July 2006, <http://www.cioinsight.com/article2/0,1397,1786024,00.asp>.

III.   APPLICATIONS FOR STATISTICAL AGENCIES

C.   Using blogs to communicate with staff and customers

11.   Corporate blogs are generally divided into two categories: internal and external. Perhaps the most immediate benefit to be gained from blogs is the creation of cost-effective internal knowledge management and communication systems. Blogging software, such as WordPress, Movable Type and Radio UserLand, can replace the need for more expensive and complex content management systems. They are relatively easy to deploy and to use, providing agencies with an effective means to report on projects, future directions and filtering content of interest. The ability to add comments and track the contribution of others makes them a valuable tool for online meetings and discussion. The categorization, keyword tagging and search features of blogs helps to make information easily discoverable.
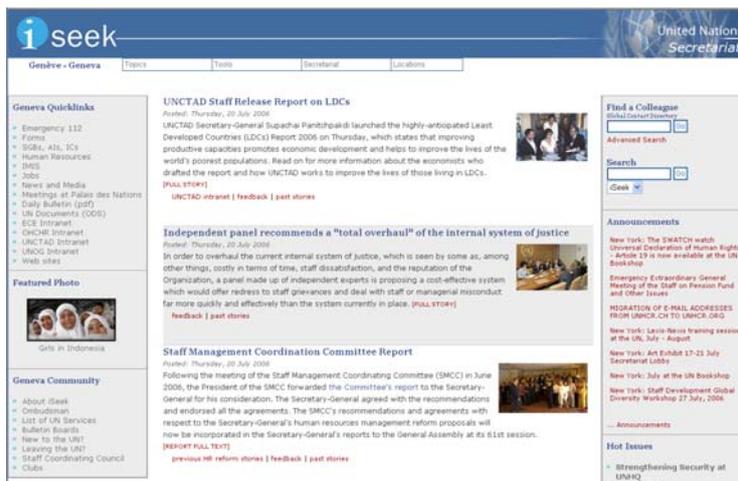
The United Nations intranet, ⓘseek, has a blog format. Each post has a headline and an excerpt of the article, allowing quick scanning of latest news, with links to the full story. Posts are added daily and displayed in reverse chronological order.

ⓘseek has replaced the need for email bulletins to staff in United Nations Headquarters. The system is in the process of being rolled out to all duty stations.

12.   External, or public blogs, can be useful for communicating progress on a particular project or event, when regular updates are necesssary. The UK's ruralnet conference uses a developer-hosted blog to communicate information and updates about their event (http://ruralnet.typepad.com/conference/). It is a good example of a blog that incorporates text and photos, and it even has a pre-conference video tour of the venue. The United Nations Statistics Division used blogging software to create the website on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) Indicators (http://mdgs.un.org).

http://mdgs.un.org

The MDG Indicators site presents the official data, definitions, methodologies and sources for the 48 indicators to measure progress towards the Millennium Development Goals.

It links to related sites and documents, and the regularly updated news keeps readers up to date with ongoing activities on MDG monitoring.

D.   Create a policy on blogging

13.   Blogs are a reality. Regardless of whether your agency decides to publish one, it should at least have a policy on blogging. Within any organization there are likely to be staff members who publish a blog in their personal time. A policy should make clear any boundaries and expectations about references to work and the workplace. The corporate blogging policy of Feedster, internet technology supplier, provides a good example: http://feedster.blogs.com/corporate/2005/03/corporate_blogg.html.

E.   Monitor what the blogosphere is saying about your agency

14.   All organizations can tap into the valuable information available in the blogosphere. Blogs can be monitored for comments and discussions on your agency, products, and services. However, remember that the content of blogs is often opinions, rather than fact. Searches can be conducted through sites such as Technorati (www.technorati.com), Feedster (www.feedster.com), or Google Blogsearch (http://blogsearch.google.com/). Using a feed reader, such as Bloglines (www.bloglines.com), it is possible to subscribe to your search and receive new results, as they become available.

15.   In addition to finding information about your organization, blogs can be used to gather intelligence on a range of topics. If there is a blogger out there writing about your area of interest, they can filter the vast content of the web for you, presenting the most interesting news and links. To facilitate the use of blogs as a source of information for your agency, links to relevant blogs can be included on the intranet.

IV.   A LOOK INTO TECHNOLOGY

16.   **RSS feeds** are an extremely useful feature of blogs and other websites. RSS, also known as Really Simple Syndication, uses XML to structure and disseminate information. Wherever you see RSS symbols, such as , **XML** , or **RSS** , you know there are feeds available from that website. A 'feed' is an XML file and looks similar to HTML code. They are retrieved and 'read' by a feed reader and formatted into something more comprehensible. Users are alerted when new content is added to the feed.

17.   Blogging systems provide a unique RSS feed associated with each blog. If time is not an issue, you can individually visit all the blogs and websites you want to read, or, you can subscribe to their feeds and view the latest content in one window. Online tools, such as Bloglines (www.bloglines.com), are free and easy to configure.

F.   Associated technologies

18.   A **wiki** is a website that allows its users to easily create, edit or remove content using their internet browser. Derived from the Hawaiian term 'wiki wiki', meaning quick, wikis are an effective tool for collaborative writing. One of the most successful examples of a wiki is Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/). Established in 2001, Wikipedia is a free online encyclopaedia that anyone can edit or contribute to. Today it counts over 4.5 million articles in more than 200 languages.

19.   **Podcasting** is the broadcasting of audio files using RSS feeds, which can be played online or downloaded to a personal audio player. The term is a compound of "iPod" and "broadcasting", although an Apple iPod is not required to use them. A directory of available podcasts can be found at sites like podcast.net (http://www.podcast.net/) and Podcast Directory (http://www.podcastdirectory.com/).

V.   CONCLUSIONS

20.   Blogs provide a new method of communication and are proving to be more than a passing fad. Their use has grown exponentially and relevant business applications are now emerging. Organizations are using them to communicate with customers in a more personalized way, and are gaining valuable feedback through reader comments. Blogging systems are inexpensive and can provide quick results for internal knowledge management and communication. A blog can be a good choice of website for communicating with the public about a particular project or event.

21.   The blogosphere is a valuable resource for any organization. Statistical agencies should monitor blogs as they do other media and communication channels. Associated RSS technology makes this possible with minimal effort. Finally, a corporate policy on blogging should be developed, regardless of whether an agency decides to publish its own blog.

VI.   TO KNOW MORE

Information and examples of user and developer-hosted blogging systems:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog_hosting_service

General information on blogs and links
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blogs

Blog search engines
www.technorati.com
blogsearch.google.com
www.feedster.com

Blogging 101
http://www.unc.edu/~zuiker/blogging101/index.html

Glossary of blogging terms
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_blogging_terms

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