Weblogs: a contributory element to the research dissemination process.

The concept of weblogs as a medium for academic discussion and paper dissemination has been raised before but never has the climate been so ideal for actually exploiting this resource. Weblog use within academic communities is increasing rapidly especially in the US and Canada. Institutions including Harvard[1], Stanford[2], Dartmouth[3] and the University of British Columbia[4] have implemented weblogs for discussion, while other institutions use the weblog as one means of communication between faculty, tutors and their students[5]. Persons ranging from academics to application developers use weblogs as a means to share / display snippets of their research[6]. By its very nature, weblog technology enables news and ideas to travel quickly. This short report explores the possibility of weblogs being used as a legitimate means for disseminating academic material for review by one's peers.

The traditional, dominant method for getting academic work, research and ideas reviewed and accepted by peers is for work to be published via a recognised source. Publication in a acknowledged journal demonstrates the work meets a required standard for acceptance into the academic community.

When an academic is working on an idea at a very low level they may call upon colleagues within their department to revise and pass comments. However, this process is less well suited for work that is at the "working or draft stage"; i.e., not quite ready for submission for publication, but well past the beginning stages of development. It would be ideal if a wider body of reviewers could assess the work.

At present, few methods appear to exist for these research ideas and drafts to be commented on, enhanced and further developed by the wider academic community. Consequently, it is possible many research ideas reach this stage but never morph into fully developed, published material. Clearly this is a waste of knowledge and resources.

---

[1] http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/

[2] http://cyberlaw.stanford.edu/

[3] http://dartblogs.com/

[4] http://www.ubcbotanicalgarden.org/weblog/

[5] http://blogs.setonhill.edu/nmj/cat_weblogs.html

[6] http://commons.ucalgary.ca/weblogs/dnorman/

Weblog publishing
By their very nature, knowledge travels exponentially across networks of weblogs: an author posts information, linked to by several weblogs, which in turn are linked by more, and so on. These links are the power behind the medium, creating a valuable community of knowledge. Some sophisticated technology has been developed to make this process both easy and intuitive.

The ability to post articles you would like peers to comment on, give suggestions and or pass criticisms quickly and easily could have great repercussions for research enhancement. Few mediums allow work written by relatively unknown researchers to be accessed by over 1000 persons within six days[7]. It is acknowledged not all of these downloads will be by people in the related field – however, experience demonstrates people do not generally access academic papers or research unless they have an interest in that subject area.

Watch it spread
One of the fascinating things about the weblog medium is watching the work distribute; within a week the draft report can be linked to from across the world. Usually these sites allow comments to be posted, reading though these comments are an excellent way to pick up advice and suggestions. A facility called "trackback", available in most modern weblog software, notifies you when another weblog has linked to yours, allowing you to easily see who's discussing your posts in the weblog community. You can make trackbacks visible to other users, allowing them to follow the discussion and learn more about the subject.

Additionally, weblog authors often recommend related articles that may touch on similar work being carried out by another researcher. This can point you in the direction of research, people, institutions and papers you were not previously aware of - all the time increasing the *network of knowledge transfer*.

Finally, a tertiary benefit is search engine availability. Sites that receive a proportionally high number of links are placed higher in the search engine hierarchy, which means more Web users will discover your research when they search for terms relating to your field.

Network of knowledge transfer
From an individual point of view, within a short space of time one's community of learning expands dramatically; other commentators with their own weblogs link into yours, read your reports, leave comments including a link back to their research. The natural thing to do is follow the link and discover what they are doing. This can continue *ad infinitum*, allowing you to amass an excellent library of sites, people and resources that will help enhance your own research.

---

[7] In the case of ePortfolios and weblogs: one vision for future ePortfolios development
http://www.eradc.org/paper/ePortfolio_Weblog.pdf

ERADC working series report
Weblogs: a contributory element to the research dissemination process.

2

The Downside
Inevitably, there is a trade-off. Although intellectual property law is enforceable on the Web, an individual who posts 'work in progress' onto their weblog runs the risk of plagiarism of text and ideas. Some academics feel a better policy is to wait until the work is finished, publish it in a book or journal and then put it out on a weblog. This approach may spark the same discussion, but the author could miss out on a vital part of the writing process.

Conclusion
It is our view this downside is far outweighed by the positives gained from giving the wider community access to your ongoing research. Most individuals are not interested in stealing ideas, but rather enhancing and aiding progress of knowledge. Therefore including this network of people within the development cycle of your research will only enhance the research outcomes for the individual and the wider academic community.

Contributors

David Tosh
Learning Technologist
The University of Edinburgh
d.tosh@ed.ac.uk

Ben Werdmuller
Application Developer
The University of Edinburgh
benw@education.ed.ac.uk

Please contact email@eradc.org with any suggestions, criticisms, ideas. Use this address if you would like to contribute a report for inclusion in the Working Series reports.

ERADC working series report
Weblogs: a contributory element to the research dissemination process.

3