

VNUNet – Blogs, Wikis and the Long Tail

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The social networking phenomenon is upon us, and it seems that half the world (in reality, less than one sixth) is instant messaging, blogging, wiki-ing and generally collaborating and communicating in new and exciting ways.

The idea here is to capture thought processes and ideas which ensure that the pace of change towards a far better future has never been faster.

But there are problems. Let's start with the idea of a blog. The Wikipedia definition reads: 'A user-generated website where entries are made in journal style and displayed in a reverse chronological order.'

Seems simple enough; essentially a web-based diary, generally with the capability for others to comment if they agree or disagree with what's been said.

The results are presented pretty much as an old bulletin board or a discussion database would have been, and this is where we can have problems as we try and figure out whether a blog is to provide us with real value.

Let's say that the first entry in a blog says something along the lines of 'Today, I decided that Linux really is useless.' Provided that others are tracking the blog, someone will undoubtedly respond to counteract the comment.

In fact, it's likely that many, many people will. And some of these comments may spin off other comments, some in agreement with other points raised, some in defence of the original comment, and some completely off subject.

Trying to find any real underlying truth, or even to track the underlying argument in a blog, can therefore be a little difficult.

We have a collection of statements that present themselves as self-evident truths, and reading any part of the blog without looking at all comments against that part means that we are bound to only get part of the story.

Similarly, reading a blog where there are no comments means that we are essentially getting the view of one person, and we have to treat the information accordingly.

So, let's move to a wiki. Again, Wikipedia (itself a wiki) defines a wiki as: 'A website that allows the visitors themselves to easily add, remove and otherwise edit and change available content, and typically without the need for registration.'

The idea here is to move dynamically towards the 'wisdom of the crowd'. Let's take the same example. On a new wiki, someone opens up a topic on Linux and types in 'Linux is really useless'.

Again, assuming that the wiki is being used, others will come along, and rapidly or slowly, changes will be made to the entry until we get a semblance of an agreed perception of the truth.

Note that we are talking about 'perceived truth' here; we are still at the whim of those who are active in the specific wiki environment.

The wisdom of the crowd may not always be correct, but it is the perception that counts in the end not the truth itself. Overall, though, the output of the big wikis, such as Wikipedia, seems to be impressive.

But there is a problem with wikis, and that is the concept of the 'long tail' where the 'big things' have high occurrence, and the 'little things' have low occurrence.

So, if we look at 'Linux' under Wikipedia, we will find a well-crafted, excellent history and overview, with countless citations, references and external links.

Now, let's try that for something else: Blodwyn Pig, a UK rock group from the late 1960s. There's a short entry that someone has obviously gone to the trouble of putting in and, as far as I can see, it seems OK.

But there is a strong likelihood that this item is more like a blog entry; it is the unreviewed outpouring of a single mind, and is therefore open to the persuasions of that one mind.

Within Wikipedia's six million plus articles there will be a lot of these types of entries. But for those who have got used to interrogating Wikipedia and trusting the wisdom of the crowd, coming up against such an article (or a 'stub' in wiki terms) can lead to problems.

If the person puts the same amount of trust in this single item as they do in the well-reviewed and peer edited entries, a decision could be made based on inadvertently or purposefully wrong information.

Newer systems are looking at beefing up the 'source/provenance' side of wikis. This would make those articles which reference many other articles or sources, and are referenced by lots of other articles, more visible as 'trusted' articles.

Whereas most people understand that blogs cover a spectrum between the demented outpourings of sick minds to the great insights of geniuses, wikis are gaining the view as the place where 'real' perception is found.

We are seeing the morphing of the blog; many organisations moved to enabling certain individuals to write whatever they wanted as they saw fit and some of these blogs have been very successful.

Others have not been quite as successful. The journalist who managed to write his piece on the hanging of Saddam Hussein in time to hit the front page of the paper the same morning, then blogged that this obviously had to be written before the event which is why so many details were wrong.

His employers took a dim view, and now any blog material by all journalists aligned to the paper in question has to be vetted first.

Many more companies now have corporate blog policies, and the majority of these include the need for a degree of peer and/or management review.

Many also are beginning to write in to employee contracts that external blogging about internal company details is a sackable offence.

The blog has become a victim of its own success, and newer tools are looking more towards 'team blogs' with better reviewing and policy enforcement capabilities.

But the wiki is the probable long term winner. It allows people to have their input in a more friendly environment where misconceptions, misperceptions and downright lies can be dealt with through a democratic process, and where management hierarchies count for little and real knowledge in a subject counts a lot.

However, we still need to watch out for that 'long tail', and look for better ways of identifying those entries that have no or minimal review or activity, and put in place information lifecycle management tools to help to keep entries crisp and up to date.

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Quocirca is a primary research and analysis company specialising in the business impact of information technology and communications (ITC). With world-wide, native language reach, Quocirca provides in-depth insights into the views of buyers and influencers in large, mid-sized and small organisations. Its analyst team is made up of real-world practitioners with first hand experience of ITC delivery who continuously research and track the industry and its real usage in the markets.

Through researching perceptions, Quocirca uncovers the real hurdles to technology adoption – the personal and political aspects of an organisation's environment and the pressures of the need for demonstrable business value in any implementation. This capability to uncover and report back on the end-user perceptions in the market enables Quocirca to advise on the realities of technology adoption, not the promises.

Quocirca research is always pragmatic, business orientated and conducted in the context of the bigger picture. ITC has the ability to transform businesses and the processes that drive them, but often fails to do so. Quocirca's mission is to help organisations improve their success rate in process enablement through better levels of understanding and the adoption of the correct technologies at the correct time.

Quocirca has a pro-active primary research programme, regularly surveying users, purchasers and resellers of ITC products and services on emerging, evolving and maturing technologies. Over time, Quocirca has built a picture of long term investment trends, providing invaluable information for the whole of the ITC community.

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