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An Exploratory Study on the Progress of Social Computing and Its Potential Impact on Organizational Computing

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Abstract

Originally created as personal publishing tools for individuals, weblogs (blogs) have metamorphosed into communication devices for social networks. This article reviews weblogs, and their transition from publishing tool to social networking device and probably evolve as organizational computing. It describes the technology features which have facilitated this transition. It then reports on the motivation of young webloggers, based on an analysis of interviews, and evaluates the fit between technology features and the needs of these weblog users. Four types of webloggers (habitual, active, personal, and dormant) are identified and each types of webloggers required different features provided by blog sites. Understanding the needs of different types of webloggers can allow organizations to prepare for the blogging wave that is rapidly approaching.

Keywords: weblog (blog), virtual communities, needs, task-technology-fit

1. Introduction

Social networking web sites have become an important medium for people to interact in the cyber world. According to Alexa (alexa.com, 28 March 2005), 14 out of the top 20 most popular English/Chinese web sites are either social networks *per se* or have embedded social networking functions. Currently, the most commonly used social networking technologies are discussion boards, real time chat rooms, P2P newsgroups, and listservs (Lee et al. 2003). Yet a comparably new Internet technology, *weblogging* is now driving the contagion of virtual communities, especially among young people. Weblog hosting sites such as Xanga are now among the most active sites on the WWW (Alexa ranked Xanga the 19th among the Top 100 sites in the world, 28 March 2005). Alexa reported on average 16 million daily visits to Xanga, 15 million to Blogger and Blogspot (combined), 4.6 million to LiveJournal, 3 million to BlogChina (online since late 2003), and 2 million to TypePad, for March 2005. As another apparent indication of the technology's popularity and impact, AOL in mid-2003 began to include weblog technology into its Version 9 software (Spring 2003), and Yahoo recently announced the adoption of weblog technology into its suite of applications (eWeek 2005).

While early weblogs may have been used by technology savvy users with an interest in journalistic reporting, weblogs nowadays are increasingly attracting young people who share their daily activities with their peers. Many Xanga users, for instance list their age in the teens (a random sample of Xanga users had an average age of only 16, with 13 being the minimum age to enroll). This transition in the technology and its use may potentially have significant implications. First, it may redefine the area of social computing and shift importance away from traditional technologies such as e-mail. Second, developments in social computing may soon impact organizational computing, as organizations may need to find ways to address webloggers as their customers through the medium, or may wish to take advantage of webloggers' social computing skills and the technology to improve organizational information processing and knowledge management.

We therefore seek to explore weblog use and its impact on social (and possibly organizational) computing within this article. To do so, the remainder of this article is organized as follows. We firstly give the description of the brief history of weblogging, followed by the description of the popular weblog technology features and the common blogging activities. Our research detail will be described. The relationship between social computing and organization computing will then be discussed. Finally, the implication of our research findings corresponding to organizational computing will be discussed.

2. Brief History of Weblogging

The term weblog, was first coined by John Barger in December 1997 (Bausch et al. 2002). Weblogs typically describe a personal diary, kept on the Web, which can be edited by an end-user with little web publication skills. Although weblog has just existed for a few years, their principles, functionality and use, has already significantly evolved. Wagner (2005), for instance describes three generations. First generation weblogs were first-person diaries, with the focus of being a "log of the Web", allowing webloggers to comment on other web-based articles. Their main virtue was to allow non-technical people to share text content via single-click web publishing. The user interface of these weblogs was frequently rather basic. As blogging popularity increased, so did the interest of bloggers to comment on each other's articles. Hence, second generation blogging software included more between-weblog communication features, including the important "permalink" (permanent URL to each individual weblog entry). In addition to such social networking features, another second generation change was the improvement in user interface to enable more features people were used to from their word processors, as well as multi-media components.

Xanga, the apparent leader among blogging sites, as well as other popular providers such as Modblog, incorporate second generation technology. Their features enable relationship building, such as the set-up of circles of friends or subscribers to exchange content, which can either be disclosed or remain

invisible to “non-members”. Xanga’s newest relationship model, the social *Metro* extends the concept to city-wide circles for major metropolitan areas. Xanga’s Metros have grown at a rapid pace since their inception in November 2004, with several such Metros now enrolling tens of thousands of members. Hong Kong’s Metro, the most popular in the world, now numbers over 70,000 (in a city of 7 million people), thus reflecting more than 2% of that city’s Internet user population within less than 6 months!

Third generation (3G) weblogs, which are currently emerging, bundle existing and new tools together to enhance productivity and to further enhance connectivity on the Web. 3G blogs are application blogs, which provide practical applications for the bloggers to use. For instance, in Lycos circles, users can set up “workflows” that automate processes such as organizing a party from sending out invitations to receiving confirmations, providing map directions to guests, and such. These 3G weblogs seek to port an increasing number of activities from the physical world into the cyberworld and carry real-world relationships online.

3. Popular Weblog Technology Features

To better understand the attractiveness of blogging services, features of three popular weblog services providers were analyzed. Two of these blog sites are highly ranked by Alexa – Xanga and LiveJournal (ranked 19 and 140, respectively, as of 28 March 2005). The results are summarized in Table 1, which only shows the features that are provided to the members with free accounts. Members with paid accounts have more features available to them, but the large majority of subscribers opts for the free services.

Table 1. Commonly Used Features				
Function Category	Xanga Feature	Modblog Feature	LiveJournal Feature	
Community Building	Bulletin			
	Commentary			
	Counters			
	Forum			
	Individual Profiles			
	Language (Multiple)			
	Look & Feel			
	Latest Updated Blogs			
	Most Recent Visitors			
	Perma-Link			
	Skin		(called Scheme)	
	Syndication (RSS feeds)			

	Subscriptions	Friends List	Befriends' List
	Xanga Metro	Blogring	Community
	Chatterbox		
	Emails		
	Instant Messaging		
	Eprops		
Journal Writing	Archival		
	Editing		
	Language (Multiple)		
	Look & Feel		
	Skin		(called Scheme)
Content Management	Archival		
	Perma-link		
	Language (Multiple)		
Security & Privacy	Protected Blogs		Private Blogs; Ban
		ISM (IntraSite Message)	

The features shown in Table 1 are those commonly used by the interviewed Xanga users, corresponding features from Modblog and LiveJournal are also listed for references. *Bulletin* is for disseminating messages to community members. *Commentary* allows community members to add comments on other blogs. *Individual profiles* aim at allowing other community members to know as much as a blogger wants them to know. *Eprops* are tokens given by other bloggers to show how good a weblog is. *Perma-link* is a permanent URL to each individual weblog entry. *Skins* (LiveJournal terms it as *Scheme*) are predefined templates for bloggers to design their websites. *Syndication (RSS feeds)* allows bloggers to read offsite news sources just like they were other users. *Metro/Blogring/Community* are groups of bloggers with a shared interest interact together, can be formed by region or other criteria. *Forum* and *Chatterbox* allow for unprecedented amount of interaction between the bloggers and the visitors. *Archival* is downloadable archives. *Protected Blogs/Private Blogs/Ban* are blog sites that are only accessible by selected members. *ISM (IntraSite Message)* allows bloggers to send private messages to other Modblog users without hassle of sending email. (Xanga 2005; Modblog 2005; LiveJournal 2005)

4. Weblog User Behaviors Examined

4.1. Study Overview

To better understand the attractiveness of weblogs to young users and to reveal some of their usage

behaviors, we had carried out an exploratory study. This exploratory study involves an analysis of data obtained from 12 individual interviewees. All interviewees, except two research students, were all young adults, aged from 20 to 22, and were university students from several local and overseas universities. All of them were Xanga users with different usage patterns. Each interview was conducted for around 30 minutes. To encourage the interviewees to freely express themselves, all interviews were conducted in Chinese and no audio taping was used. The scripts were written and translated by the interviewer. Study participants were asked a variety of questions related to usage intensity (frequency of use and duration), perception of group belonging and sharing (interest in blog as a sharing device, peer influence in usage behavior, introversion/extroversion, feeling of group belonging), and technology features they used to use. The interviews consisted of structured questions as well as ad-hoc follow-up questions.

4.2. Findings

We were aware that intensity ranged from very high, with users modifying their own blogs and commenting on others' on a daily basis, to very low, where blogs remained dormant for long time or had been apparently abandoned. We sought to find out whether different intensity levels coincided with the *social* aspect of social computing, and preferred technology characteristics.

Interviews discussions revealed that it was meaningful to differentiate weblog users into different groups based on their usage intensity and, as this categorization revealed several other distinguishing characteristics. Based on usage intensity, we categorized the study participants into four types which we labeled as Habitual/Enthusiastic, Active, Personal, and Dormant, referring to the owners (first two groups) or their weblogs (last two groups).

Habitual (enthusiastic) users were the highest intensity users, who apparently had formed a strong habit (if not an “addiction”) of visiting their weblogs or weblogs of their weblog group (subscriber list). They described themselves as “have to” access Xanga several times a day, to write their own entries (active use), to see whether their blogs had received any comments, or to check their friends' postings (passive use). Habitual users reported spending hours to post their own blog entries or to comment on their friends' postings. For habitual users, group aspects of blogging were highly important. They were eager to share (no matter it is within their group of friends or to the public) and had adopted the blogging software due to some peer pressure. They also find that blogging is one of the best ways to spend time if they had nothing to do. They appeared to be extrovert (not formally assessed). For this user group, technology features that promoted sociability were of great importance. For example, they would keep lists of friends (subscriptions) for continuous interaction, or would use syndication (RSS feeds) to inform or remain informed of changes. For a summary of habitual user characteristics, see Table 2.

User quote: "I am really eager to know what my friends have left in the blogs. It is not difficult to see who had posted. The RSS feeds features help a lot. I can let them know what I am thinking, what I have done, and I know their activities, it's very important to me."

We labeled the second user type as **active users**. Although less intensive in their weblog use, this user type would normally visit their weblogs once a day, usually during leisure time. They would spend time reading their friends' blogs and post comments, or would post their own journals and permit their friends to access.. They would not post entries every day, but as often as they felt the need to share. Although not as intensive users as habitual bloggers, they were also eager to keep connected with their friends. Overall, their behaviors and attitudes seemed comparable to the most active users, although they seemed less "addicted". They preferred similar technology features as the most intensive users. For a summary of active user characteristics, see Table 2.

User quote: "I will usually access Xanga to see what had been posted if I have time after school. Xanga is a good communication tool for me, in addition to ICQ and MSN, to keep contact with my friends, so, if I have time, I will go there every day. Even though my friends are in the US, they can still know my activities. We thus have common topics once they return Hong Kong."

We labeled the third type of users in our study **personal users** (personal refers to their blogs). These users would keep a weblog as a truly personal diary, shared only partially with friends and rarely with the general public. Friends might be allowed to read some daily life information, but would not have access to personal secrets, such as proprietary knowledge, or negative comments concerning their friends. This user type was more introvert (not formally assessed), with little concern for peer group or sharing. Correspondingly, technology features of relevance for this group were those that enabled privacy as well as easy publishing, archival, and access. For a summary of personal user characteristics, see Table 2.

User quote: "Xanga is very stable. Many of my friends use it. I mainly go to Xanga for diary(-writing) purposes. When I want somebody to know (read), I'll set it public. When I don't let them know (read), I'll set it private. I won't let them know my secrets."

The fourth type of users we encountered was **dormant users** (dormant refers to their blogs). These users kept a weblog but would rarely or never post to it. Oftentimes, these users had little interest to share their own stories, but were eager to learn about their friends' exploits, and thus had to maintain a weblog just to be able to subscribe to others' blogs. Overall, this was a less involved type of users, with less defined usage intensity or group belonging and correspondingly less distinct technology feature needs. For a summary of dormant user characteristics, see Table 2.

User quote: "Just want to know what my friends said. It's quite amusing to read their stories..... No way to let them know mine."

Table 2. Characteristics of Different User Types

Type of bloggers/ Characteristics	Habitual	Active	Personal	Dormant
Typical frequency of blog access	Several times a day	Once daily	Once daily	Not fixed
Typical duration of blog access	Hours per day	Around 1 hour per day	Depends on own needs	Not fixed
Interest in blog as a sharing device	High – active and passive	High – active and passive	Low	Low – active, High - passive
Peer influence	High	High	Low	Unknown
Personal characteristics	Extrovert	Extrovert	Introvert	Unknown
Group belonging	Strong	Strong	Weak/None	Unknown
Preferred tools	Community building, journal writing	Community building, journal writing	Journal writing, content management	None

Different set of tools and features are popular among different types of bloggers. For example, community building features, including *chatterbox*, *counters*, and *eprops*, are frequently used by habitual and active bloggers, while *protected bloggings*, *restricted subscription* are the most desirable features for personal users. Understanding the fit between the features and the needs of particular types of Weblog users, it would be more precise to predict the growth of this social computing technology and its potential evolution of being an organizational computing technology.

5. Social versus Organizational Computing

While popular as a social computing technology, weblogs have not yet received wide use as an organizational computing technology. In many companies, social computing is anathema, and social computing technologies are intentionally blocked through technological means such as port filters (e.g., instant messaging), or via company policies (e.g., web based e-mail) (Simmers 2002; Urbaczewski and Jessup 2002).

Organizational computing has traditionally been developed by reputable software providers, being implemented in organizations and the employees are allowed to use either voluntarily or mandatory. To encourage usage, the organizations usually have to provide training for the employees. Training can be costly and time consuming. Even worse, new implemented technology may face user resistance, which is not an easy task to tackle.

Social computing and organizational computing seem to exist in two discrete territories. Organizational computing is for work, for business; while, social computing is for leisure, for personal. However, increasingly we see indication that the boundaries between these two are weakening.

5.1. From Organizational Computing to Social Computing

Email is one of the technologies that has successfully spread through all domains – business, academic, and social. Email was firstly developed for research institutions and universities, and later introduced to the business. It is currently widely used in the business world, has become one of the mandatory technologies in almost every organization, and replaced phone as the number one communication technology. To lock-in customers, many dotcom companies started to offer free email accounts to their customers. This offering started at the time when the dotcom wave came to its high tide, and since then, emails had stepped in ordinary people’s daily lives.

However, email seems to lose its attractiveness to the young generation. It is not uncommon that teachers cannot receive replies for their emails sent to the students. This may be attributed by the non-communal characteristics of email (which the students find it very important in the communication among their acquaintances), the missing of automatic archival functions (which the students find it difficult to retrieve messages, and persistent messages cannot be organized easily); and most significantly, the majority of the students has not formed the habit of reading their emails on a daily basis. These imply that email can no longer satisfy the young people’s needs, as a consequence, the desires of this communication technology among the next generation is decreased accordingly.

5.2. From Social Computing to Organizational Computing

The trend of social computing moving to be organizational computing is evidenced by instant messaging (IM) such as the case of ICQ and MSN. Initially, these IM tools were used for leisure chatting among friends in the Internet. IM was perceived as a “toy” technology mainly for entertainment purposes, but without any business value. Some companies prohibited (and still do) their employees to use IM for communication in the office (Lee et al. 2002; Mirchandani 2003). However, a number of “open-minded” companies have adopted IM for internal communication between employees as well as external communication between business partners, and good results had been reported (Isaac et. al 2002; Nardi et. al 2000) .

5.3 Weblog is the Current Wave

There are reasons attributable to the evolution of social computing to organizational computing. The pervasiveness of home computers makes the social computing users be more technological competent; the increase of computer literacy encourages users to adopt new communications tool; and finally, social

computing users find passion through using such social computing technology as their needs can be fulfilled with such technologies. These few reasons make social computing users use social computing technologies so extensively and finally makes these technologies be used not only at home but also in organizations (either officially or unofficially).

Not only IM, but also blogging technologies, have all these characteristics. Besides these three factors, two characteristics uniquely pertained to blogging make blogging technology be used not only extensively but also intensively. Firstly, the majority of bloggers spend considerable time in blogging, and secondly, blogging technology is heavily used by bloggers to create/retain their communities. Based on these arguments, we hypothesize that there exists a strong trend that blogging technology will still be heavily used and finally be evolved as an organizational computing. The following two implications further strengthen our assertion.

Young people as the next generation of workforce: Young people are the next generation of workforce of any societies, understanding their practices of using communications technologies can help to enhance their productivity. For example, university students are used to use both the blogging technology and instant messaging technology extensively for their communication because they find that these technologies provide the most efficient (e.g. shorter time) and effective (e.g. more fruitful) way for them to converse with their friends. When they start to work in the society, they tend to use the same technologies that are already familiar with. We believe it is good for organizations. As young people have already used blogging technology extensively, training cost can dramatically be saved. User resistance can also be significantly reduced as blogging is already their way of communication. Furthermore, blogging technology is much cheaper than any groupware, its setup cost is relatively low.

Talk to customers in customers' way: Everyone would like to use their own way to communicate, i.e. to communicate with their own language, own way, and preferred technologies rather than anything which are not familiar with. Bloggers use a unique way for communication, such as sharing their blogs of self-thoughts and photos, using perma-links for references, sending/receiving messages/feedbacks to/from their peers, and the “almost” instant communication within the group. These formats of communication would not only increase the efficiency of communication, but also strength the sense of belonging toward their peer groups, within which same language, same ritual, and same norm are shared. If companies could use the customers' way to talk to them, it would be much efficient and effective for the companies to get closer to their customers. Young people are the prospects of any organizations, thus, it is a must for organizations to communicate with their prospects with their designated ways.

The usage of blogging technology in young people’s daily lives is very high, so as the the likelihood that blogging being used as organizational computing. Hence, it is essential for organizations to prepare for the blogging wave that is rapidly approaching. The sooner the understanding of the usage pattern, the earlier an organization can grasp the opportunities to increase intimate relationship with its customers. Our research findings give these organizations an insight of applying social computing in their business which may entirely change their ways of communication within and beyond the organization.

6. Discussion

As we can see blogging culture would have a great potential impact on organizations, it is necessary for us to study this phenomenon so as to ensure the transition of social computing to organizational computing really add value to organizations. From our study, we find different technological needs from different types of users (Table 3 provides the summary). Both habitual, active and private users use *Skins, Look & Feel* to customize their sites, and use *Add, Edit, and Delete* to manage their postings. Not only habitual and active users would make their sites special and comfortable, private users also customize theirs by applying different formatting/editing features. Some users will even spend considerable time in decorating their webpages to make them special and unique so as to win the reputation among their peers. In order to retain close relationship among friends, habitual and active users use community building features extensively. The most common features being used are *Chatterbox, Counters, Commentary, Eprops, profile info and pics*. *BLOGRINGS, XANGA METRO* and search features are also widely used by Xanga users to widen their virtual social circles. In order to remain clandestine, personal users will use *Protected Rings, Restricted Subscriptions, Blocking, and Protected Postings* to keep their postings invisible from the public.

Table 3. Features Used by Different Users	
Users	Technological needs
Habitual (Enthusiastic)	Content Management Tools Community Building Tools Time Structuring Search by Category Commentary
Active	Content Management Tools Community Building Tools Search by Category Commentary
Personal	Content Management Tools Secured Closed Blog

Dormant	Reading
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The major social needs of the habitual and active Xanga users are to have bigger social circles, to be socially accepted, and to have social exchange among their peers. Blogging technologies allow their blogs to be accessed freely by other bloggers, therefore, their goals for sociality can be achieved. Off-line relationship can be further solidified by extending the interaction to online mode. On the other hand, with deeper understanding of each other, Xanga users' virtual relationships may get closer and some of them become close virtual friends and may eventually go offline. Knowing the needs of different types of bloggers as well as their usage patterns is important to organizations. Firstly, habitual and active users aim at building relationship among their peers by using weblog technology. To serve customers better, it is a must for organizations to know how to communicate with them through their preferred way, and a closer relationship can then be developed. However, personal and dormant users seem not to use weblog technology as their communication tool, hence, other type of communication technology such as IM could be utilized for closer and more intimate communication. Secondly, with the understanding of different blogger groups' needs, corresponding technology can be used together with different marketing strategies.

We believe that Xanga's success is due to its provision of technologies which fits the Xanga users' needs. Other reasons explaining why Xanga outperforms other blog hosting sites may be attributed to peer influence, ease of use of technologies, and most significantly, an abundance of community creation features being provided. In fact, Xanga is not the only successful case. Blogger, BlogChina, Modblogs and LiveJournal, also provide similar features to their members, and are all doing well in this business.

With these findings, we propose a model (Table 4) to explore how blogging technology impacts on users' utilization, aim at a further understanding on how this technology impacts on organizational usages. Task/Technology Fit (TTF) concept (Goodhue and Thompson 1995; Goodhue 1998; Zigurs and Buckland 1998; Maruping and Agarwal 2004) is the foundation of the building block of the model.

We modified the TTF model to fit the domain of our study. Task, itself, is not sufficient to reflect our research context. The tasks measured in previous studies (such as Goodhue et al. 1995 & Zigurs et al. 1998) are all business related tasks, which are assigned by the individual workers' superiors or management level. However, in blog-based virtual communities, tasks performed are driven by individual's needs and desires. For example, habitual and active users need to build a close relationship within their group and then desire some specific technologies to help them to get closer to their friends. This is important for an organization because it has to know their customers' technological preference to

get closer to them with the most appropriate technologies. For personal users, organizations may provide abundant publishing tools to encourage comments postings. To serve the customers better, organizations have to know their needs, thus we modified the TTF model by replacing the *Task* with *Individual Needs*.

Table 4: Research Model (The Fit between Needs and Desired Technological Features)		
Types of Bloggers	Needs	Desired Technological Features
Habitual (Enthusiastic)	Community Building Content Management Time Structuring	Community building tools Content management tools Search engine Commentary provision/alert tools
Active	Community Building Content Management	Community building tools Content management tools Search engine Commentary provision/alert tools
Personal	Content Management Privacy	Content management tools Secured closed blogs
Dormant	Information seeking	Reading

7. Conclusion

Our study points out the importance of understanding social computing, which is believed to be the trend of the future organizational computing. With a better understanding of the popular technologies, it is beneficial for both academic and practitioners to better prepare for the future. We believe social computing, blogging is an example, will have a turnaround impact on organizational computing based on the analysis of the current situation. Young generation is both the future customers and workforce of any organizations; therefore, it is essential to understand their needs so as to provide what they want.

7.1 Theoretical Implications

This study is the starting point of investigating the fit between weblog technology and the users' needs. To evaluate whether a social computing technology can be contributable to organizations, it is essential to understand how social computing fulfills users' needs. The theoretical foundation of our proposed model is on Task/Technology Fit, but, we believe the tasks performed by bloggers are principally driven by their internal needs (blogging is a personal issue and no arbitrary assignment can be assigned), thus, the fit should be assessed based on the needs and the provided technology. Furthermore, individuals can choose to/not to use any technologies to meet their needs, thus, we believe only the best, or the most desirable, technology will be chosen. We also believe that the needs of the bloggers are different among

different age groups. The understanding of the different patterns would further enhance the trustworthiness of our research model. With the findings of our extended Need/Technology Fit concept, we can then predict the effectiveness of any specific blogging technologies in matching the needs of individuals and business.

7.2 Practical Implications

In the traditional educational sector, curriculum designers would base on the business needs to decide what technologies should be included in the curriculum. We believed this industry-driven approach is not sufficient. As we can see social computing is going to reshape organization computing, it is important for us to reconsider the design of the curriculum from the needs of university students rather than solely from the needs of business.

With the finding of the suitability between the needs and the technology, blog hosts can design more useful technological tools to support their blogs services so as to ensure their sustainability. Our model can also be used as the predictor to a web-based virtual community's future.

7.3 Future Research

In this exploratory study, 12 case studies had been carried. In order to study this phenomenon in detail, much work needs to be done. We will need to interview more people to develop a more comprehensive set of need-technology matching behaviors. We also believe age may have great impact on choosing the desired technologies, thus future study will extend the age group of interviewees.

Xanga is an entertainment-based blog host, future research would extend the varieties of blogs being studied, such as blogs for professionals. This will allow us to offer more comprehensive conclusions concerning the phenomenon.

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