Evaluation of Weblog Services

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this research was to identify functional features that contribute to the level of acceptance and use of weblog services. Based on literature and interviews, desirable functional features for weblog services from a user's perspective were identified and ranked. The most significant features were categorised according to the content publication process on weblogs using the categories "Community", "Content Creation", "Content Management", "Content Interaction", "Content Rendering", and "Security". The resulting criteria catalogue made it possible to evaluate a sample of 77 weblog services regarding the features they implement. The analysis showed that implementation rates vary widely among the different services and functional features, with the most popular services implementing more features than their less popular competitors.

Keywords

Weblog, services, features, implementation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Weblogs, or blogs, are frequently updated web pages containing information arranged in reverse chronological order. The number of weblogs has grown to several millions in the recent past (Perseus, 2003; Lascia, 2004) and they represent a new trend of web publishing that influences the way people and search engines perceive the World Wide Web. In the last five years, several articles have been written on the application of weblogs (Blood, 2003; Hiler, 2002), definitions of what a weblog is (Clyde, 2002; O'Rourke, 2003), social issues pertaining to weblogs (Dvorak, 2002), weblog services and software tools (Stauffer, 2002; Dragan, 2003). This paper aims to add to the literature by providing an evaluation of weblog services based on an extensive catalogue of functional features.

2. METHODOLOGY

Data gathering was subdivided into two stages. In the first stage, functional features that lead to the successful acceptance and use of weblog services by weblog authors were identified. To achieve this, secondary sources of information such as books, articles, and web pages were used to research and compile a preliminary set of features. Based on these features, interviews with selected weblog authors were conducted to explore whether there are more previously unnoticed features. Whenever this was the case, the catalogue of functional features was updated. Another purpose of the interviews was to identify to what extent certain functional features are relevant to weblog authors. The subsequent second stage that evaluated weblog services built upon the findings of the first stage. A list of weblog services in English and German languages was compiled. Data sources for determining weblogs services were web pages that list weblog services, journal and magazine articles, as well as research on web search engines. Finally, it was evaluated to what extent weblog services implement the functional features identified in stage one. Data sources were the services' web pages on the WWW.

3. RESULTS

Regarding the process of publishing content on weblogs, the interviewees had similar perceptions. From their descriptions of the procedure four different steps for content publication on weblogs could be identified: creation, interaction, management, and rendering. In addition, security

Table 1: Major weblog service providers

English Providers	%	German Providers	%
Blogger.com	28.5	Blogger.de	32.9
LiVEJOURNAL	23.4	twoday.net	16.9
Diaryland	23.1	BLOGG.de	16.7
TypePad	7.0	myblog.de	10.6
xanga	5.3	20six	8.8

Table 2: Implementation rates by provider

English Providers	%	German Providers	%
Blogger.com	55.2	Blogger.de	62.1
LiVEJOURNAL	55.2	twoday.net	79.3
Diaryland	17.2	BLOGG.de	65.5
TypePad	82.8	myblog.de	44.8
xanga	51.7	20six	82.8
Average for the other 55	37.3	Average for the other 12	33.6

issues need to be considered because on weblog services, multiple users maintain weblogs in shared environments. Finally, weblog services are commonly organised as online communities. The literature review identified 55 functional features and the list was reduced to 29 by ranking them according to the frequency with which they were mentioned in the literature and disregarding those that were cited in fewer than five of the 14 literature items.

By using Internet search engines, 77 services (60 in English and 17 in German) were identified. The numbers of third party sites that point to each site were counted to determine the major players. For example, Blogger.com accounted for 28.5% of the 31.3 million links to English sites and Blogger.de accounted for 32.9% of the 0.9 million links to German sites (see Table 1).

The method for evaluating the sample of weblog services involved visiting each site and counting which of the 29 relevant functional features were available. For example TypePad and 20six had implemented 24 of the features (82.8% - see Table 2).

Comparing tables 1 and 2 shows that there is no correlation between "link popularity" and "requirement implementation". However all of the top five German providers and four of the top five English providers had implemented significantly more features than the average for the remaining 68 providers. It is also clear that the top five German providers had an average implementation rate that was much higher than that of the top five English providers (66.9% versus 52.4%). The evaluation did not assess to what extent a certain requirement was being implemented. Furthermore, it did not attempt to rank weblog services by applying a weighting scheme to the identified features. Both aspects would require a modeling of users' preferences for certain features together with a broad empirical survey for testing the model, which is beyond the research's scope.

The 29 features were categorised according to whether they related to community, creation, interaction, management, rendering or security, and the frequency with which they were mentioned in the 14 literature items was compared with the frequency with which they were implemented by the 77 weblog service providers. For example, rating for postings was mentioned in six of the 14 literature items (43%) and was implemented by seven of the 77 weblog service providers (9% - see Table 3).

Comparing the last two columns in Table 3 shows that there is no correlation between how often a requirement is mentioned in the literature and its implementation rate.

Table 3: Relevant functional features

Feature	Category	Frequency in Literature	Frequency of Implementation
Rating for postings	Community	43%	9%
Multi-authoring	Creation	93%	34%
XML-RPC interface	Creation	64%	19%
Multiple posting fields	Creation	57%	92%
Posting by bookmarklet	Creation	50%	16%
WYSIWYG editor	Creation	50%	30%
Posting by e-mail	Creation	43%	21%
Multiple weblogs	Creation	36%	19%
Post management	Management	93%	96%
Archiving	Management	64%	79%
Categories	Management	64%	44%
File upload	Management	57%	55%
Search	Management	57%	34%
Data export	Management	50%	19%
Scheduled publishing	Management	43%	13%
Calendar	Management	36%	55%
Draft publishing	Management	36%	29%
Comments	Interaction	86%	94%
Trackback	Interaction	57%	18%
Ping	Interaction	50%	26%
RSS aggregator	Interaction	50%	10%
Friendly links	Interaction	43%	62%
Polls	Interaction	43%	16%
Subscription by e-mail	Interaction	36%	25%
RSS publication	Rendering	93%	45%
Templates	Rendering	79%	82%
Permalinks	Rendering	64%	58%
Rights management	Security	57%	29%
Banning of IPs/visitors	Security	50%	21%

4. CONCLUSION

This research identified functional features for weblog services from a user's perspective. Focusing on the most prominent ones, it categorised the features according to the content publication process on weblogs. The defined criteria catalogue made it possible to evaluate a comprehensive sample of weblog services in English and German languages regarding the features they implement. The results showed that implementation levels varied widely among the different services and functional features. However, it became clear that the most popular services (as determined by their link popularities) had implemented more features than their less popular competitors. Thus, the features offered by a weblog service seem to have an impact on its acceptance. Certain basic features such as

331

multiple posting fields, archiving, post management, comments, and templates can be found in nearly all services while advanced community and security features are rarely implemented. It is interesting that weblog services in German on average implement more features than services in English language. The younger technological basis might be the reason for these differences.

There are many promising opportunities for further research. First of all, it would be interesting to carry out a broad survey among weblog users in order to determine the importance of weblog features. This would provide an opportunity to supplement the findings from the literature and interviews with more empirical results. Such research could be combined with measurement of the acceptance of different weblog services and weblog scripts. It would also be valuable to determine whether bloggers are willing to pay for certain features and to compare free weblog services with those that charge their users. Finally, it would be also insightful to compare the implementation levels of weblog services with the features supported by weblog scripts.

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