

# Weblog success: Exploring the role of technology

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## Abstract

Weblogs have recently gained considerable media attention. Leading weblog sites are already attracting millions of visitors. Yet, success in the highly competitive world of weblogs is not easily achieved. This study seeks to explore weblog success from a technology perspective, i.e. from the impact of weblog-building technology (or blogging tool). Based on an examination of 126 highly successful weblogs tracked over a period of 3 months, we categorized weblogs in terms of popularity rank and growth, and evaluated the relationship between weblog success (in terms of popularity) and technology use. Our analysis indicates that weblog success is associated with the type of blogging tool used. We argue that technology characteristics affect the presentation and organization of weblog content, as well as the social interaction between bloggers, and in turn, affect weblog success or popularity improvement. Based on this analysis, we propose a techno-social success model for weblogs. This model postulates that a weblog's success is mainly associated with its ability to provide value for its users and readers at the content, the technology, and the social levels.

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## 1. Introduction

Weblogs (or blogs) are becoming a “new form of mainstream personal communication” (Rosenbloom, 2004, p. 31) for millions of people to publish and exchange knowledge/information, and to establish networks or build relationships in *the world of all blogs*, the so-called “blogosphere”. Weblog-building technologies (or blogging tools) bring new capabilities, such as web publication and communication, to average people, especially those non-technical users. They are designed to facilitate simple and fast creation of web content without much technical or programming skill. Recent releases of blogging tools have been further improved to provide enhanced features for between-blog interactivity; thus promoting the creation of social networks among bloggers. As an innovative social computing technology that enables *web based word-of-mouth* (through blogging activities), weblog was recently identified as among the top “10 tech trends to watch in 2005” by *Fortune* magazine (Vogelstein et al., 2005, p. 43).

Weblog popularity has surged over the last few years, resulting in 6 million ([www.technorati.com](http://www.technorati.com)) active blogs worldwide by the end of 2004. According to Sifry (2004), founder and CEO of *Technorati* (well-recognized for its blog tracking/ranking service), over 12,000 new weblogs are created daily and an average of at least 4.6 weblogs are being updated every second. In a telephone survey of American Internet users, Pew Internet & American Life Project reported an increase of 58% weblog readership from February to November 2004, and reached 32 million readers (27% of the American online users) (BusinessWeek online, 2005). Businesses have also begun to recognize weblog's (potential) value. Several large firms, such as Microsoft and IBM, are already seen at the forefront of the corporate blogging wave, where employees are encouraged to actively embrace this medium. Companies such as Stonyfield Farm and CareerBuilder.com are paying “in-house bloggers” salaries in the range of 40,000–70,000 US\$; a further indication that corporate blogging is becoming one of the emerging careers in Marketing and PR circles (PRWeb, 2005).

Despite the increased attention the blogging phenomenon has received, most weblogs will never achieve wide readership, possibly being read only by their author(s) and

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few others. Only very few weblogs may ever obtain the readership and financial success of *Instapundit.com*, or the cult status of *Slashdot.com*. Some studies (e.g. Shirky, 2003; Sifry, 2005) suggest that weblog popularity has been following a *power-law* distribution with most of the readership focused on a very small group of highly successful weblogs, sometimes called the “A-list” of weblogs. It has also been expected that with time, the distribution becomes increasingly uneven, so that the audience-rich would become richer while the audience-poor would become relatively poorer and eventually fade out. And yet, the web has proven itself again-and-again as a breeding ground for new ideas, new products and new services, allowing, seemingly out of a sudden, new popular websites to emerge and to replace old favorites.

The Internet and web technologies have substantially influenced systems development and its outcomes, and radically changed people’s behaviour in adopting these technologies (Lyytinen and Rose, 2003). Although, there has been growing interest and significant recent study of online phenomena and their success factors, most existing research focuses on the success issues relating to electronic commerce (e.g. Liu and Arnett, 2000; Molla and Licker, 2001; Torkzadeh and Dhillon, 2002), open source movement (e.g. Raymond, 1998; Markus et al., 2000; Mockus et al., 2002), and online community (e.g. Hagel and Armstrong, 1997; Kozinets, 1999; Preece, 2001). Past empirical research, to the best of our knowledge, has focused little on weblog success. We therefore seek to explore this important issue to identify IT-related factors associated with weblog success. In particular, we wish to answer the question whether blogging technology can help to increase weblog success in terms of readership popularity.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows: Section 2 introduces weblogs and their supporting technologies. Section 3 explains our study design. We then continue by discussing weblog success categories and blogging tool properties. Section 6 maps weblog success against blogging technology used. Based on the preliminary analyses and findings, we introduce a conceptual model to explain weblog success in Section 7. Section 8 discusses both theoretical and practical implications from the study. We then identify limitations and possible further improvement in Section 9, and draw conclusions in Section 10.

## 2. Weblogs and blogging technology: the background

### 2.1. Weblogs

The term *weblog* was first used by John Barger (1997), and was defined as “a web page where a blogger ‘logs’ all the other web pages she finds interesting”. Weblogs are distinct in both form and content from other types of web pages (Blood, 2004). As a “log on the web”, it is kept mostly in a reverse chronological order with the latest entry at the top of the web page. As a “log of the web”, it easily refers to other Internet locations via hyperlinks. A more

recent and comprehensive definition of weblogs is that “the site consists of dated entries” [Brigitte Easton, see (Blood, 2000)], and that the entries were episodic or conversational in a diary or “story telling” format (Brown, 2001).

As suggested by Wagner and Bolloju (2005), weblogs are ideal for experts who wish to broadcast their expertise to a large audience, and are also suitable for average persons who wish to share their stories/diaries with a small group of others. According to Winer ([www.scripting.com](http://www.scripting.com)), a blogging pioneer, weblogs have the following characteristics:

- *Personalized*: Weblogs are designed for individual use (multi-person weblog is also possible through collaboration, such as the “team blog” offered by [www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com)). Their style is personal and informal.
- *Web-based*: Weblogs can be updated frequently. They are easy to maintain and accessible via a web browser.
- *Community-supported*: Weblogs can link to other weblogs and websites, enabling the linkage of ideas, and hence stimulating knowledge generation and sharing between bloggers.
- *Automated*: Blogging tools help bloggers to present their words without the hassle of writing HTML code or program; instead, bloggers just need to concentrate on the content.

### 2.2. Blogging tools and their evolution

In the early blogging days, during the late 1990s, no special tools were available for creating weblogs. Most bloggers hand coded their sites. But, very soon, “it became difficult to read every weblog every day, or even to keep track of all the new ones that were appearing” (Blood, 2000). Weblogs started to gain popularity after Pitas.com launched the first free *build-your-own-weblog* tool, and few others like Blogger released their blogging tools. These tools provided the ease and affordable opportunity for non-technical persons to communicate online.

Nowadays, most weblogs are powered by hosting services or standalone software; although a few bloggers, like Rebecca Blood ([www.rebeccablood.net](http://www.rebeccablood.net)), still hand code their sites. According to Bauer (2004), approximately 80% of weblogs use hosting services that provide weblog-building tools and server space, while the rest use standalone software that runs on individual servers or web hosts. Many popular weblog hosts, such as Blogger, ModBlog, and Xanga, offer basic services for free, which are good for new bloggers or general users who are happy with limited server spaces and standard features. But, successful weblogs can outgrow these basic services, and may be forced to choose premium services (at higher costs), or even to set up their own hosts (Rubenking, 2003). Comparatively, standalone software is more flexible in terms of server space and control of own content, but requires some knowledge to set up the application and to maintain the server. Movable Type and Radio Userland are two popular fee-based standalone software solutions.

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