

Social Networking and Weblog Sites for Researchers

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Social Networking services build online communities of people with shared interests [1], providing the capacity to contribute to content generation and thus are considered to be the bedrock of the "Web 2.0" framework. Dating back to early online communities such as the USENET, LISTSERV and the WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link), contemporary Social Networking services include microblogging sites that provide a regular commentary or online journal sites by individuals and communities.

Microblogging tends to attract large numbers of individuals but lack sophisticated methods of commentary due to poor journaling tools, such as limited character length, along with highly significant psychological factors [2] whereby the short and immediate comments can induce temporary feelings of elation or depression depending on content. In contrast, the latter provides sophisticated commentary, but typically lacks the ability to network large numbers of people due to a lack of aggregation tools (RSS feeds notwithstanding) [3] and a necessity of creating a critical mass of participants.

If a means can be found that combines the two technological orientations there would be an extremely useful result for Australian researchers, providing the opportunity for disparate community to establish communities and make connections of their own volition and interest. A comprehensive review of the features many existing services (such as Friendster, MySpace, FaceBook, Bebo, Twitter for social networking and Wordpress, Blogger, Vox for weblogs) indicated deficiencies in the capacity to unite the two necessary streams.

An alternative, Livejournal, with additional technological enhancements from Dreamwidth, does however provide both strong social networking tools and journaling capacity through a subscriber system, community generation and reading aggregation. The technology also has modest searching facilities to find common association through interest, geographical region etc, that can certainly be modified to suit academic research. The technology provides individual researchers the ability to create accounts and communities without pseudonyms will promote a high quality of discussion, collaboration and enhance research networks. These limitations are necessary evidence clearly indicates that a combination of anonymity and lack of moderation degrades discussion [4]. Written in Perl with global master databases, and a distributed filesystem, the Livejournal and Dreamwidth technologies are stable, scalable, with load balancing when needed [5].

The vision is that individual Australian researchers (only) would be able to create an account at in the format of firstname-surname (i.e., without pseudonyms) and only for academic purposes. They would be able to select for their reading list other collaborators which would remain private to the subscriber. All posts can be public or private (to subscribers only) and collaboration teams would be able to make use of the existing 'communities' tool to establish areas of mutual interest. These would require a team leader or leaders who would have the task of moderation of members and posts etc, as deemed necessary (e.g., it could have membership open to all researchers and unmoderated posting). Some collaboration teams could even include a process of peer review (e.g., a number of moderators who screen a proposed post prior to publication).

In addition to these technological evaluations, the institutional context must also be considered. Existing models of project-orientated grant funding and relative independence of research groups pose difficulties in establishing large scale infrastructure for collaborative research [6]. Research administration is increasingly related to the public communication of a university's identity. Therefore it is necessary to strategically identify and target existing gathered research data. One particular method is the dynamic collation of public profile pages, publications, grants etc., such has been carried out by the University of Melbourne, the University of Queensland, and Cornell University in the United States. This may be further enhanced by collated interests from unique identifiers allocated to researchers and projects as a proposal within the Australian National Data Service [7].

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