Whitepaper
Blog Communities

Forging Connections and Promoting Growth Through Blog Communities

21Publish
Cooperative Publishing

Find like-minded people and make new connections through blogging communities

Blogging has been around for some years and in recent history, blogs have constantly gained in popularity and influence. The classic blog has evolved and developed several sub-categories. One of the sub-categories gaining more recognition is blog communities. Blog communities carry the idea of a social network at their root, in the sense that they strengthen communication and connections amongst different groups of people with a similar mindset. Imagine joining a blogging community where people can find and read your blog, get your blog reviewed or even chat with other bloggers all around the world! Whether you like to talk about politics, business, your wedding, and family, or simply enjoy sharing your life experiences on your blog with other people, Blog Communities are a great way to expand the number of people that read your blog!

- Blog communities allow communities of interest, organizations, loose associations, groups of alumni, etc. to instantly, easily and effectively create a single point of access and content aggregation.

- Blog communities represent an aggregation of individual blogs giving readers an overview of the breadth and depth of content and knowledge within a group. This way, blog communities allow the popularity of an individual blog to grow, and help to spread the message on a cause.

- The advantage of establishing a blog community, either amongst friends, colleagues, or communities of interest, lies in the group effect. Users can benefit by networking, finding new friends, or simply have a stronger communication tool within the blogosphere.

- Companies and organizations like Amnesty International and BusinessWeek have integrated blog communities, so-called BlogPortals, into their websites.

- Blogging communities operate under a private label and their own individual domain names and can be customized to reflect the look and feel of any organization.

This whitepaper will describe blog communities, specifically in regards to how they function and how they can be set up. This paper will also describe essential elements and requirements that need to flow into creating and maintaining these blog communities.

What is a Blog[*]?

The term "blog" is derived from **"Web log"**. A **blog** is a user-generated website where entries are made in a journal style and displayed in reverse chronological order.
Blogs often provide commentary or news on a particular subject, such as food, politics, or local news; some function as more personal online diaries. A typical blog combines text, images, and links to other blogs, web pages, and other media related to its topic. The ability for readers to leave comments in an interactive format is an important part of many blogs. Most blogs are primarily textual although some focus on photographs (photoblog), sketchblog, videos (vlog), or audio (podcasting), and are part of a wider network of social media. A blog can be **private**, as in most cases, or it can be used for business purposes. Blogs, either used internally, to enhance the communication and culture in a corporation, or externally, for marketing, branding or PR purposes, are called **corporate** blogs.

What is a Blog Community?

Blog communities can be manifold. Sometimes, the term is used to describe people using the same blogging platform, e.g. Xanga. Other times, it is used to describe group blogs, in which members do not run individual blogs but rather all contribute to the same blog. The way we like to define a blog community, in comparison to a group blog, is that **blog communities aggregate the *individual* and *independent* blogs of a number of people with a shared interest** – the same cause, similar political views, business interest, etc.

As blogging has evolved, bloggers have used all different kinds of applications to run and host their blogs. Thus you find bloggers with a common interest – such as "surfing", a similar socio-demographic group of "young urbanites", cities or even colleges and schools – on a widespread set of blogging providers. Blog communities know no borders – they are not bound by certain provider, country borders, or age. They can connect bloggers discussing the same subjects from different cities, countries or continents. They can also connect friends or colleagues.
College alumni who share a common passion for their alma mater's football team, or sorority sisters who want to pass their experiences on to new members, can use a blog community to do so. Businessmen and -women trying to forge connections among like-minded peers can use blog communities to network, collaborate, and assist each other.

[*] Source: Wikipedia (2006), Definition of a Blog at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/blog

> **"Blog communities usually focus on a shared interest, a cause, or an organization."**

In the age of social communities like MySpace et al, blog communities offer groups of bloggers the opportunity to form connections and bonds in much more focused groups. They bring together different individual bloggers and can be used as a platform to share wisdom about everyday issues, such as children, fashion, etc. but they can also be used to educate about human, political, educational, or environmental issues.

> **"In many ways Blog Communities are like webrings — only better"**

The benefit of establishing a blog community, either amongst friends, colleagues, or communities of interest, lies in the group effect and the increased reach. Users can benefit by networking, finding new friends, or simply have a stronger communication tool within the blogosphere. Individual bloggers can forge connections and learn more about their field of interest. Plus, individual bloggers have a crowd of possible evangelists for their own blog within reach.

What are the elements of a Blog Community?

Blog communities usually consist of two layers: On the first layer, readers and users find a community homepage, that aggregates content, such as new posts from the various individual blogs, has messages and news for community members, and lists features intended to drive the community, such as a blog directory. On the second layer readers will find all the users' individual blogs, which all reflect their individual design. The community homepage serves as a platform to connect individual blogs and ease communication amongst the community's members. Below you see an example of the two-layer system illustrated through the community blog **ReadMyDay**, used by a British municipal council.
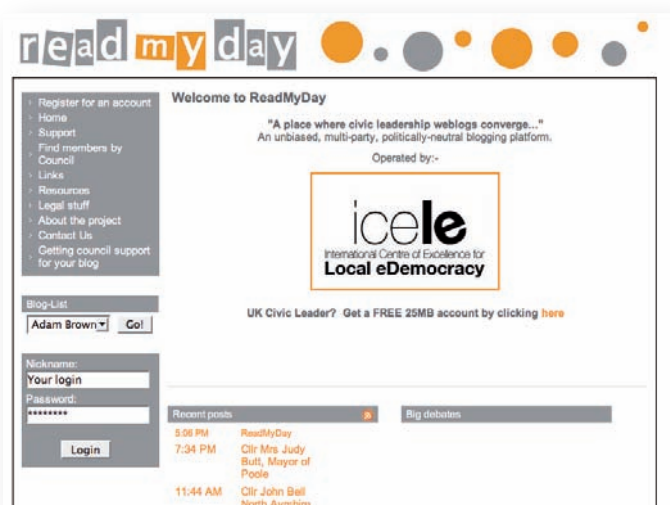

Figure 1: ReadMyDay's community portal homepage
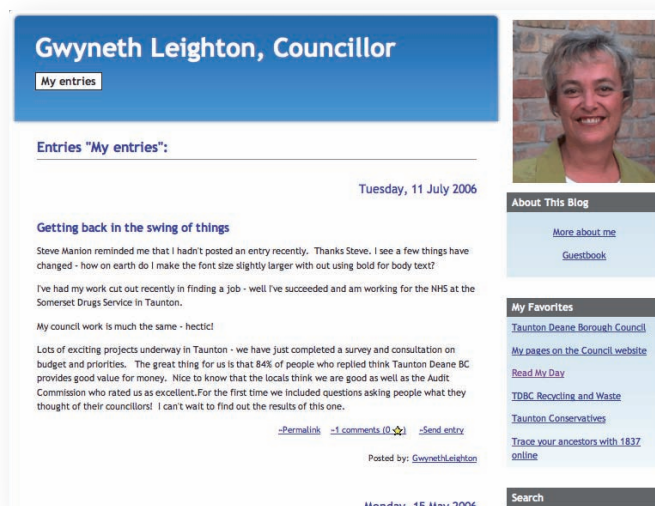

Figure 2: ReadMyDay community user blog

Users, who already have an established blog, can simply feed their own blogs onto the platform through an RSS-Feed, or they may use the community as an opportunity to begin a new blog. Users, who are interested in a certain cause or topic but have never written a blog, can use blog communities to begin their blogging experience.

The community portal's homepage, as well as all blogs within a community, can be branded to reflect a uniform image and the success of individual blogs can reflect on the entire community. Visitors and readers of the community have the choice between subscribing to aggregated RSS feeds of all posts or to the feeds of chosen individual blogs.

Ease of Registration and Use of Blog Communities

When registering for or establishing a new blog community, the registration process and login for new members are quite simple. One administrator sets up the initial platform and can then sign up other members or simply add their feeds. New members signing up do not have to go through a long design and set-up process for their blog, because they can usually set it up within a pre-established realm set by the blog community's administrator. Readers of the blog community have the advantage of getting a complete overview of different blog entries on their topic of interest on one platform.

Thus, the advantages of a blog community can be summarized as follows:

- blog communities can connect bloggers hailing from different cities, countries, or continents discussing the same topics. They can also connect groups of friends or colleagues, or like-minded groups

- they can serve as a platform to ease communication

- communities represent individual blogs aggregated into a single point of entry, giving readers an overview of the breadth and depth of knowledge within a group

- for organizations, they can be integrated into the website and can reflect the organization's branding

- readers and members can serve as evangelists and create a growth and group effect

- registration is easy and several RSS feeds can be subscribed through one platform

Let's take a closer look at some blog Communities of interest

Consider the blog community called **marmaBLOGS**. The idea behind this community is to connect business women in, as they say, a "rather ladylike place to blog". Topics connecting these women include business and personal issues – new business ventures, new gadgets, new friends, seeing movies, posting baby pictures, planning a wedding, etc. The essence is to give women a place to share their life with others. New members signing up have the option of starting a new blog or feeding in their existing blog.

Figure 3: marmaBLOGS community portal homepage

Members can also create a profile page where they can let others know about themselves, download pictures and create their own del.icio.us tags. The homepage of the marmaBLOG's portal features the most recent posts, a blog list, and, as an important community feature, a number of aggregated del.icio.us tags, the most popular ones of which are standing out, leading readers to corresponding pages on the Internet. New users can also take a look at a bloglist, featuring marmaBLOG's existing blogs, for information and inspiration. The blog community's message and intention is clearly stated and featured in the center of the blog portal's homepage.

The marmaBLOGS community clearly focuses on working women and the issues in their everyday lives and represents a perfect example of bringing together a group sharing the same interests on one platform.

Another great example of a blog community, connecting a group of like-minded people, is **BlogKITE**. This community is centered on kite surfing, wind surfing, snow surfing, etc. and fans of this sport are encouraged to share their blogs surrounding their experiences with it as well as tips and tricks.

The main page of the BlogKITE portal is packed with information giving readers many options and a good overview of the community's purpose. Readers can take a look at the latest 5 posts, blogs of the week, top 5 blogs, watch recent videos, etc. Users even find a number of featured blogs in French. This blog community also offers users to submit their existing blogs or to start a new blog. The blog community also has a Google search, which searches all blogs and a separate search by tags. A plethora of information and blogs to choose from and read for anyone interested in any kiting sport is offered as well.

Figure 4: BlogKITE's blog community portal homepage

The Benefits for Organizations

An organization's blog community can provide more benefits in gaining supporters than a collection of individual blogs. In such a community different individual blogs are easily aggregated into a single point of entry, which quickly gives the reader an overview of the breadth and depth of collective knowledge within an organization.

Let's look at some communities run by organizations and companies

Consider Amnesty International's **blog community**. The community's main page has a consistent look with the organization's traditional **website** and is directly integrated into the website to ease navigation for the reader. The focus within the Amnesty International USA's blog community is on the organization's main areas of interest – 'AIUSA', 'Death Penalty', 'Denounce Torture', 'Student Activism', and 'Urgent Action' – each with an individual blog.

The Amnesty International USA blog community's platform aggregates the five blogs. The blog portal's homepage lets readers take a look at the most recent entry and gives them a list of the most recent entries on the right. Readers can also search certain entries directly within the individual blogs. The platform also displays different 'AISUA del.icio.us' tags, which lead readers to more information about specific topics relating to Amnesty International issues on the Internet.
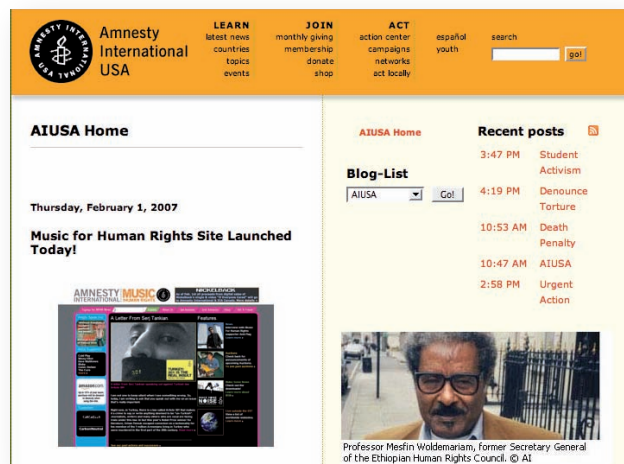

Figure 5: Amnesty International USA's blog community portal homepage

Most blogs featured in the blog community have a single author, usually an expert, and all welcome comments from readers. The 'Death Penalty' Blog (shown below) features entries about official developments and government decisions regarding the death penalty, as well as personal entries from American inmates sitting on death row. The first page of this blog features the most recent entry in the center of the page and recent entries plus a blogroll featuring links to other sites covering death penalty on the right-hand side of the page.
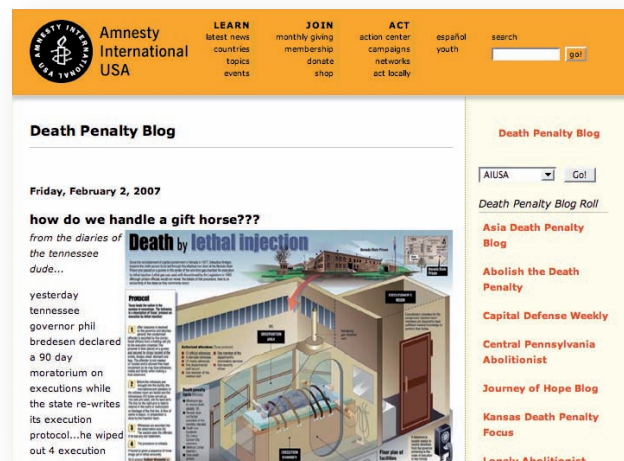

Figure 6: Amnesty International USA's Death Penalty blog

The header of the start page leads readers back to the organization's main site. A key thing to note here is that the blog community offers a perfect overview of all developments on issues important to Amnesty International USA. The mixture of official news, accounts by individuals, and calls to action lighten the tone of the information being communicated.

Another notable blog community run by a corporation is *BusinessWeek*'s **MBA Blogs**. In this case *BusinessWeek* also integrated this community, based around the common interest of information about Business Schools, right into their **website**. The blog community is also connected to the magazine's existing backend customer management and content management systems.[*]
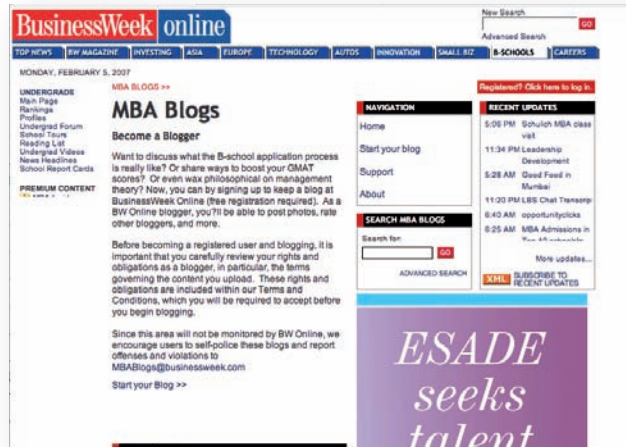

Figure 7: *Business Week*'s community portal homepage

Users can create a login on the community's portal and then start a blog to share their experiences with and tips about different business schools. BusinessWeek's MBA Blogs strives to bring together former, future, and current students at Business Schools around the world on one journalistic platform. *BusinessWeek*'s blog community represents a healthy mixture of opinions by professors, alumni, and current students.

[*] Source: "*BusinessWeek* Retains 21Pulish To Launch Blog Targeted To MBA Community" at
http://openpr.com/news/182/BusinessWeek-Retains-21Publish-To-Launch-Blog-Targeted-to-MBA-Community.html

How to make a Blog Community work and grow

For blog communities to be effective for users, a few elements should be considered:

a. **be clear in direction and topic** — the community should have a clear direction and purpose and, ideally, a topic narrow enough to be of interest.

b. **establish a community manager/organizer** — this person is the key to making the blog community work. In essence he/she is the face of the blog community and the sole contact person for any question regarding the community. He/she is also responsible for recruitment and driving interaction within the community.

c. **communicate the community's cause, topic or theme and also use Meta tags for search engines to find and link to your blog** — this is the key to making your blog community known within the blogosphere and to help others find your community.

d. **integrate existing blogs and invite users** — invite users whose individual blogs fit into your community and invite users that you know would like to join a community and begin blogging.

e. **offer new bloggers or like-minded people a simple means to start their personal blog on your platform** — allow new users to sign up their existing blog and also offer them the possibility of starting a new blog. Make the sign-up process quick and simple by providing a pre-selected set of layouts, etc.

f. **write news for the community** — keep the members of your community involved and informed and foster communication within the community. Send out frequent newsletters in which you write about new members, the hot topics of the week or month, the most prolific blog, etc.

g. **use a tool like http://kalsey.com/tools/buttonmaker to create and provide buttons for all member blogs** – these can be integrated and linked to the community's homepage.

h. **activate community features wherever possible** — put things like a blog directory and a user directory directly on the homepage of your community portal. This way readers, as well as community members, will have easy access to any blog and have another quick way for communication.

i. **integrate RSS Feeds from entries tagged on Technorati** — You can link entries, which are tagged on Technorati, i.e. education, fashion, etc., to your blog community through an RSS feed from Technorati. This way, your blog community members will be informed about new blog entries written, on your subject of interest, anywhere.

j. **integrate delicious tag cloud** — A tag cloud allows you to aggregate the community users' most popular bookmarks and lets new users immediately identify the most important topics related to the blog community. Clicking on the different tags leads users to related pages and links on the Internet.

Blog communities are intended to connect existing blogs as well as give the opportunity to start new ones. Communities of interest or a group of friends, colleagues or fellow students, who all keep separate blogs and want to combine their blogs on one portal, are the ideal candidates and need to find a provider that offers the right solution to combine the blogs.

Once this provider has been found and the portal has been established, an administrator needs to drive the growth of the blog community. The best way to encourage growth is also to get your blog community linked and listed on search engines. Administrators should try to find sites that are already in the community's field of interest and ask them to link to the community. These link exchanges can be a way to develop traffic and discussion.

How to Select a Solution for Your Blog Community

There are a number of different organizations offering solutions for blog communities. When looking at blogging software for blog communities the following should be areas of consideration:

1. **Hosted Versus Proprietary** — A hosted solution provides the quickest way to get up and running as no information technology staff or equipment are required, and there are no maintenance costs. Free solutions, like the one offered by 21Publish, can be found. If you have the time and knowledge to set up, install and maintain software on your own server, you may want to consider Open Source Software like Wordpress MU.

2. **The integration of new and existing blogs** — The mixture of new and existing blogs provides a balanced exchange between established and new bloggers. Ensure that the blog solution you are using for your platform allows new members to set up new blogs, as well as sign up their existing individual blogs.

3. **Ease of use to set up and centrally manage the community** — The blog platform you use should provide an easy way for you to set up the community. In the same sense you should be able to create and pre-select an easy way for your new members to sign up. Alternatively the platform should offer you an easy way to sign up new members yourself.

4. **Customizable Design** — A key to establishing a blog community under any label is to make sure that a similar look is preserved amongst the different blogs within the community. Make sure that the vendor provides a blog solution where both look and feel and web domain address can be fully customized.

5. **Co-Authoring and Intranet & Review Capabilities** — Co-authoring refers to the ability to have different bloggers write for multiple blogs or for different categories. Some blog platforms permit draft posts to be reviewed before published to the public.

6. **Scalability** — This is a key argument for many people. While some initial blogging deployments may only start with a smaller number of blogs, many communities should have a solution easily scalable to a growing number of blogs (and still make the process seamless and manageable).

Summary of Benefits of Blog Communities

Blog communities are something that all organizations and communities of interest and like-minded peers should consider. Relationships within groups and communication within the blogosphere can be stronger and go far beyond the reach of an individual blog. A blog community can pool information and knowledge from different individuals and strengthen the communicable message. They can also inspire ideas and developments not reached by an individual blogger.

So if this white paper has inspired you to start a blog community begin looking for the right solution provider and get started!

Some Recommended Blog Communities to Explore:

marmaBLOGS.com - http://blogs.marmaladya.com

Blogkite – http://www.blogkite.com

zooweekly - http://www.zooweekly.co.uk

Mein Express – http://www.mein-express.de

About 21Publish

21Publish is a turnkey software solution for creating your own private label blog service. The 21Publish solution has fully customizable templates to support your design needs. It provides a centralized hub from which to build, manage, and deploy your group blogging service. As an on-demand solution you can easily scale the service according to your needs. 21Publish is located in the United States and Europe serving customers like Amnesty International, McGraw-Hill, and Emap. 21Publish is a spin-off of 20six/Myblog, a leading European blog service.

Please visit 21Publish at http://www.21publish.com