

Collaborate or die



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We all want to communicate, and many of us know what we want to communicate, but do we best communicate via the internet? Joseph Priestley once said, 'The more elaborate our means of communication, the less we communicate'. True enough, but these words were penned long before the internet came into existence.

Publishing has come a long way since the Gutenberg press, and we are no longer tied to publishing houses in order to communicate with others via print. Nor do we need to know a friendly web guru who can convert text into code in order to post material to a website. Electronic words can travel in any direction, and to as many people as we see fit. But how do we unscramble all of the options to determine what will work best, and what method will have maximum engagement with our intended audience? The options are worthy of consideration.

E-mail

The best online communicator of all, and extremely pervasive. Flexible, almost universal, and often misunderstood, e-mail is the main channel of one-to-one communication via the internet. With more and more web-based e-mail services available, users no longer need a dedicated computer to store incoming and outgoing e-mails. The ubiquity of e-mail permits a wide range of communication. On the downside, spam and viruses are making things more difficult for Windows-based mail users, and the overall traffic generated by viruses and spam is slowing the development of all internet services, but in particular makes the use of e-mail as a broadcast medium extremely difficult (because much that is broadcast, or looks like it could be a broadcast, is routinely blocked). Further, the prevalence of 'dressed-up' e-mails (those coded to include graphics, or fancy formatting of any kind) makes it much harder to communicate equally with all (since many users will not be able to read the e-mail, or will have it rejected by their mail server).

E-lists

Although not directly associated with web-based activity, e-lists offer the widest range of communication between groups of people, and are a very effective tool in the democratisation of the internet. Lightweight, robust, and scalable, most list servers are capable of a good deal of activity, at minimal effort. List servers require considerable resources to maintain and to ensure that they are not abused (they can be 'spam havens' or virus propagators). From time to time, 'trolls' might attempt to disrupt or subvert the list or list's communications, but most lists are 'self-healing': the troll is generally banished. Archives of e-lists are easily generated and can be placed on a website automatically, or stored so that segments of the archive can be mailed to an individual. The downsides? Converting

attachments and non-plain text messages into something that can be safely read by all (and archived) is still extremely difficult, and prone to dangers of unsafe material being displayed in the workplace (as with all messages sent in anything other than plain text).

Chat

Chat servers offer the digital equivalent of phone conversations (though using a party line). Chat servers usually require participants to register with a username and password in a web-based interface, offering a selection of 'discussion rooms' where groups can conduct private conversations. Participants communicate in real time (as fast as they can type). Due to the nature of the interface and software, most participants tend to abbreviate their communications, and use an excessive number of smileys (or emoticons) to convey emotions. Each message is brief; at best, no more than 80 characters long. Archiving of conversations is possible, but rare. Its ephemeral nature often means chat is treated like a phone conversation, even though all keystrokes can be logged. Chat servers are lightweight, easy to use, require no coding or specialist skills — and therefore immensely popular.



IRC

Internet Relay Chat is an extension of 'chat', but relies upon custom software used by the operating system on the computer itself (in contrast with chat servers which are web-based). IRC sessions are effectively the same as chat server sessions, although software developers are forever attempting to add more features to promote the popularity of their proprietary software. Most IRC software is not cross-compatible, so users tend to download and configure software to suit themselves and their associates.

Forums

Online forum software permits users to join or begin a 'thread' of conversation, and to continue to correspond over time with those who also join the forum. Web-based, and generally archived into a database, forums are a permanent feature of the internet, and can be indexed, archived, and generally used as a resource by members and outside readers. Some are password-protected, and most only permit communications from registered users who log in. Forums are ideal for a wide range of communications, especially those that collate reference material. Images, sounds, ▶

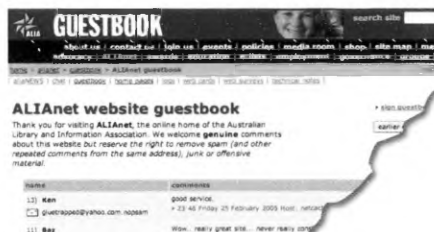
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and other content can be added. The user expertise required to create coded content is either nil or minimal. Forums can be made highly spam-resistant, and rarely require much administrative intervention, either at a system level, or at a 'thread' or 'topic' level. Forums are readily scalable, from small to very large. The style of content is generally conversational, and is rarely in-depth. It is worth noting that the common interface used by forums encourages identification of contributors, can often be used to indicate who is viewing the forum (if logged in), and to show the number of 'posts' that an individual has made.



Guestbooks

Most guestbooks are simple tools that permit website visitors to leave short comments (mostly about the host website), and to communicate with others vicariously. Most are now closed due to overuse by spammers and self-promoters. Remnants still exist, and are archived in many locations. They are often a useful historical public record of early to mid-90s website activity. Early websites used them to show how wonderful their site was (by culling negative comments, frequently!)



Wikis

Since the earliest days of websites, webmasters have attempted to make content addition easier. The process of web-page creation is not rocket science, but most tools available are difficult to use (under the guise of 'offering a multitude of features'). Eventually, developers began constructing online interfaces that permitted changes and new content in the web browser environment. Wikis take this one step further, opening the floodgates entirely, and permitting anyone to make additions and changes to content. The rationale behind this is that those with a vested interest will ensure that content is accurate and up-to-date. In reality, the process of 'self-maintenance' requires some external guidance. The most notable Wiki project (and there are many) is wikipedia.org, offering hun-

dreds of thousands of pages of content in the form of an online encyclopaedia. Peer review takes place, so content can be considered authoritative in most instances, though most publishers and editors denounce the project as being one-eyed, unstable, and subject to the whims of loud individuals with time on their hands. Whichever view you take, wiki-style websites paved the way for truly collaborative content, even though (as with all such projects), the need for an information management team (administrators) is too often neglected. Wiki sites don't necessarily promote discussion or two-way communication via the web, but they show that the web is innovative in one sense. Spam is a problem of sorts (as are vandals), but active wikis will generally revert content to a pre-spam or pre-vandalised state as soon as it is spotted. Copyright infringements are a growing concern for wikis, as is plagiarism (in and out).

Blogs

Website development has always been in the hands of web managers and coders — specialists who know how to craft code around content. Blogs are a spin-off from wikis, allowing non-specialists to add content to a website, and to format it in a 'diary' style for others to view. Blogs are ideal for one-way missives that seek comment (brief) from others in an environment where coding knowledge is in short supply. The lack of an 'information architect' is the general downfall of most blogs today — finding particular content on a rolling series of pages is, at best, difficult — and not many bloggers appreciate that an overarching structure is needed to keep things in order. Although often self-indulgent, blogs can bring to light issues that would otherwise be ignored. Allowing others to link to the blog's content increases its reach and strengthens validity of the content. (On the web, reputation and validity are generated/enhanced by the number of external links pointing to the content.) These acts of self-expression are creating a good deal more content that can be traversed on the web, but the downside is that it increases the noise level considerably. Successful blogging involves dialogue between bloggers and readers though bloggers can edit or discourage comment. Added comment from visitors can be greater than the original content, and does not always add much to the original material. However, blogs of little value soon roll over and die. Blogs work best for personal websites, and are assured of a future.

RSS

There is mixed reaction to RSS (it first meant 'really simple syndication', but is

now more popularly known as 'rich site summary'). Partly because of the confusing acronym, and partly due to people misunderstanding how it can combine the best elements of virtually all of the above, RSS is only just beginning to make its mark on the web. However, for websites that change or add content frequently (ie, all active non-cobweb sites), RSS feeds are powerful, easy-to-use tools for the busy web-browsing individual. New articles (defined as any kind of content) are added to a list summary, which can be set to be polled as frequently as desired by anyone with an RSS feed reader (or aggregator, because it is possible to add or subscribe to any number of feeds). In the RSS reader, headlines and/or short summaries are initially displayed for new content, which can then be expanded or read directly via a browser. New web browsers offering incorporated news feed tools are becoming available, but stand-alone readers are more powerful, and more flexible in delivery. On websites, RSS feeds are typically shown with an orange 'RSS' or 'XML' rectangle to signify that they are available as an RSS feed. The beauty of RSS feeds is their ease of access and their flexibility: on busy websites, most visitors want to see what is new or what has changed — RSS feeds show these in one window without having to visit all of the pages that might or might not have changed over time. Further, the ability to have selective content pushed onto the desktop of a computer, instead of having to go directly to each website concerned, is a real time saver. The timing of the polling of the content is also entirely up to the individual concerned, although polling too frequently can upset website administrators.

Summary

There are many ways in which the internet can be used as a collaborative environment. Some tools move in and rapidly out of fashion, but ultimately those survive that require minimal management and intervention. Some tools are well-suited to large sites, others to small sites. Some are narrow focus and purpose-built to fill a niche, some are built to facilitate online publishing by individuals, whilst others attempt to bring people together. But — as Priestly predicted — it's the simple tools and methods that allow us to communicate at our best. Not surprisingly, e-mail and e-lists are still a long way ahead of all other methods of communication via the internet, and are likely to remain so. And yet they have seen the least amount of 'development' since their inception. Such a pity both are so undervalued. But at least they have remained simple and thus accessible by all. ■