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Moving From Personal to Organisational Use of the Social Web

BRIAN KELLY

UKOLN, University of Bath, Bath, UK

B.Kelly@ukoln.ac.uk

Abstract: *The importance of the Social Web is now being widely accepted for those working in organisations such as higher educational institutions and public libraries. It might now be argued that the advocacy work of the early adopters, who made use of Social Web platforms hosted in The Cloud, has been vindicated and that such pioneering work can be migrated to a secure and managed environment provided within the institution. This paper, however, argues that the examples provided by early adopters who have been successful in maintaining their Social Web services over a number of years and developing a community of readers and contributors demonstrates that effective services in-house services can be deployed outside the traditional institutional environment. The paper goes on to suggest that such approaches are particularly relevant at a time of cuts across the public sector. However it is acknowledged that there are legitimate concerns regarding the content and sustainability of such services. The paper concludes by proposing a policy framework which seeks to ensure that authors can exploit Cloud Services to engage with their audiences in a professional and authentic manner whilst addressing the concerns of their host institution.*

Keywords: *Social Web, Web 2.0*

1. Background

Since the Web 2.0 term was popularised by O'Reilly in 2005 [1] we have seen a growth in take-up of technologies such as blogs and microblogs in the public sector. Initially institutions may regarded the relevance of such services with suspicion and had concerns as use of such services did not relate to established policies and processes for providing Web services, which placed an emphasis on quality of the content and accompanying editorial and workflow processes and in-house content management systems (CMSs).

In order to overcome such institutional inertia and objections we saw take-up of Social Web services taking place from the bottom-up. There was a suggestion that one should “*seek forgiveness, not permission*” in order to circumvent internal barriers. Now we see an increasing acceptance of the relevance of the Social Web, such as blogs, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube and Facebook.

But if the value of such services is becoming accepted there are still concerns regarding the out-sourcing of the IT infrastructure and the use of such services by individuals, with a loss of established editorial processes and control of the content which in-house CMSs provided.

This paper addresses the tensions between use of Social Web services by individuals within an organisation to support their professional objectives and the institutional concerns regarding the quality, ownership and sustainability of the content.

2. Case Study: Bloggers In Higher Education

The author's “must read” blogs include:

OUseful: Tony Hirst's blog “*in part about... things that I think may be useful in an higher education context, one day...*”.

eFoundations: A blog about “*Web 2.0, the Semantic Web, open access, digital libraries, metadata, learning, research, government, online identity, access management, virtual worlds and anything else that takes our fancy by Pete Johnston and Andy Powell*”.

The Ed Techie: Martin Weller’s blog on “*Educational Technology, web 2.0, VLEs, open content, e-learning, plus some personal stuff thrown in*”.

Learning with ‘e’s: Steve Wheeler’s “*thoughts about learning technology and all things digital*”.

Ramblings of a Remote Worker: Marieke Guy’s reflections on working from home and the broader issues of remote working.

A characteristic these blogs have in common is that they are all hosted on blog platforms in the Cloud (Wordpress.com, Typepad.com and Blogspot.com). In addition the blog authors all work in higher education, either as academics, developers or researchers.

These blogs are also well-established, having been set up in 2005 (OUUseful), 2006 (eFoundations, The Ed Techie and Learning With ‘e’s) and 2008 (Ramblings of a Remote Worker). As well as publishing posts frequently the authors have also developed an established community of readers and commenters.

We might regard such bloggers as having the following characteristics:

- A willingness to take risks.
- Are passionate about communicating.
- Have identified ways of balancing personal approaches & institutional concerns.
- Wish to continue to do a good job.

3. The Institutional Perspective

Institutional Concerns

The case study provides an illustration of the benefits which an initial generation of bloggers can provide. But what of the concerns of the institution regarding both the sustainability of such services and the precedents which might be set for others who fail, for whatever reasons, to provide blogs as successful as these?

Such concerns, which also apply to use of other Social Web services besides blogs, include:

Appropriateness of the content: How can the institution ensure that content provided on Social Web services is appropriate if no editorial processes are in place?

Legal risks: How can the institution ensure that illegal content is not uploaded to Social Web services if no editorial processes are in place?

Sustainability of the platform: How can the institution ensure that the platform is sustainable?

Sustainability of the service: How can the institution ensure that the service provided by the author is sustainable?

Sustainability of the content: How can the institution ensure that the content provided by the author is sustainable if, for example, the author leaves the host institution?

Value of the service: How can the institution ensure that the service provides value for money?

For a purely personal blog such issues would be of no concern to the host institution. However for a blog which is used to support institutional objectives the institution would appear to have an interest in answers to such questions.

What Could Go Wrong?

What kind of problems could occur with use of externally hosted social networking services such as a blog platform or Twitter?

- A librarian sends a public tweet which is intended to be sent as a Direct Message which is critical of a journalist on the local newspaper.
- A Social Networking service changes its terms and conditions so that a service which had previously available for free now requires a subscription. The data cannot easily be migrated to an alternative platform.
- An announcement that a blog service will be shutting down shortly is missed as the email notification ends up in a spam folder. The opportunity to migrate blog posts is missed.
- A mobile device is stolen for which the username and password is remembered for accessing Social Web services.
- A well-established and popular professional blogger leaves her institution. The institution claims ownership of the content published while she under contract at the institution.

All of these scenarios could happen and, in the first example, has. As described in LocalGov.co.uk [2]:

Croydon council has suspended the Twitter account of its 'newspaper' Your Croydon after it 'tweeted' a dig at an Evening Standard journalist.

A local newspaper has reported that a member of the council's staff used the account to criticise the reporter, claiming 'a squirrel could have run rings' around her after she had interviewed TV personality Esther Rantzen.

The council claim that the post was supposed to be a private message, but was instead published for all to see.

In addition the Ning social network recently withdrew its free service, with owners of existing services having to move to a subscription account in order to continue to access their content [3].

Similarly on 2nd September 2010 the Vox blogging platform announced that it was closing its service on 30 September 2010, although users were given the option of migrating their blog posts to Typepad and their images to Flickr [4].

Fortunately I am unaware of examples of disputes over ownership of the contents of a blog when a blogger moves to another institution.

4. Addressing The Tensions

A recent article on “*All about me, dot com*” published in the Times Higher Education [5] makes the point that academics and researchers have a culture, which may also be included in their contracts with their university, which provides them with the flexibility to make use of a variety of communications and dissemination technologies to support their profession activities, with no requirement that such technologies need be hosted within the institution.

However for University staff working in service departments, such as the Library, or for those working outside higher education, such as those working in public libraries, there is

likely to be much less flexibility. Indeed staff may be unable to access third party services from work due to firewall policies which block access.

In order to address institutional concerns this paper provides the following suggestions: provision of guidance and policies covering use of Social Web services by individuals and personal and institutional audits of use of such services.

Guidance and Policies

Mosman Council Library, based in Australia, have developed a policy on its use of Twitter [6] which clarifies the purpose of the service:

Our aim is to inform constituents of what's happening in Mosman.

- *Our Twitter channel supplements the information we publish on our website.*
- *We can remind you of important events and alert you to late-breaking news.*
- *We can link to interesting and useful information about Mosman published by other people.*
- *We can better communicate with those using mobile devices.*

and ways in which the service will be used:

we will reply [to messages] as quickly as possible. But please note:

- *we monitor the channel during business hours only; and*
- *we consider a Twitter conversation to be analogous to a telephone conversation.*

A simple and lightweight policy such as this would have avoided the need for Croydon Library to suspend its Twitter service as the inappropriate public tweet would have been regarded as the equivalent of sending a private email to a public list – an embarrassing incident which should be addressed by user education rather than removal of the communications channel.

The JISC Involve blogging platform provides helpful guidance for JISC staff who wish to use blogs to further their professional activities [7]. It should be noted that the guidelines place responsibilities on the author for the content of their posts with such guidelines also applying to use of externally-hosted blogs:

You're personally responsible *When writing a work blog on the JISC Involve platform, readers will assume you are expressing the views of JISC. If you are writing a personal blog on a different platform (i.e. Blogger) and you are writing about work-related matters, it would be prudent to clearly state the following disclaimer in your blog post:*

These are my personal views and not necessarily the views of JISC

Style *Editorially, blog writing is more chatty and informal. Your blog post sets up a conversation, offering opinions and leaving loose threads open for comments and further discussion.*

These guidelines also address copyright concerns, again placing responsibilities on the blog author rather than implementing a work flow process for checking content which would slow down the publishing process:

Respect copyright *If you make material available via your blog ensure the downloading, copying and use of the material will not infringe the proprietary rights (including the copyright, patent, trademark or trade secret rights) of any third party.*

An example of a policy which addresses the ownership of the contents of a blog and Twitter posts can be seen from the blog policy page on Aline Hayes blog [8]. Aline, Assistant

Director of SLS/ Director of Information & Systems Technology at Sheffield Hallam University, states that:

- *The content of the blog will primarily address issues related to my work at Sheffield Hallam University, both as the senior lead for IT in the University, and in my role as part of the Executive of the Directorate of Student and Learning Services*
- *... the content of this blog belongs to [Sheffield Hallam University] and remains theirs in the event that I either cease to contribute to this blog, or leave the University.*
- *Whilst this blog is hosted by Sheffield Hallam University and relates to my role in the University, this blog reflects my personal views and not necessarily the views of the University. This blog is not branded with Sheffield Hallam University branding and it is not part of any official reporting, marketing or publishing process for the University.*

These examples illustrate ways in which organisations can develop guidelines and policies which place responsibilities on blog authors and ways in which blog authors can develop their own policies which acknowledges possible concerns of the institution.

Managing The Closure Of Blogs

There are dangers that blogs may fail to be updated and perhaps attract spam if comments are left open. It should be acknowledged that such concerns are not restricted to blogs hosted in The Cloud. Nevertheless it is desirable if blogs can be closed in a managed fashion.

In a paper on “*Approaches To Archiving Professional Blogs Hosted In The Cloud*” [9] Kelly and Guy described a number of cases studies for managing blogs hosted in the Cloud which were used to support departmental activities including project and event blogs. The paper provides a set of guidelines which are intended to manage the closure of blogs. The guidelines included:

Planning: Preparation for archiving blogs should begin before the blog is launched. A blog policy can help to clarify the purpose of the blog and its intended audience.

Clarification of rights: A copyright statement covering blog posts and comments can also minimise the legal risks in archiving the blog.

Monitoring of technologies used: Information on the technologies used to provide the blog, including blog plugins, configuration options, themes, etc. can be useful if a blog environment has to be recreated.

Auditing: Providing an audit of the size of the blog, numbers of comments, usage of the blog, etc. may be useful in helping to identify the value of a blog and in ensuring that interested parties are aware of how well-used the blog was.

Understanding of costs and benefits: The audit should help to inform the decision-making processes regarding the effort which needs to be taken for the selected blog archiving strategy.

Identification and implementation of archiving strategy: The appropriate blog archiving strategy needs to be selected. As illustrated in the case studies this could include 'freezing' a blog on the external service, with an organisational backup copy (in a variety of formats) or the continuation of an active blog, with a backup copy of taken in case of unexpected data loss.

Dissemination: It will be desirable to ensure that end users are aware of the existence of an archived copy. Ideally such information will be made publicly available. The summaries of the approaches taken in the three case studies illustrate that such dissemination work need not be time-consuming to implement.

Organisational Audit: There is a likely to be a need to carry out an organisation audit of use of blogs held on third party services which may be at risk. Such an audit should initially identify (a) location of such blogs; (b) their purpose(s); (c) the owner(s) and (d) their perceived importance. This information should help to inform decisions on the archiving strategies, along the lines described in this paper.

Note that UKOLN have published briefing documents for the Cultural Heritage sector on “Closing Down Blogs” [10] and “What To Do When a Service Provider Closes” [11].

5 A Risks and Opportunities Framework

This paper has described guidelines and policies which can help ensure that professional blogs hosted in The Cloud can to provide a quality service. However it needs to be acknowledged that there are risks with this approach. Rather than ignoring such risks the risks should be documented and discussed in order to identify risk minimisation strategies, risk management strategies and areas in which risks may be accepted.

A risks and opportunities framework has been developed to support cultural heritage organisations in making effective use of the Social Web [12]. This paper introduces further developments to the framework including a summary of risk minimisation approaches and an inclusion of an evidence base.

Use of the framework involves documenting the following aspects of the proposed use of the Social Web:

Intended use: Rather than talking about Social Web services in an abstract context (“*shall we have a Facebook page*” for example) specific details of the intended use should be provided.

Perceived benefits: A summary of the perceived benefits which use of the Social Web service are expected to provide should be documented.

Perceived risks: A summary of the perceived risks which use of the Social Web service may entail should be documented.

Missed opportunities: A summary of the missed opportunities which a failure to make use of the Social Web service should be documented.

Costs: A summary of the costs and other resource implications of use of the service should be documented.

Risk minimisation: Once risks have been identified approaches to risk minimisation should be documented.

Evidence base: Evidence which back up the assertions made in use of the framework.



Figure 1: Risks and Opportunities Framework

When using this framework it should be recognised that there are likely to be biases, prejudices, vested interests and other subjective factors which will affect how the framework is used. Ideally such subjective factors will be openly acknowledged and taken into account, although it is recognised that this may be difficult to achieve.

Application to In-House Developments and Existing Services

It should be noted that this framework need not only be applied to proposals to make use of the Social Web. In order to minimise the subjectivity of the approach it should also be applied to proposed in-house development work and commissioning IT developments. It can also be applied to existing services in order to identify the risks, limitations and constraints which the organisation is willing to tolerate and accept.

6 The Economic Context

Greater use of services provided in The Cloud may be particularly appropriate under the current economic climate in which we may face a reduction in levels of funding available to support and develop in-house services.

An example of a move from in-house to Cloud services can be seen from the approaches which have been taken to providing the Web site for JISC's FAM10 event. As described on the UK Web Focus [13] a decision was taken to make use of Google Site, Google Docs and EventBrite rather than JISC's CMS due to the ease-of-use of Google's services and the limited technical and administrative support available in-house.

A similar approach has been taken for the Web site for the FOTE10 event. As can be seen from a comment made by Frank Steiner, FOTE10 organiser: *"From my personal point of view the question isn't 'if' you should outsource – not sure outsourcing is the right word in that context – but rather 'how to'. As someone with average technical skills and comprehension (I know that's a rather ambiguous statement) I want things to be easy to use and plainly put, do the job."* [14].

Interestingly both of these examples highlight the simplicity and ease-of-use of services provided in The Cloud.

From both the ease-of-use and economic perspectives we can see a need for further work in developing policies and guidelines for managing content held externally.

6. Conclusions

The question addressed in the paper is how should institutions address the challenge of making institutional use of the Social Web, especially when many successful examples of thriving services are based on individuals using such technologies to support their professional activities with the traditional editorial control process being in place?

The paper suggests that rather than attempting to bring such individual uses into a more managed environment within the institution the benefits of use of Social Web services which are hosted outside the institution needs to be recognised. There is therefore a need for policies and guidelines which embrace use of such services together with use of a risk management approach.

The JISC Guidelines provide a useful starting point for those working in the higher education sector. But what about those working in other sectors? Might it be appropriate for a professional organisation such as CILIP to provide a template policy framework for librarians and information professions who their members wish to make use of Social Web services as dedicated professionals who wish to ensure that their institution's concerns can be addressed?

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