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Exploring the potentials of blogging for development

by CHRISTIAN KREUTZ

Introduction

Ideas that spread through groups of people are far more powerful than ideas delivered at an individual.
Seth Godin

The World Wide Web has changed dramatically in recent years, not just in its sheer number of users, but in particular, in the new forms of participation it offers. Sometimes referred to as the 'read and write' web, Web 2.0 technologies now make it potentially possible for every Internet user to have a voice and a worldwide audience – linking people from around the world in an unforeseen way. With the first phase of the web, most people could only read information. Now, it is possible for most Internet users to create content and edit websites (see Box 1).[1]

Commenting, editing or writing articles can be at our fingertips – and this shift also applies to development. Grassroots activists were the first to tap that potential – with very few means you can create an online platform for your cause. One example is the village of Nata, Botswana. Villagers there face severe problems due to poverty and HIV/AIDS. Yet the villagers have a blog, where they describe their daily strug-

"Slowly, top-down communication is shifting to a two-way conversation. One of the successful key factors of blogging is that it flourishes from volunteer engagement."

gles from their own perspectives. Via this blog, supporters worldwide can engage and follow the latest news.[2]

Even organisations like the World Bank have joined the publicly open and transparent conversation about the challenges of development via blogs. Shanta Devarajan, Chief Economist of the African region, proclaims in his blog that Africa can end poverty.[3] He discusses ideas, solutions and challenges online with whoever is interested. Slowly, top-down communication is shifting to a two-way conversation. One of the successful key factors of blogging is that it flourishes from volunteer engagement.

Who blogs and why?

In the early years of the Internet, technical constraints limited how we published our own content online. Today, there are multiple websites where users can participate by publishing

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[1] For a definition of 'blog', see glossary, p.121. See also Blogging p.106 (this issue).

[2] See: http://natavillage.typepad.com/
[3] See: http://endpovertyinsouthasia.worldbank.org/blogs/shanta-devarajan

THEME SECTION

The Nata village blog is a fundraising tool, which also enables website visitors to meet the people of Nata and to learn about their stories and how they live.

Source: http://natavillage.typepad.com

Box 1: What is a blog?

A blog, short for 'Web' and 'log', is basically just a website with articles, but with some decisive elements:
- Everyone can easily create his or her own blog and write posts about any kind of topic.
- Most blogs are written by one person in the form of a diary or journal. The author can opt to allow other readers to interact and write their own comments on the blog.
- This offers readers an opportunity to participate by commenting on each other's posts and engaging in discussion.
- Unlike an online forum, blogs start with the newest posts rather than the oldest ones – this gives them a sense of immediacy.
- A blog is a little publishing system, which allows you to add photos, videos and audio.
- The majority of blogs link to each other, forming new networks and information pathways.

Blogs…
- are an expression of personal opinion;
- help trigger discussions online; and
- link to other blogs, picking up on other ongoing conversations online.

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their stories, collaborate with others, or simply comment. Blogs have been synonymous with this recent shift in web communication tools towards the 'social web', often referred to as Web 2.0. A global network of blogs has created its own public sphere – known as the blogosphere – where millions of bloggers write their stories worldwide.[4] Although blogs are mostly personal, there are blogs about all kinds of topics, from sharing a hobby or political opinions, to offering information as an expert, campaigning for a cause, or linking co-workers within a project or organisation. Bloggers can write about their insights and opinions – and trigger a discourse or controversy.
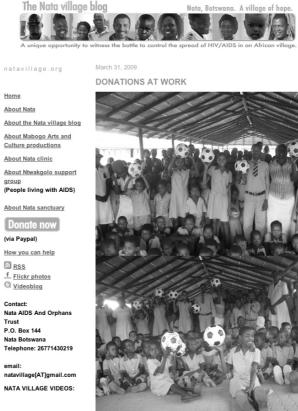
All bloggers share the potential opportunity speak to a global audience. Particularly for development, previously unheard people can tell their stories. In the short history of blogging, however, only a minority of people has participated by writing or commenting. Few blogs have a large audience. Few bloggers focus on development, and the existing development blogs are still loosely linked. But there are various fascinating examples offering new ways of information exchange through blogs.

Blogging in action

The connectedness of blogs allows ideas and information to spread quickly throughout the Internet. African citizen journalism is slowly on the rise. Equipped with mobile phones, in

projects such as Voices of Africa, bloggers film interviews and upload stories from around the continent.[5] Another example is the Indian Kisan blog. Farmers can post questions to the blog, which are answered by other farmers or scientists. In this way, the Kisan blog is contributing to sharing experiences of rural farmers in India.[6]

Bloggers connect not only to share information, but also to take action. One interesting phenomenon is that people are blogging in many different languages. In Asia, Africa and Latin America blogs have become important transmitters of news and expertise. In the Arab region, blogs have become a major tool for political activism.[7] Through blogs, human rights activists connect, coordinate and publish information such as incidents of torture or protests not reported in media. Much political debate has now moved to the Internet.[8] However, this has also resulted in increased censorship in

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[4] The blogosphere is a collective term encompassing all blogs and their interconnections. Source: Wikipedia

[5] See: http://voicesofafrica.africanews.com
[6] See: http://kisan.wordpress.com
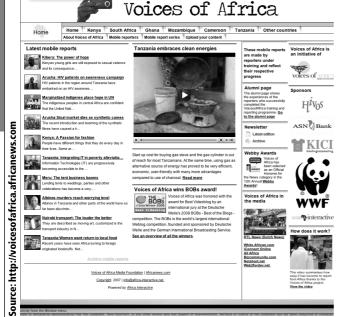[7] See e.g.: http://aliveinbaghdad.org
[8] See e.g.: http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/publications/2008/Mapping_Irans_Online_Public. Or short URL: http://tinyurl.com/iran-online

Initiated by the Voices of Africa Media Foundation, the Voices of Africa project was launched in late May 2007. Reporters gain experience in uploading texts, photos and videos – much of their work is published on this website.

Crisscrossed is one example of a blog which explores the use of information communication technologies (ICTs) and Web 2.0 tools for development, social change and knowledge management.

Source: http://voicesofafrica.africanews.com

Source: www.crisscrossed.net

many countries, restricting freedom of expression, with some bloggers imprisoned for writing about political or social issues (see also Zuckerman, this issue). For example, in countries such as Egypt, China or Iran, bloggers – and the blogosphere – are under surveillance by their governments and increasingly by Internet companies.[9] However, blogs are often one of the few – or only – sources of information available online, particularly in conflict situations (see also Okolloh, this issue).

Accountability and transparency

Compared to normal development websites, bloggers both analyse and link information – and in the process, create meaning. Bloggers are also notified ('pinged') every time there is a new link from another blog to their own posts. It generates interaction between bloggers and also measures the popularity of a blog – e.g. citations and affiliation (i.e. a list of links to other blogs). Bloggers weave a web of knowledge, expertise and perspectives. In a way, blogging means linking conversations and other existing blogs, increasing the ebb and flow of information. This forms hubs or nodes within networks, where bloggers aggregate information, and give orientation and relevance – and also become effective filters of information. They act like fishers, who pick the

most relevant pieces of information out of the net.[10] This aggregation is important to find different blog posts with different perspectives.

The advantage of filtering is that these bloggers give an overview on interesting topics. The disadvantage is that a blogger decides that on a personal basis and it might be biased information. Critics such as Andrew Keen wonder where the added value of this growing content lies – compared to professionally compiled information by journalists. Many say that most blogs 'copy and paste' from other blogs or repeat themselves, often ending in an echo chamber of mutual confirmation. Networks of sympathising blogs often do develop where not enough perspectives are heard or discussed. However, blogging proponents underline the strength to **link information from different connections**, disciplines and interests and highlight the possibility for direct feedback. The paradigm shift is that each Internet user is able to link information and can add values and perspectives – Wikipedia and worldchanging.com are good examples.[11]

These networks of blogs and their readers become a large conversation, where everyone can participate. New ideas and interpretations of them find their way to different

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[9] For more information see Reporter Without Borders: www.rsf.org
[10] A good example is Technorati, the largest worldwide blogging directory. See: technorati.com. Afrigator is a portal that aggregates many different African blogs that report on topics from different parts of the continent. See: http://afrigator.com

[11] Wikipedia is a free online encyclopaedia that anyone can edit. It is a multilingual, Web-based, free-content encyclopaedia project. The name 'Wikipedia' is a combination of the words wiki (a type of collaborative website) and encyclopaedia. See: en.wikipedia.org

blogs every day. Much of this kind of exchange was already happening through email mailing lists. However, these connections made by blogging are accessible to anyone online: they are not limited to a certain thematic mailing list and so are more transparent.

Examples in development

For development, this linking and exchanging becomes essential. Multidisciplinary approaches are key to tackling complex environmental problems. Blogs have opened up new channels for development communication. One example is the UK Guardian newspaper's ongoing Katine project in Uganda.[12] Villagers, journalists, scientists and aid workers are invited to write openly their perspectives about the project on a blog on the newspaper's website. It entails controversial discussions around development aid, but also shows the complexity of community-driven development projects. For example, on the Katine blog, Richard M. Kavuma writes bluntly, 'The trouble is, the need is much greater than the project budget.' This is a direct comment about the limitations of development aid.[13]

Blogging can allow us to be transparent about projects. It gives more space for opinions, different perspectives and reflections than traditional communication channels. These can help influence the course of a project. But here, the limits of blogging also appear: one blogger made the comment that, 'At its best, the Guardian's reporting allows us to analyse and think about life in Katine in a careful way.' Just blogging does not necessarily have a demonstrable impact on development.

For many organisations, blogging offers the chance to enter into an 'authentic two-way conversation', enabling people to provide feedback in an open manner – and more easily than before. This bottom-up approach to speaking out about social, economical or political issues has the potential to engage a broader public sphere in the development sector. But it seems only a few organisations in the development field have discovered the potential of blogging – and not all appreciate this degree of openness. Unfortunately, many of the existing initiatives are often only randomly linked – they are islands rather than networks.

Yet Allison Fine (2006) argues that future organisations have to embrace this kind of openness and learn to improve their listening skills. For development organisations, which are non-profit and publicly-funded, there is a chance to

"These networks of blogs and their readers become a large conversation, where everyone can participate. New ideas and interpretations of them find their way to different blogs every day."

improve transparency. Although there are examples of increasing political influence of blogs, particularly in the USA, the political blogosphere in most countries is still marginal. The communication power of blogs has not yet challenged development organisations – but they can act as watchdogs. As Daniel Kaufmann, Director of the World Bank Institute writes on his blog,

Blogs are playing an increasingly important role for improved governance. Blogs do not face the restraints of commercial print media. The blogosphere is a planet apart from traditional PR departments of public institutions, enabling citizens to share unfiltered information, expose misdeeds, and freely express views. Blogs help make governments and public institutions more accountable.[14]

Blogs and organisational knowledge-sharing

Some organisations, however, are starting to explore blogging for internal knowledge-sharing. They use blogs to keep a community of practice running or to improve a department's communication or even for project management.[15] Contrary to the traditional Intranet, where few write for many, internal blogs allow everyone to participate and be readers and authors. In its informal approach, blogging encourages storytelling and places an emphasis on individual experiences. For project management, it can be used to document the project history in one central place. This helps to highlight the different perspectives and voices of a project in a more horizontal communication approach.

It also has the potential to make the implicit explicit. This offers organisations the opportunity to not only weave a web of organisational knowledge, but also communicate through their blogs with external audiences. Internal blogs are a good way to experiment with blogging and grasp hidden experiences, and also put employees at the centre of internal communication.

[12] See: www.guardian.co.uk/katine
[13] See: www.guardian.co.uk/society/katineblog/2008/nov/10/one-year-on-uganda

[14] 'Blogging for transparency and good governance: on IFIs.' Blog post, 26th April 2008. See: http://thekaufmannpost.net/blogging-for-accountability-good-governance
[15] For example in Egypt, GTZ uses a blog as an internal exchange platform.

Box 2: Some tips on how to start a blog

- There are several free blogging websites available from which you can easily create a blog. Two of the biggest ones are Wordpress.com and Blogger.com
- Blogs can easily be administered from simple web-based interfaces to add applications such as video clips, photos, or other types of information.
- Think of a topic you want to write about and have an audience in mind. Check blogs on similar topics and start by commenting on them if you do not want to start your own blog right away.
- Write interesting content for readers. Add value to existing conversations and write authentically.
- An important key is to link to other blogs for reference. Pick up discussions on other blogs and link to your favourite blogs to become part of a network.
- Do not underestimate the effort of blogging. Writing takes time, but regularly blogging keeps your blog dynamic.
- Blogging needs patience, but can also be seen as a good process of self reflection, where you digest the things you learn online and offline.

Some challenges to be aware of

Since the creation of the first blog, we have witnessed a huge boom. But not all blogs become vibrant spaces for discussion. Many blogs quickly lapse or are rarely updated. Finding an audience is usually a major challenge. Many also underestimate how much time and resources a blog needs. It takes skill and patience to achieve a vibrant blog with an active, commenting audience. Attention and visitors are not guaranteed. You need to persevere to find the audience or help the audience find you (see Box 2).

Issues of access and literacy

For the average, experienced Internet user, you can quickly learn the publishing process for a blog post. It should not take more than three mouse-clicks, including writing the text. But not everybody is as well connected or has the experience to use this tool and its opportunities. The participatory web has opened new ways of interacting on the Internet, but there are obstacles: access, cost, time, literacy and a certain degree of media literacy.

Particularly in developing countries, few people have Internet access or the means (literacy and media competence) to engage in such a conversation. Also, just a few languages dominate and there are very few bridges between them. The majority of online development debates are in English and exclude many groups from participating. Some of these obstacles will remain or might even intensify.

The speed at which innovation is transforming how we

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use the Internet is breathtaking. Even so, bandwidth is a big constraint. One approach to bridging the online and offline world is social reporting, where knowledge-sharing is documented for the Internet and vice versa. Participants at events act as reporters to present the different opinions and perspectives articulated within a group. The results can be texts, videos or audio presented on a website.[16]

Reading blogs also means that the reader has to find content and then also filter it to create their own understanding. It takes a certain level of education and familiarity with different writing styles to do this. Also less 'media literate' people may take blogs as factual and 'trusted sources' in the same way they would a newspaper. Although there are numerous cases of blogging that have helped to empower people – it does not benefit all causes. With all technology, a best fit approach is key: focus on needs. Not all communication solutions need to technological. In the development context, the key question must always be: how can this potential tool help?

Lastly, there is also a risk that the front-runners are far ahead of normal Internet users. I share the author of We-Think Charles Leadbeater's (2008) concern: 'Those already rich in knowledge, information and connections may just get richer.'

Conclusion

Blogging can have a positive impact on communication and empowerment, but nevertheless there are limitations. There is still very little evidence of blogging making a difference for development. In my opinion we are still at a very early stage in this whole movement. So long as the South cannot participate more easily and until northern organisations change their mindsets towards openness, blogs and all these other wonderful Web 2.0 tools will have limited effects.

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[16] Social reporting is where a group of participants at an event interactively and jointly contribute to some form of reporting, in text, photos, images or video. The resulting 'social report' is made accessible, usually online, as soon as possible, sometimes as a half-product. This allows others to join in, to extend, to adjust or remix. Joint live blogging is one way of creating social reports. Source: 'What is social reporting?' See: http://ictkm.wordpress.com/2008/12/04/what-is-social-reporting

"With all technology, a best fit approach is key: focus on needs. Not all communication solutions need to technological. In the development context, the key question must always be: how can this potential tool help?"

Blogging is just one form of publishing and interacting. Many Internet users are publishing content on wikis or on social networks such as Facebook, which allow their members to interact and facilitate collaboration. Mobile social networks go in the same direction, letting you interact from your mobile phone wherever you are.[17] Nevertheless one key problem of all these initiatives is that they always struggle to get a spill-over effect to the offline world.

It is not only about publishing, but interacting within your own networks. Enthusiasts see in this open collaboration promising times ahead, where development challenges are tackled collectively. So whether you choose to use blogs or any other Web 2.0 tools – remember, it is the people who form these networks and their exchange that create value, ideas and innovation.

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[17] For example Twitter, a micro-blogging tool, has had far more networking effects and interesting real life effects than ordinary blogging. Users can send and receive short text updates via the Internet or a mobile phone. See Micro-blogging and Twitter, p.108 (this issue).