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Social Issues Surround Social Software; Participants in the Supernova conference give insight into the social dynamics around the use of online social networking services, Weblogs and wikis.
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846 words
25 June 2004
eWEEK
English

SANTA CLARA, Calif.-At what point do more people joining an online social network or using a social software tool cause more harm than good? While the answer may be elusive, panelists at the **Supernova** 2004 **conference** here agreed that the social dynamics around the use of burgeoning collaboration tools such as online social networking services, Weblogs and wikis are often as important as, if not more important than, the technologies themselves.

Technologists need to delve into theories of group dynamics to make the new tools useful, said Christopher Allen, founder of angel capital investment firm Alacrity Ventures. As an example, Allen cited anthropological research pinning the maximum effective group size in primate behavior at 150, the so-called Dunbar Number.

While that number may not be directly applicable to social software, the size of groups interacting through the tools does have limits that need to be considered, Allen said.

"How should tools evolve to take into account the subtlety of human behavior?" Allen asked. "We created tools to match our technological desires. ... For years, I've been thinking that we need to create tools more adapt to the way groups work."

In online social networks-such as Friendster Inc. or LinkedIn Ltd.-social groups can blossom briskly and grow to the hundreds. The meaning of the word "friend" itself can become confused, as Esther Dyson, editor in chief of tech industry newsletter Release 1.0, pointed at in opening the panel.

"Turn to the person on your left and say, 'Will you be my friend?'" Dyson said, in a reference to the practice of distributing e-mail invites to be someone's friend through online social networks.

"It's akin to friend inflation if someone writes to me and wants to be my friend," Dyson said, noting that she uses sites such as LinkedIn. "I may know them and [just] don't want to be rude. ... So you get a kind of fake niceness. [Social networking companies] need to lose their buzz, and people need to focus on their genuine social network of friends."

Social networking sites and software in the past year have gained much media attention and increasing amounts of venture funding, but Dyson said she expects the functionality of such software to increasingly become features in other tools, such as in Windows, e-mail services or Web portal sites.

Click here to read more about the incentives needed to make social networking fit for enterprises.

Also generating growing attention is Weblogging, the creation of individual, decentralized online diaries and soap boxes. Even corporations such as Sun Microsystems Inc. and Microsoft Corp. are beginning to embrace the publishing of public blogs, moves that should be mimicked more broadly, said Tim Bray, Sun's director of Web technologies, during a later session.

"Any corporation that doesn't do this in the future is going to be playing catch-up," Bray said. "They can use the technology to make the enterprise provide a more human face to world."

While blogs have opened the Web to more voices, the medium also is changing the dynamics of online interaction. They even can be the best defense against an overly nasty flame war, according to panelists.

Mena Trott, co-founder and CEO at blog software maker Six Apart Ltd., said her company made use of one of the main features in its Movable Type software to its advantage-trackback. Trackback allows a blog publisher to track and list other blogs that are referring to and writing about a post.

Six Apart last month introduced a new pricing model for Movable Type, a move sure to draw some negative reaction, Trott said. But Six Apart decided to use trackback when sharing its pricing news through the company's blog because it provides more pertinent feedback than a blog comment section or customer e-mails, Trott said.

"If we had had open comments then it would have been a thousand times worse because it would breed anonymity," Trott said. "The accountability of Weblogs is that they are your online personality."

Six Apart recorded between 800 to 900 trackbacks from its original posting about the pricing changes and another 300 to 400 when it asked for more feedback in a later blog posting, Trott said. Bloggers often wrote essaylike responses and provided insight that helped shape a revamped pricing structure for Movable Type announced last week, she said.

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