MEDINFO 2007
HISA Ltd Australia
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Goal-Oriented Blogging: A Case Study of a Dutch Commercial Website For Tracking Weight Loss Online

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Abstract

Blogs, short for "web logs," together with podcasts and wikis are currently important foci of internet research. These three applications are often addressed together as comprising "Web 2.0." Within the area of health care, however, little attention has been devoted to understanding these technologies and how they are being used by lay health publics. In this article, I will discuss the idea of "goal-oriented" blogging using the case of a Dutch commercial weight loss website. Because this research project is still in preliminary phases, I will address the topic based on an analysis of the website and discuss the relevant informatics questions that such a case raises.

Keywords:

blogs, Web 2.0, patients, lay health practices, health promotion

Introduction

Web applications such as podcasts, wikis and online web logs (more commonly referred to as "blogs") are currently important foci of internet research. These types of web-based applications (collectively dubbed "Web 2.0") are considered to give credence to well-known claims about the democratizing nature of internet technologies because they give users easy avenues to produce/publish information, experiences, opinions, etc. and reflect bottom-up regulation of that published information. Within the area of health care, however, little attention has been devoted to understanding these technologies and how they are being used by lay health publics. Discussants in both the Consumer Health Informatics and Knowledge in Motion Working Groups at the AMIA 2006 Annual Symposium pinpointed the need for more research devoted to alternative avenues for managing both information and experiences with respect to individual health.

Although much has been published on blogs, bloggers and the practice of blogging more generally, the literature on blogs with respect to health care has been quite limited. Most of what has been written are editorials, are written from the perspective of doctors who are blogging, or are discussing the potential roles for blogs in educating nurses and medical students.[1-3] Little attention has been given to how patients blog with respect to their health.

The closest relation is found in work on Personal Health Information Management, such as the studies conducted by Pratt et al. [4] As Pratt et al discuss, Patients are increasingly expected to play a more active role as managers in their own care. The central role afforded to patients means that they must store, maintain and retrieve many different kinds of information from different sources using different media. Pratt et al suggest that patients need tools that address information gathering and sharing challenges, thereby enabling them to be more involved in their health care. Specifically, they emphasize the need to create tools that are easy to use *and* allow for the integration of different information interfaces in one.

Although health-related blogs do not completely meet the idea of integration, they do allow patients to utilize open space to actively manage their own care. They can assemble information from different sources as they choose and repackage it for others, who not only read the blog posts, but also have a chance to respond. This latter function also helps patients to communicate any news or developments they want to share with those in their readership communities. Investigating under which circumstances individuals do or do not choose to use this broadcast format could provide helpful insights into how individuals use technology to resolve the communication difficulties to which Pratt et al refer. Under the idea of "push button publishing" (all you have to do is fill in a text box and click submit), blogs are incredibly easy for individuals in the general public to use, thereby further lowering the barriers to publication/ distribution of various types of information.

Blogs are generally defined as personal web sites with content displayed in reverse-chronological order. [5] They can deal with personal or private issues or aim to situate themselves within the public discourse on a given topic. [6] New posts are placed at the top of the page instead of the bottom, making changes easily identifiable. They generally have an identifiable author, sometimes even with pictures. Site visitors can usually leave comments for others to see. Blogs are loosely joined to each other through hyperlinks and the global network of blogs is referred to as the "blogosphere". [5] Blogs are often thought of as analogous to online diaries, but this is a misconception. [7] Blogs began as lists of links to (or web logs of) other interesting web content but have evolved to include many different forms of multimedia content, including combina-

tions of links, text, photographs and other web materials. The format and tools used to produce the blog are more defining than the content itself. [7-8]

Information about an individual's health care can be both implicit and explicit in existing personal blogs. Implicit would refer to texts that are on general topics or consist of links to different types of websites, but that refer to health-related issues or practices as part of a larger body of topics. In this case, one would have to search blogs for instances of links, thoughts or experiences related to health care. Explicit would refer to blogs that are set-up with a particular health situation in mind. An example would be coping with a chronic disease such as leukemia, self-management of a disease such as diabetes[9], documenting a specific (limited) trajectory such as pregnancy, or to support attempts to achieve specific health care goals such as losing weight or smoking cessation.[1]

In this article, I will discuss the idea of "goal-oriented" blogging using the case of the Dutch-based "valt af" ("is losing weight") website. This commercial website allows individuals to keep an online journal, collect and/or register information and other resources, and communicate with others through discussion boards and chats on the parent site and through a function that allows readers to post responses to individual blog posts on personal sites. This space enables users to use their blogs to document the process of achieving a specific health goal. After describing the features of the site, I will use the discussion to raise important questions that are relevant for future informatics research.

Materials and methods

This is a case study description of the Dutch-based, Dutch-language commercial website, Valtaf.nl. It is based on a content analysis of the website and also garners information from the website of the company that provides the commercial site.[2] This website is an interesting case because it has received a lot of attention in the popular press and because it represents a unique approach to helping people achieve difficult health goals.

1 Combinations of implicit and explicit are also possible. An example of a hybrid of these two types of health representation is the blog maintained by sociologist and internet researcher Eszter Hargittai. [10] Hargittai posts interesting links with comments, and also tells about her personal life and experiences in journal format. The archives of her posts are tagged according to topic. The part of her blog tagged for "health and fitness" refers to a post about her goal to run a 5K marathon

2 Interviews with users are currently being conducted. However, not enough interviews have been completed to allow using that data and making any detailed claims here.

Results

The Valtaf website is provided by a commercial company, Sofit Wellness, which develops software and content about healthy habits, nutrition and exercise. Sofit Wellness provides Valtaf.nl for Dutch users and Valtaf.be for Flemish-speaking Belgian users. On its corporate site [11], Sofit also explains that the valtaf sites are an example of the software and content services they provide – in this case, the technological basis for companies interested in establishing a weight loss portal under the brand name of said company for use by customers, readers or employees. The websites provide "personal web pages" to individual users and includes diverse automatic content and social support functions that support participants in the weight loss process.

The parent page for valtaf.nl provides general information about the site. It begins with the claim, "Lose Weight Online!" and contains a sentence in the web-browser that identifies the site as "Your free, personal weight graph and food diary." It informs site visitors that "Losing weight on the internet really works! If you participate with www.valtaf.nl , then you'll receive your own website where you can keep track of what you weigh, what you've eaten and how much you still have to lose in order to reach your target weight." It continues, "Thanks to the support and encouragement you'll receive from buddies and thanks to the professional supervision from a nutrition expert and dietitian, you can successfully lose weight and keep it off."

Through their links to the parent website, these "personal web pages" offered to individuals who join contain more content options than do blogs, but the individual pages are be built, at least partially, with the same easy-to-use functions as popular blogging websites and they include the unique combination of materials that is common to present-day web logs. In addition to submitting data about their daily food intake and exercise, weight, fat percentage, BMI, and physical measurements using a form that allows push button publishing, users can also post personal photo's and write journal entries with (animated) emoticons. The journal entries are listed in reverse chronological order, with the newest on top, and allow for commentary from others. Their other entries are then repackaged in helpful charts and graphs that track progress over time, while the journal provides a compendium for understanding the trends reflected in the graphics by providing insight into specific factors in their daily lives that may have affected eating/exercise habits.

Users also have contact with buddies they have met (mostly) through the site and they can also join clubs with similar characteristics (live in the same city, are in the same age group) or with similar sub-goals (such as losing weight following a certain diet program or losing weight and remaining smoke free). Once on the site, they can eas-

ily see who is actively participating (that is, which sites were recently updated), who is online at the same time that they are and what each participant's individual progress is. In the general participation list, weight loss is signified with a green arrow pointing down while weight gain is signified with a red arrow pointing up. New users are easily identifiable because they haven't yet entered enough information to indicate weight gain or loss.

The personal web pages are interlinked with the primary valtaf website, which offers both asynchronous discussion boards and real-time chat, as well as articles from the experts behind the site. It also contains its own separate blog, which presents news and other relevant materials related to weight loss. The parent site also has direct communication with individual users. Submission of measurements and data is supported with e-mail reminders and all participants also receive weekly newsletters. For a fee, users can receive personal supervision with one of the health care consultants that works with the site.

A final interesting aspect of the site is the personal nature of the information that individuals choose to display. Web-based communication is often thought of as anonymous and faceless. This is called into question with applications such as blogs. In the case of valtaf, users generally register with a pseudonym as their user name, but their websites are not necessarily private/protected or anonymous (although they can be either or both). Many users write an introductory text wherein they reveal their name (at least their first name) and then reveal more personal information as they document their daily lives. Furthermore, the photograph policy on the sites requires that the photos be of the user and pictures of others can only be included when the registered user is also in the picture. Thus, a blog about an otherwise private and personal health issue becomes a public, social activity.[12]

Discussion

The different features offered by the valtaf website transcend different web categories (home pages, discussion boards, chat, text, video, pictures, news, opinion, experience, etc.) and broadcast genres (one to one, one to many, many to many, etc). Bridging different genres has been argued as one of the important defining elements of blogs.[13] Because of the nature of the personal sites and the structure of the journals that are located on these sites, I would argue that the individual pages are incorrectly labeled as personal home pages and should be considered as health-related, goal-oriented blogs.

Herring et al [13] suggest the importance of documenting the individual characteristics of journal authors, the purpose of keeping the blog, a structural analysis of the blog, and temporal information for when specific information is added to a blog. Additionally, I suggest it is important to understand how blogging as an activity fits into an individual's past and present uses of other documentation and communication media, both in general and specifically with respect to health. For example, is an online journal easy to use because the person has kept journals in the past – or is there no discernable relationship? Has blogging for health care purposes led to other online practices? Understanding how users utilize (or have utilized) related on- and offline tools enables us to answer the question of where can blogs be placed in relationship to other methods of keeping records, such as diaries and autobiograhies and other forms of support, such as online and offline groups.

Because sites such as valtaf are gaining recognition in the popular press in the Netherlands, it will be important and interesting to examine from a user's perspective what aspects of the blogging tools and site options are most important and why/how these are effective. This indicates the need to typify who exactly is using these commercial sites, as well as why and how different individuals use various options they offer. It also raises the question of whether online tools are as effective as they are portrayed in popular media to be, which points to the need for quantitative studies in addition to qualitative studies.

Many users keep a daily or weekly chronicle of their experiences, which is a rich source of data about how individuals construct their own (health) identities. How does keeping an online record of one's progress motivate users to stick to the routines that are necessary to achieving their personal goals? Because interactions are not limited to online instances but also reflect blending with respect to online and offline communication, another important question which deserves more attention is one that leads to understanding how Web 2.0 technologies are configured within existing and new (health) networks. Where are the lines between online and offline relationships and how do these shift when patients begin documenting specific health care practices for which they need support?

One final area of interest is learning from users how they integrate their blogging practices into encounters with health care professionals. Do they utilize the services offered by the professionals that support the site? Do they discuss their attempts to lose weight, their blogging activity to this effect or the issues that they document in their online journal with their personal physicians? How does using such a tool "democratize" the health care process? What is the relationship between lay and expert knowledge on such a site and how do individual users view the expert opinions and advice vis-à-vis information they receive from buddies or other peers who share the same space? Related to this is investigating whether they would like to receive a similar service from their own health care provider organization in addition to or rather than a commercial website. Investigating these points could be

useful to health care institutions that are looking for new avenues for reaching their users for promotion and prevention purposes.

Conclusion

New and emergent technologies and tools are important topics of discussion. New applications that are available via the still very much rapidly changing internet are of special importance. In many respects the technologies and ideas discussed here are not exactly new. Certain categories of patients have been encouraged to keep diaries for years and more recent research has shown the effectiveness of, for example, online discussion boards as support groups. The uniqueness of these technologies comes, of course, in the fact that so many different tools are being blended together in and through one easy-to-use interface and that information retrieval and management are combined with interactive communication with both peer and expert contacts. In this paper I have used a single case study to identify several important questions that can be raised about these new combinations and applications. In the next phases of my research among individuals who explicitly blog for their health, I will address these questions more thoroughly.

In the United States, much research interest has been devoted to usable, functional Personal Health Records provided from Health Care Providers/Institutions. In the Netherlands, this has been much less of an issue, although one hospital is currently exploring what the creation of this type of tool would mean for its consumers. However, private companies are providing individuals with defined space on the internet that combines the idea of personal websites with easy to use blogging tools. Although these are not the same as personal health records, they can arguably be seen as fulfilling a similar function, at least with respect to specified health goals. What can we learn from the fact that patients are taking it upon themselves to utilize these publicly available (commercial) technologies for health purposes? More research is needed into these sites and the respective practices of the individuals who use them. This line of research is important for increasing our understanding of how “new” and “alternative” avenues for managing health information fosters healthy practices and how health care providers can capitalize on these easy-to-use applications in patient education or disease prevention and health promotion.

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