

Role of New & Social Media in generating environmental awareness: a case study of the Delhi Greens Blog

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Abstract: The rapid political, social, and economic transition, especially in developing countries, is producing a critical demand for an effective and socially beneficial mass communication system. The use of media as a tool for addressing social problems and improving quality of life depends on successful implementation of mass communication strategies that promote development. This has become even more challenging since the advent of the information superhighway – the Internet, and its gradual evolution. The paper investigates the use of Web-log (blog) as a New & Social media tool for spreading environmental awareness and mass mobilisation. We provide an overview of the ways in which mass communication has, or can be used to promote environmental awareness among targeted masses. It investigates the ways in which new and social media interventions are influencing public behaviour, both directly and indirectly. The Delhi Greens Blog project is presented as a case study to show how the efforts and enthusiasm of a student group from the different universities in Delhi, took shape as a national green media initiative. The role of the Delhi Greens Blog is examined and its impact on the target section of the society is analyzed. The paper further discusses the emergence of New & Social media while also carrying out a comparative analysis between the former and conventional media. Using carefully standardized indicators such as page views, comments, user response and integration of other social media platforms, the paper discusses the working of Delhi Greens Blog. Increased Blog readership over the last four years indicates a positive correlation between use of social media tools and its reliability as a news and information source.

Keywords: environmental awareness, new & social media, blog, mass communication, ICT

INTRODUCION

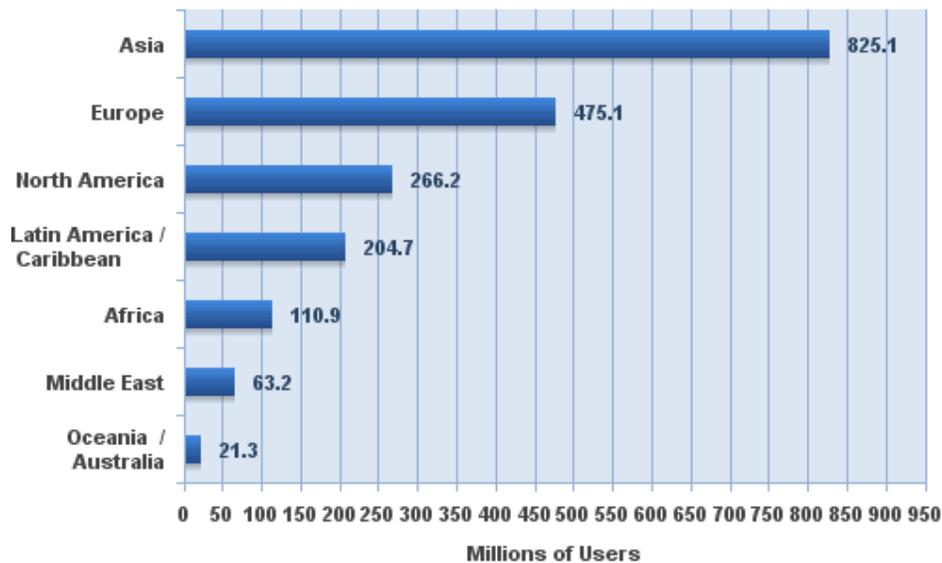
We are living in an “information age” where innovation in information, communication and technology (ICT) plays an important role in day to day life. The Internet, which is perhaps the most visible evidence of this phenomenon, has revolutionized the way people communicate. The Internet has made it possible to access tremendous amount of information at just a click of the mouse. Such is the volume of information being delivered to us that one of the most important skill needed in the digital age is the ability to navigate effectively through copious amount of available information (1).

The success and popularity of public access informational and networking websites such as Facebook, Twitter, Orkut, Wikipedia, Google etc. are all examples of this transformation. It has been suggested that for a truly progressive and representative model of democracy to thrive, government entities must take advantage of new media for political discussion and civic activism (2). At the same time, it is no surprise that those nations who do not believe in the principles of democracy and public participation are blocking sites like Google, Wikipedia and Facebook (3).

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The advent of modern technology and progress in health care and medical science has prolonged life expectancy leading to an increase in world population (4,5,6). This has been accompanied by the transformation of the society to an increasingly consumption oriented and urbanizing one, leading to an exponential increase in per capita ecological footprint (7). Mankind today faces the dual challenge of sustaining development and saving mother Earth from widespread degradation.

Figure 1 Internet Users in the World
by Geographic Regions - 2010



Source: Internet World Stats - www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm
Estimated Internet users are 1,966,514,816 on June 31, 2010
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Accompanying the advent of Internet and its contemporary Web 2.0 version is the popularity of New & Social Media (8). For instance, news media combined with viewer participation in the form of online comments, testimonials and blog entries by citizen journalists is known to enhance the truthfulness, value and spread of centrally produced stories (9). Social media has already come of age in India and is being used in social communication of various kinds (10). One such tool that is being used both to disseminate information and calling for action is the 'Blog'. The Delhi Greens (DG) Blog is a New & Social media initiative that uses Blog as a medium to disseminate information and generate environmental awareness.

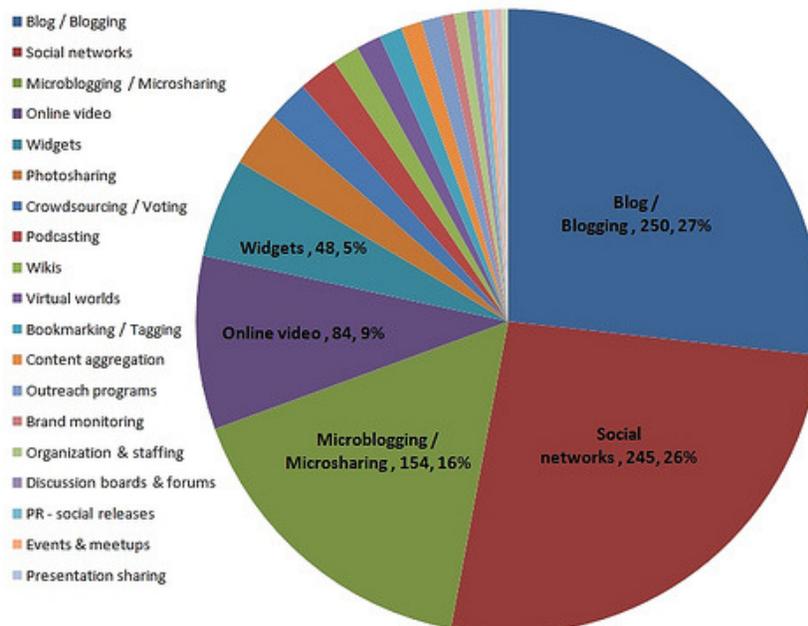
The DG Blog began as a student protest against the cutting of trees in Delhi University, and has now become a pioneering green media platform for the city. Perhaps because the movement was led by students from environmental courses or perhaps the city required such an online platform, the Blog has become widely popular since its inception. The success of the Blog can also be measured with the fact that the DG Blog promoted the idea of blogging as tool of bringing a significant change in our society.

BLOGGING: A NEW & SOCIAL MEDIA TOOL

As of 2006, there are more than 11.7 million web-logs (blogs) on the Internet, and it is estimated that this number is doubling every 5 months (11). The Oxford English Dictionary defines blog as a frequently updated websites consisting of personal observations, excerpts from other sources, typically run by a single person, and usually with hyperlinks to other sites; online journals or diaries.

Perhaps the most important difference between blogs and traditional media is that blogs are networked phenomena that rely on hyperlinks. Links between blogs take two forms. First, many bloggers maintain a “blogroll” on their website; a list of blogs that they frequently read or especially admire. Second, bloggers may write specific posts that contain hyperlinks to other blogs (12).

Figure 2 Type of Social Media distribution



Source: <http://www.beingpeterkim.com/2009/03/smm-wiki-analysis.html>

Figure 2 shows the different type of social media distributions on the Internet. While the highest media distribution among all social media distributions is through the medium of Blog/ Blogging, Social Networks follow closely at the second position. However, little remains known about the reasons that motivate people to Blog other than some obvious reasons.

Blogging & Academics

In a study conducted to explore and understand the role of blogs in higher education, a majority of the students reported that blogging enhanced their learning and led them to think about course concepts outside the classroom (13). Many educators have attempted to implement a blog in educational contexts to enhance the communication environment among students and teachers. A

comprehensive study exploring the effects of educational blogs by considering Computer mediated communication as a tool is needed (14).

GREEN MEDIA: BLOGGING ENVIRONMENTAL INFORMATION

ICT innovation has allowed for changes in media content and in practices of media reception (15). This is true particularly in case of science communication and within that, in information dissemination on Environmental Science. Environment Science affects all of us more directly than any other field of science. Because of this connection, there is a strong citizens' lobby which acts as a 'watchdog' pressure group. Consequently, environmental findings and reports get much more attention on the blogosphere than other science related content.

Blogging, because of its sheer simplicity and relative ease of usage, gives an opportunity to every Web content consumer to become Web content producer. However, this does not mean that it is only the most accurate information that gets communicated. It also does not mean that if a mis-information gets communicated, it will be corrected in due course of time. In fact one of the greatest challenges in the acceptance of Blogs as a reliable media tool is the decentralized operational mechanism of this tool.

This has also been a problem in the dissemination of environmental information. Ashlin and Ladle (11) have suggested that Environmental scientists should actively engage in blogging to increase the presence of informed opinions in the blogosphere. Butler (16) is of the belief that at its best, academia is a marketplace of ideas, but the blogosphere may only gain popularity among the scientific community once a peer review mechanism has been implemented. However, neither is this likely to happen anytime in the near future nor does this fit into the managing and working of the blogosphere.

THE DELHI GREENS BLOG CASE STUDY

The Delhi Greens Blog (<http://www.delhigreens.com>) is an information portal for green news, events and activities in Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR) and is at the forefront of the global and Indian environmental movement. The Blog is a flagship project of the Delhi Greens organisation and is a pioneering initiative under its 'Green Media Network' Programme. The Blog is first comprehensive green blog in Delhi and an online platform promoting the green cause in the city. Initiated first as a student response to protecting Delhi's environment, the Delhi Greens Blog has matured with the academic growth of its founders. The Blog now works to spread information about Delhi's urban ecology and advocates sustainable urban across India.

Delhi Greens Blog History

The Delhi Greens Blog was founded by Govind Singh (co-author of this paper) in March 2007 while pursuing a Master degree course in Environmental Studies from the University of Delhi. The Blog was a knee-jerk reaction to two separate yet related incidents, along with the love and passion for Delhi and trees, which led a young ecologist to launch this online 'green outreach platform'. The inspiration and purpose was promoting sustainable development and ensuring citizen participation in achieving it.

As the city was being prepared for the Commonwealth Games 2010, Singh saw over 1,000 trees brutally marked for felling in the (Delhi) university campus. Not only were the markings

unscientific and damaging to the trees, some of which were decades old, the whole idea of felling such a large number of ‘heritage trees’ for a ‘Rugby Stadium’ was totally irrational. The large trees in the university support rich biodiversity, especially because of the Northern (Kamala Nehru) Ridge adjacent to it. It was a challenge: to act now or bid farewell to the heritage trees that formed a continuous green belt from the Ridge all the way into the University.



Figure 3: *The motivation of the Delhi Greens Blog was unscientifically marked trees like this one in the Delhi University campus area.*

The very ambiance of the University was threatened and Singh felt something was needed to be done. This threat to Delhi’s environment would have undermined its ‘green city’ title. This title was first conferred to the capital city only days before the proposed felling, by the Nobel Peace prize winner Prof. Wangari Maathai (17). This need for saving the trees led to the creation of the DG Blog, first as a Wordpress hosted blog. The Blog put together content in the form of student voices and images of threatened trees and biodiversity in the light of ongoing unplanned and non-inclusive “developmental” activities. It called for adequate planning and foresight in decision making so as to ensure sustainable urban development.

Through consistent publishing of updated activities on protests against tree felling, the DG Blog was successful in taking the issue to the masses, and most importantly, highlighting it in national media. The fact that one of the objectives of the DG Blog in its initial phase was to highlight the issue in conventional media explains how the importance of latter can never be undermined. What Blog as a New & Social media tool does is that it empowers ordinary citizens to be able to voice their opinion and highlight the issues that are otherwise being overlooked. The DG Blog continued after the tree saving campaign, largely because of the feedback it received. The

unscientific marking of the trees was stopped, not just in the University but in the entire city. The trees that were to be earlier cut were instead transplanted to off-campus facilities of the University.

Blog organisation and working

The Delhi Greens Blog works like just another Blog in the blogosphere. Acquired by the Delhi Greens organisation in July 2008, it is now a multi-author Blog with similar objectives. The Blog works to promote citizens participation in environmental decision making and for ensuring sustainable urban development. The Blog is a Wordpress installation that runs on a Linux server hosted on a sharing basis by 1and1.com. The Blogroll provides links to all environment related organisations, government agencies, universities and environmental businesses in Delhi. The Blog links to social networking websites like Facebook and Twitter. It has a live RSS feed, which enables users to submit their e-mail, on which blog posts are sent on a regular basis. The present blog writers include mainly those having some training in the field of environment and a deeper understanding of the intricacies of the subject. Blog content includes upcoming events, analysis of environmental reports and policies, articles on environmental subjects and images and proceedings of various city based activities.

The Delhi Greens Blog works by ensuring simplicity and clarity in the process of environmental information dissemination. Following the similar principles of Google.com, of straightaway giving the user what the latter came looking for on the website and promoting others, the DG Blog has ensured effective meeting of its objectives. Comments on the Blog are moderated and queries are mostly generated through the email associated with the Blog. Since the mobile number of some of the authors is also available on the Blog, users tend to get their queries resolved more often through direct communication. The success measure of the DG Blog is indeed the number of people it is able to reach, the impact it has helped to bring about, the large number of response it gets and number of times the DG Blog is able to motivate a conventional media house to run an environmental story.

Blog impact

The Delhi Greens Blog was launched with an objective and made an impact of saving the trees in the Delhi University campus area. Since then, it has inspired considerable green action and promoted the cause of environmental protection among masses. A significant impact of the DG Blog has been the registration of the Delhi Greens organisation, a Delhi based Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) working for environmental harmony and sustainable development. The DG Blog has run several campaigns from time to time, which have generated good and measurable impacts.

A campaign to deconcretize the trees was launched after a Delhi Government order to remove concrete from all the trees in Delhi. The DG Blog inspired citizens to file Right To Information (RTI) inquiries with various agencies responsible for this work. Through participatory mechanism, information was collected about trees still under concretization. This was reported to the concerned agency in that area to ensure timely action. The Eco-clubs of Delhi have also benefitted from the DG Blog in getting timely information as well as ideas and inspiration.

Stories from the DG Blog have also been picked up by the media from time to time (18). Formal enquiries made by various media houses are entertained with the agenda of raising issues that need attention.

The performance of the Blog (or for any website) is also a measure of page views it receives. This has risen from a modest 100 when the Blog was first launched, to over 3,000 readers per day. Owing to the Blog nature of the site, the page views vary based on the number of posts made, the type of content posted, etc. The DG Blog's real impact is in creating better informed citizens who are now asking the right questions.

CONCLUSION

Blogging is a powerful New & Social Media tool and has a tremendous potential in empowering ordinary citizens, disseminating information and bringing a social change. However, mere use of this tool is not sufficient as it requires thorough planning, some level of expertise of the subject being blogged about and dedicated efforts for successful implementation. While Blogging seems to be the most popular online communication platform used, it is also the simplest and easily usable. It will be incorrect to compare blogging or New & Social media with contemporary media at this stage, as the former is nascent and for it to be effective, is only complemented by the latter.

The Internet is an ICT wonder which finds tremendous use in academics and in promoting the principles of people's participation and democracy. The right combinations of tools need to be selected and an integrated approach followed in using the Internet for imparting education that will ensure national growth. Presently, the reach of the Internet in India is largely urban and this should be kept in mind while designing awareness programmes. The use of Internet opens seamless possibilities of accessing information and should therefore be made accessible across the country.

The Internet, through the Blog medium, can be used as an excellent platform for socially beneficial campaigns like generating environmental information or promoting conservation initiatives among the masses. The Delhi Greens Blog is a pioneering green media initiative in Delhi city that uses all forms of New & Social media to spread environmental awareness and inspire green actions. While further research and development is required for analyzing blog success and 'impact factor', existing indicators suggest a steady increase in the impact of the Delhi Greens Blog. In the near future, New & Social media tools will have an even greater impact on our society. Integrating them into our development plans, policies and awareness programmes could therefore go a long way in ensuring sustainable and equitable development.

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