Paper: Flasg Forums and ForumReader: Navigating a New Kind of Large-scale Online Discussion
Author: Kushal Dave, Martin Wattenberg, and Michael Muller

First of all, I never even knew there were such things as “Flash Forums”. I have been to Slashdot numerous times, but I guess I never noticed that there was a time limit on posting to the forums there. With this, right from the start I am very interested in seeing what they find. I imagine, with the added time limit for posting, threads might become intense discussions. The limited amount of time could lead to lots of ideas like brainstorming sessions. The paper does touch on this as well. After being introduced to the problem, I am curious to see how they try to solve it.

I also found it interesting that there were fewer repeat posters on Slashdot and Jams than there were in Usenet. The authors called this effect “drive-by” posting. Even though there does not seem to be discussion going on between certain people with these “drive-by” posts, it could mean that people are posting their thoughts, comments or suggestions and leaving it at that. It is up to the original author to figure out what to do with all the responses received from these posters. Usenet seems to have a large number of repeat posters and a large number of replies. However, if there are not a large number of people in the discussion in general, saying that 81% of authors are repeat authors does not mean much. With a limited number of people, it is possible that ideas become stagnant and that defeats the purpose of Flash Forums. Overall, it seems that it could be considered a good thing that there are fewer repeat posters. Unfortunately, according to the data, it also seems that fewer posts are replies in general in Jams and then on Slashdot. It could be a result of the time constraints, but if one is trying to gauge the success of an idea and no one replies to the original post, there is only so much one can do with that.

The authors wrote that some people had technical or usability problems and so could not discuss the interface. However, if there are usability issues, shouldn’t those be addressed? This is a paper about a user interface. If users cannot use the interface, I think those issues should at least be noted. Instead the authors ignore them and only discuss the issues brought up by people who did not have those usability issues. I can make a UI and claim that it is perfect, but that would mean nothing if I discounted all of the reviews that said anything bad about it.

I found the interface hard to understand. I think it would have been easier to understand the interface if I was looking at it, instead of just a screenshot of it. Figure 5 does have an example of it, but I do not entirely understand how the interface works and how exactly it is supposed to help me navigate through a Flash Forum.

When the authors were discussing how users were exploring the space, I thought it was extremely interesting that almost everyone started out by navigating linearly (depicted by the diagonal line in Figure 3). There were a few users that even with the visualization available still explored in a linear fashion. The authors did not include the thoughts from the users, but I am curious to know why even with the visualization available did they decide that a linear search was the best way to go.

The authors also found some interesting results based on their Likert scale survey. They found that simple aspects were the most useful, like having the scrollbar and search field. I was really surprised to see that color by moderation was just as important as those aspects. While color by similarity, recency, or author were much less important. I really want to use this interface for myself and see what I can gain from it. I do not understand how color by moderation can make such a large impact, and the authors do not offer an explanation or users thoughts on the matter.
The related works section seemed to be very short. I wonder why that is. This paper is not that old, so I would expect that there are plenty of open source projects around. Also, because of this, I imagine that this has been a problem discussed by others before. It is possible that there has not been much work in this area. If that is the case, then I wonder why. It seems that discussion and collaboration is very important to the success of an Open Source project.

I really like the aesthetics of CodeSaw. It is nice to be able to compare the times at which people are contributing code, like the example used in the paper. While we do not know exactly what the relationship is between the contributors, we are able to see that they were contributing around the same time and were taking breaks around the same time. I also wonder if seeing this encouraged people to contribute more, when seeing one’s own data in this visualization. If one saw that many people were contributing a lot compared to oneself, maybe that person may feel the need for their data to match the others’. Or it may make one feel bad that they do not have the time to contribute as much as others. Another result still, is that the visualization may encourage competitiveness. Like in the electricity usage interface, social guilt and competitiveness caused people to use less energy. I wonder if these visualizations caused people to contribute more and more so that their data was greater than others when visualized.

Instead, I was really surprised to see that many users felt that the visualization only confirmed what they had expected to see. The users knew who was contributing for the most part and did not really find many surprises when viewing the interface. It makes me wonder to what extent these people are involved with the Open Source project. They must be highly involved to be able to recognize these facts without explicitly tracking them. And then another surprise yet, only one person who participated in the study was a project manager. That means the developers of these projects were keeping track of a lot of information.

Since this project involved people from all over, I wonder how the IRB was done for this project. I imagine that it might have been difficult to first of all find people, and then once people were found, to be able to coordinate with them and get the study done. I would be interested in knowing more about how this was done.

It was a little sad to see that this visualization made some people feel lonely. However it does bring up an interesting shortcoming of CodeSaw. The project only visualizes a certain aspect of the traffic when it comes to Open Source projects. Users are only getting an idea of what the main contributors are doing. However, one participant mentions the people who are sending in bug reports, or the people who are posting on the forums. Another participant mentions that there is a lot of anonymous traffic and that it would be interesting to visualize that as well. With all this other traffic added to the visualization it could show users how they are contributing to something huge, a project that thousands of people want to use and are trying to help make better. I agree that with this extra data, the visualization might be much more meaningful to the code contributors and the general public as well.

Finally, while I really like the idea of spatial messaging, I wonder if it was ever abused. I wonder if participants used spatial messaging instead of regular email. I wonder if someone ever decided to just go through and vandalize the visualization by adding numerous comments everywhere they possibly could. It was not mentioned in the paper, but it might be possible for someone to do something like that.
Paper: Bridging the Gap: A Genre Analysis of Weblogs  
Author: Susan C. Herring, Lois Ann Scheidt, Sabrina Bonus, and Elijah Wright

As part of the introduction, Herring et al. state that journalists use blogs as an alternative source for news. I completely understand how blogs can be considered sources of public opinion. That part seems very obvious. However, I do not understand how they are sources for news. The people who write in these blogs have to get their data from somewhere. The only thing I can imagine is that when an event happens, a person may write about their experience. In that case, I would not consider that news; it is more of a reflection on an event that probably is already in the public eye. If it is not already public news, then there is a good chance that it will not be in the future either.

One area that I wish the authors spent more time on is the motivation for creating a blog. They talk about how there are millions of blogs at the time this paper was written and how it is becoming increasingly simpler to create and maintain a blog. However, they do not discuss what compels people to create their blog in the first place. The authors’ goal is to categorize blogs; they want to define genres for blogs. How can that be done without a thorough understanding of why the blog was created in the first place? It does seem possible to gauge this characteristic by looking at the function the blog is playing, but I feel that motivation to create, or motivation to continue to update are important aspects that seemed to get little notice.

Later in the paper, the authors mention that based on temporal measures, it seems that users are giving their blog a non-trivial time commitment. Here, again, motivation is really important. What are they doing in these blogs that makes them feel that they need to spend the time to update and maintain the blog? Do these bloggers feel that they are contributing to society with their daily writings? Are they helping others in some way? Or are these blogs purely for self reflection and just a diary of sorts to help them process and deal with recent events in one’s life. Does readership affect motivation? If a blogger had no readers, would they discontinue the blog? If a blogger had numerous readers, would they feel obligated to maintain the blog?

I also feel that the genre analysis is skewed. Since they only looked at blogs in English, 70% of those blogs were from the United States. I am curious if that percentage would stay stagnant if the study was widened to other languages as well. It is possible that other places around the world have found other interesting ways to utilize blogs. Blogs in China would definitely be different than those from the US, if the Chinese people are even allowed to have blogs. Overall, the beginning of this paper is misleading, since they are not performing a global analysis of blogs.

One point that surprised me was that blogs were not likely to contain a search function or advertisements. If the blog was held on a free blogging site, I am shocked that there were no advertisements, how would the site make money to continue? As for the search function, if there are hundreds of posts, how would one find a specific post, if they were looking for something in particular?

Overall, I feel that there is much more work to be done for this analysis to be considered complete. I feel that the authors only looked at the tip of the iceberg. I also feel, even though this paper is only a few years old, that it is outdated. Most of the blogs I have seen nowadays, especially those held on free blog hosting sites have some sort of search function available. I feel that this study could be redone and a more thorough study may reveal new and interesting results.