

## Flash Forums and ForumReader

In *Flash Forums and ForumReader: Navigating a New Kind of Large-scale Online Discussion* the authors Kushal Dave, Martin Wattenburg, and Michael Muller discuss the uses and benefits of “flash forums.” They define these forums as having diverse authors, being large in size, having a specific topic, and limited in time. The authors also analyze the effectiveness of using the tool ForumReader to get insightful information from a flash forum. Flash forums are a phenomenon I have not previously explored, so I found the explanation and analysis especially interesting.

One of the defining characteristics that was identified is the use of time limits. While this provides a transitory discussion experience, I find that most forums enact some sort of time limit. Often if users post after a thread has been dead for a certain period of time, the poster will be ostracized for being a “thread zombie.” Also, the sheer point of limiting the number of threads available on the first page applies a time limit on how many people will view the topic. Therefore, I am not sure if this really makes Flash Forums such a unique brand of forum.

I found the ForumReader to be an interesting way to visualize the posts. I think that it is a good way to be able to view more than the top few. A personal observation of sites like Digg is that I will scan the first page for interesting topics and ignore the rest. I do not like the small amount of space that was devoted to the article however. I would prefer a much smaller visualization if it is being used for navigation, and a larger area for the text. A category that I would be highly interested in would be a mood evaluation of the posts. If a natural language processor could detect humor or news, I could select whichever one I was interested in at the time.

I agree with the analysis that Flash Forums are not used for meeting people. I think the choice to focus on content rather than users was good, although they chose to leave some people-based functions in (like searching by user).

The test for how the interface affected the users ability to make sense of the discussion was flawed in my opinion. By making a user argue for or against a topic chosen at random, you run into difficulties. A user could be interested in one topic, and be able to create a strong opinion, or even argue against their own opinion. However, if it was a topic they were uninterested in, or that had a technical component beyond their knowledge base, a user may be unable to argue for or against that topic, even with a good user interface, and reading other comments. A better measurement, in my opinion, would be to ask the users how they felt they understood a topic both with and without the interface.

I liked that they evaluated the quality of responses. However, I think it would be better if they had experts review the answers and rate on a scale. By having two people discuss ratings until they agree, you could have the person with a stronger personality asserting their opinion over the other.

The analysis on feature integration I found to be fascinating, especially since I have run into it myself. They concluded that two features were individually beneficial, but when together they decreased performance. When adding many features, they concluded that the learning curve was steeper, and harder to get started with. I think this is a valuable insight to keep in mind when designing interfaces. Often new features are useful, but add to bloat and make it hard to find and figure out how to use the features.

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## CodeSaw: A Social Visualization of Distributed Software Development

In *CodeSaw: A Social Visualization of Distributed Software Development* by Eric Gilbert and Karrie Karahalios the authors explore open source software development and a visualization called CodeSaw. CodeSaw displays the code changes and communication between the core developers. CodeSaw uses small multiples to display the code changes and comments for up to 8 core developers. Furthermore, the user can compare two of the developers in detail, in order to better explore the time line.

I thought that CodeSaw was a great way to explore individual contributions to the open source project. Previous projects we looked at, like History Flow, did a good job of analyzing what changes were made. CodeSaw doesn't show these changes as well, but is better at showing the differences between users.

A beneficial addition to this project would be to expand to allow for more than 8 user comparisons. I think it would be useful to know what lurkers there were, or how many people contributed just a line or two of code. Also, the paper states that it is common for a project to have 10 core developers. I also think it would be beneficial to be able to expand the keywords that are selected to get the full message. This would make it so you can explore what is happening at different points in the time line.

The survey of users resulted in an unexpected outcome. I thought that CodeSaw would create a greater sense of community by showing people what was going on with their “coworkers.” I also felt it would create a sense of accountability, since the community could conveniently and easily compare contributors. However, people said that the visualization made them feel more lonely in small groups. If the visualization was expanded to include more people however, it may be able to include the feelings that “passer-bys” create in a community.

The visualization is great to show committed code and the people who do work either in programming or in communication. However, if a user works on code and doesn't commit it, it can look like nothing is happening. Hopefully the communication can show that work is being done, and by being able to expand on the conversations, you may be able to get more details as to what is happening in the process.

The addition of spacial notes in the second phase of CodeSaw development can help with this issue. If a user notices that their profile looks misleading, they can leave a note explaining the circumstances. I found the concept of spacial notes as being innovative and especially helpful in clearing up any miscommunication and faults of previous versions.

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### Bridging the Gap: A Genre Analysis of Weblogs

In the paper *Bridging the Gap: A Genre Analysis of Weblogs* by Susan C. Herring, Lois Ann Scheidt, Sabrina Bonus, and Elijah Wright discusses the different categories of web logs. Blogs are a hard categorization to define. Especially since many blogs are cross overs between websites or forums. The categorizations were defined in the paper as filter, personal journal, k-log, mixed purpose, and other. The authors admitted that categories were hard to define partly because of “uses of blog software for non-blog purposes (e.g., community center events announcements; news; retail).” Personally, I would include these as a separate category of blog, or include them under other, so I do not understand how they chose some types as classifications, and others as being for “non-blog purposes.”

The qualities that were analyzed were frequency of links, links to other blogs and news sources, numbers of comments, and message length. These are a good starting point for analysis. I would also like to see statistics on number of page views as well. Blogs that are personal may have few views and a high number of postings, while blogs that are filters or k-logs may have many views with few comments.

Finding blogs through blogging software used is a good method. This way you can have a wide variety of blogs that you may otherwise not get to via search engines or links (ie, personal blogs). However, different blogging software can be prone to different proportions of populations than the web as a whole. I think it was good to eliminate livejournal for specific statistic purposes, but I believe the numbers in those blogging platforms should be taken into consideration when making broad statements about blogging on the internet.

I was personally startled and curious about the low rate of commenting enabled personal blogs. I wonder what this statistic would be across blogging platforms where the default enables commenting. In the past I generally considered a blog as a webpage with entries and comments, otherwise in my head it was just an easily updateable webpage. This brought to my mind the importance of defining exactly what a blog is.

One thing about this paper that bothered me was the high incidence of quotes attributed to Rebecca Blood. While she is identified as a prominent blogger who writes extensively about the field, most of the quotes seem to apply to a narrow range of blogs. It would be very easy for a single person to write about what they are comfortable with, without having a full experience of the entire spectrum. Also, without hard statistics you could easily mistake numbers. For instance, Rebecca Blood states that most blogs seem to be filter blogs, redirecting to other sites. These are often more interesting, and more often frequented by people who don't personally know the author. This can skew the statistics. By quoting a single person, the authors have a lot of research based on one person's perspective. By expanding their early research they may have predicted results closer to their results than occurred.