

Information Wants to Be Seen: Getting Everyone Talking Visualization

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ABSTRACT

At Mississippi State, I have been **blogging** and using other social media to talk about visualization, computer graphics, and gaming for five years. Though the blogging has been in bursts, I have been using other outlets such as **Twitter** and **Facebook** more recently. However, my efforts have been more focused in the last few years in getting my *students* talking about visualization and their research on the web. I've met with some success and some failures which I discuss here.

1 INFORMATION WANTS TO BE SEEN: A BLOG

Soon after I started at Mississippi State in 2003, **I started blogging**. It was always bursty: I'd comment on aspects of my research, some coding nuances, and such, then let the blog sit idle for several months. I did not use the blog so much as a method of forming a conversation so much as a world-readable research log or bookmarking service. This had several consequences for the design: Comments were not enabled, for example, as I was less interested in dialog. While probably read by few, the blog severed the purposes I needed.

2 THE NEXT STEP: GETTING STUDENTS INVOLVED

The blog worked well as a repository of information for me. While it did not drive high page views, my students did find it valuable. This prompted me to explore **facilitating blog access for them**. Our X-Serves came with blogging software (Blojsom) so it took little time to set up the framework. Soon, each student in the VisLab had their own blog.

I did not structure how students were to use their blog; all I asked them to do was use it help them in their research. Generally, three usage patterns emerged. Several did not use it extensively, perhaps making only one or two posts. When asked about it, most of these students just stored what information they needed as print-outs or on their own machines, having no interest in sharing what they had found. The second most numerous group used it as a repository for reading notes (e.g., **Chad Steed** and **Yagneshwara Lanka**). These students commented that such notes were useful for accessing later (such as when doing literature review for papers). Finally, a few students used it to talk about details more relevant to their research such as coding issues or progress on their prototype code (e.g., **Chris Waters** and **Matt Morris**). Chris and Matt also used the blogs to have online conversation about some of their work, posting to their own blogs as comments were still disabled due to University policy.

From my point of view, both of the latter two uses of the blog have pedagogical value. Using a blog to record research notes distributes institutional knowledge across the lab; for example, when one student graduated and another started up on the same project, the reading notes from the previous student were all available on the blog to prepare the newcomer. The discussion of tools, code issues, and such were of a more practical nature and quite useful when those issues arose for other students or myself latter.

3 NEW SOCIAL MEDIA

Over the last two years, I have begun using **Facebook** and **Twitter** as a means of communicating about visualization and my other research. While I post information about my research to both sites, the type of feedback I get from them is quite different. On Facebook, posts about classes I teach and the video gaming program at MSState get much more traction than my general research posts, most likely due to the largely student audience there. On Twitter, the feedback to my more research oriented posts is more frequent, though they come largely from previous students of mine who follow me. There have been, however infrequent, non-followers who pick up on some of my research material and discuss it with me either by Twitter or email. This serendipity has been fruitful.

I have had less success in getting my current students on Twitter, though I have several former students on that service. Most current students stick to Facebook.

4 THOUGHTS AND POSITION STATEMENTS

After five years, I believe I have some thoughts on the use of blogging and social media for visualization:

- The software needs to be better. Blogging software does a lot, but loading images, dealing with multiple PDF uploads, and such is not as easy as it should be at times. My students never upload images due to the limitation of our software (which likely needs an upgrade).
- Conversation matters. I ignored this for my initial blog, but facilitating conversation via comments does add a lot to the use of the media. This, unfortunately, adds many other wrinkles (moderation, spam, etc.), but it is likely worth it.
- Different social networks have different audiences. Facebook, for all its popularity, is a closed system—much of it cannot be seen from the web easily. It is also has a predominantly student-based audience. Twitter's audience is more wide open (both easier and more difficult to target specific groups). Tailor your usage to the audience.
- Getting students involved is always beneficial. All my experiences enforce this.

I am trying to apply these lessons in the redesign of our groups website to incorporate some of use of the blogs via wikis and adding comments and such. Progress can be seen (slowly) at the **VisLab website** and my in-development research blog at **Information Wants to Be Seen**.

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