



## Web Communication Options for Students – Strengths and Weaknesses

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### ABSTRACT

*The students use Web not only for their study, research and information gathering purposes, but also for communicating through it. Some of the various popular forms of web communication used by students are emails, online chats, blogs, internet forums, social networking sites, etc. All these web communication options have intrinsic strengths and weaknesses. Despite being efficient, effective and speedy in nature, one has to be wary of revealing too much personal information, viruses, spamming, flame wars, etc. while communicating online. If students have a clear understanding of the positives and perils that web communication entails, they would be better placed when it comes to using the web to their benefit.*

**Keywords :** Web communication, students, email, internet forum, social networking site, blog, blogging, chat, Internet, online communication.

### INTRODUCTION

Imagining our lives without computers and access to the Web seems like a dreadful dream in today's time. By March 2012, approximately 2,279,709,629 people worldwide used the Internet according to Internet World Statistics. India ranks third in the world with 121,000,000 Internet users after China and the US (Top 20 Internet Countries – 2012 Q1 in Internet World Stats, 2012).

Web has provided combination of communication ways by overcoming their various limitations. It has influenced every sphere of our lives from business to social networking, banking to shopping, online education to research – every detail is available on Web nowadays. The students use Web not only for their study, research and information gathering purposes, but also for communicating through it with their teachers, other students, friends, family, various institutions, etc. and for other entertainment purposes. Hence, it would be worthwhile to delve into such web communication options giving an insight into their strengths and weaknesses with a special reference to students. Some of the various popular forms of web communication used by students are:

### E-MAIL

E mail is an asynchronous form of communication service available on the Internet. The concept of sending electronic text messages between parties, in a way analogous to mailing letters, pre-dates the creation of the Internet. It's lightening fast speed and conversational nature enables exchange of a whole series of e-mail messages within a very short time. It's easier for reference as the text of a previous email message can easily be included as part of a reply to that message. Thus, email correspondents are able to keep the replies in context for each message more accurate and understandable. Cost of sending an email is almost negligible. Emails can be sent in bulk – one email message can be sent to multiple recipients almost at the cost of a single email. Besides this, any digital document, picture, audio or video file can be sent over email. The Worldwide Email Traffic cites a total 144.8 billion emails sent per day in the entire world during 2012 and this figure is expected to touch 192.2 billion by 2016. (Radiati, 2012)

Students use emails to avail help regarding their courses and research, to seek information from educational institutions about various courses offered by them, to contact teachers for getting and submitting assignments, to remain in touch with friends and relatives across the world, to get their questionnaires filled by respondents, etc.

While sending emails some people, intentionally or unintentionally, send worms and viruses and, in the process, infect and damage quite a lot of computers. Similarly, it suffers from problems of privacy. Virtually every email has to go through a number of computers before it reaches the inbox of the intended receiver and, along the way, there exists a distinct possibility of it being hacked and read. A case-sensitive password can offer some protection.

### ONLINE CHATS

It is a synchronous form of communication over the Web, direct one-on-one chat or text-based chat using tools such as Internet Relay Chat, instant messengers, like Yahoo! Messenger, Windows Live Messenger, AOL Instant Messenger etc. Through such services, one is able to chat with people across the world, thus, cutting across the geographical limits. Through this, they are able to keep in touch with their distant friends and are also able to develop more acquaintances beyond the geographical barriers. There are number of websites offering online tutoring service, through which students could clear their queries with the help of qualified and specialized online tutors. There are websites that offer services such as career counseling to those students who cannot meet the experts in person due to various limitations. Hence, it is very helpful in guiding students for their appropriate careers.

Even online chats have their downside. During such chats, one cannot be sure of true identity of the person one is talking to. The anonymity factor in chat rooms makes one believe that one can act any way one wants. Chat room discussions may become sexual or violent, or they may promote hatred against others. Online relationships with strangers in chat rooms can lead to one being cyber stalked, sent pornography, or pressured to arrange a real-world meeting. (Spears et. al, 2005) Therefore, such chats should be carried out with lot of care and with most trusted people only.

## BLOG

A blog is a website which is usually maintained by an individual with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or video. Entries are commonly displayed in reverse-chronological order. Many blogs provide commentary or news on a particular subject; others function as more personal online diaries. A typical blog is a combination of text, images, and links to other blogs, Web pages, and other media related to its topic. The ability for readers to leave comments in an interactive format is an important part of many blogs. There are different types of blogs, differing not only in the type of content, but also in the way that content is presented or written. (Blog in Wikipedia, 2012).

If figures are any indication, it can be said that blogging has emerged as a major tool for web communication. As of July 2011, there are an estimated 164 million blogs (from 3 million in 2004). Out of these, 27% of bloggers are full time bloggers. The US has about 49% of the blogging population worldwide. (Treanor, 2011). In India, the blog has grown steadily, if unspectacularly, from a handful at the dawn of the country's Internet era in the early 2000s to an estimated 3.2 million, according to JuxtConsult's India Online 2008 report. JuxtConsult is a Delhi-based market research firm. (Perera and Raghav, 2009)

Students with individual blogs have an opportunity to discover the work and joy of communicating their ideas in written form, and then getting feedback from others. Most often, public student blogs are done under a nickname and without any personal details, so that the incredible excitement that can come from communicating with a global audience does not place the student in harm's way. Student blogging has to be overseen with coaching and training to make sure that both the personal data is not communicated and that blog posts are appropriate.

## INTERNET FORUM/ MESSAGE BOARD

An Internet forum, or message board, is an asynchronous form of online discussion site. From a technological standpoint, forums or boards are web applications managing user-generated content. (Internet Forum in Wikipedia, 2012). Discussion forums increase interactivity. They encourage speedy feedback from the users. Forums prefer a premise of open and free discussion. Most common topics on forums include questions, comparisons, and polls of opinion as well as debates.

Because of their volatile and random behavior it is not uncommon for nonsense or unsocial behavior to sprout as people lose temper, especially if the topic is controversial. Since replies to a topic are often wording aimed at someone's point of view, discussion will usually go slightly off into several directions as people question each other's validity, sources and so on. It is not uncommon for a style over substance debates to be the ones to take it over.

The creation of student-centered spaces online is also gaining credence in educational settings. Such spaces provide a common area for students to come together and discuss unlimited topics, including social activities and educational ideas. Various discussion forums can be used as a place where assignments can be posted by the teacher and then students post their writing. It is a place where a teacher can read student work samples and reply to a posted piece of writing. (Using Forum in Moodle docs, 2012). However, participating in discussion forums by students could be merely for entertainment purpose even.

## SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

A social network service/websites focuses on building online communities of people who share interests and/or activities, or who are interested in exploring the interests and activities of others. Some such popular sites like Facebook and Twitter are widely used worldwide; MySpace and LinkedIn being the most widely used in North America; Nexopia (mostly in Can-

ada); Bebo, Hi5, StudiVZ (mostly in Germany), iWiW (mostly in Hungary), Orkut and Facebook in India. (Social Networking Service in Wikipedia, 2012)

Some people use these social networking sites for meeting new friends on the Net. Others use it to find old friends. Then there are those who use it to find people who have the same problems or interests they have, this is called niche networking. These websites cater to needs of friendship, community and provide a sense of belonging. Some networking can also help members find a job or establish business contacts. It has been noticed that by March 2012, facebook had 835,525,280 active users around the world. Out of these, 45,048,100 users are in India. (Facebook Growth Stats for 2011-12 in Internet World Stats, 2012)

Social networks are also being used by teachers and students as a communication tool. Teachers and professors are doing everything from creating chat-room forums and groups to extend classroom discussion to posting assignments, tests and quizzes, to assisting with homework outside of the classroom setting. Social networks are also being used to foster teacher-parent communication. These sites make it possible and more convenient for parents to ask questions and voice concerns without having to meet face-to-face. (Cristian, 2011)

Social networking faces the following problems: To use these websites, one is required to share information about one's name, location, age, gender, and many other types of information that one may not want to let others know. There is a potential for failure of security in both personal and business contexts. While many sites apply certain measures to keep any of these cases of harassment, cyber-stalking, online scams, and identity theft to an absolute minimum, one still may never know. Social networking may be viewed as wastage of precious time, which could be devoted to other useful work.

However, there are some general advantages and disadvantages of Web Communication that are discussed below:

## ADVANTAGES

Now we can communicate in a fraction of second with a person who is sitting in the other part of the world. Any kind of information on any topic under the sun is available on the Internet. Entertainment is another popular reason d'être why many people prefer to surf the Internet. Downloading games, visiting chat rooms or just surfing the Web are some of the uses people have discovered. Music, hobbies, news and more can be found and shared on the Internet. Many services are now provided on the internet such as online banking, job searching, purchasing tickets for movies, hotel reservations and guidance services on array of topics engulfing the every aspect of life. Often these services are not available off-line and can cost more. Ecommerce is the concept used for any type of commercial maneuvering, or business deal that involves the transfer of information across the globe via Internet. It has become a phenomenon associated with any kind of shopping, almost anything. You name it and e-commerce with its giant tentacles surrounding every single product and service will be made available at the door step. (Job, 2009)

## DISADVANTAGES

One may face grave danger of revealing personal information such as name, address, credit card number, etc. which can be accessed and misused by unscrupulous elements. Spamming refers to sending unwanted e-mails in bulk, which provides no purpose and needlessly obstructs the entire system. Such illegal activities can be very frustrating and slow down the system. Virus is a program which disrupts the normal functioning of computer systems. Computers attached to Internet are more prone to virus attacks and they can end up into crashing the hard disk, causing considerable trouble for the user. Pornography is perhaps the biggest threat related to children's healthy mental life. There are thousands of pornographic sites on the Internet that can be easily found and can

be a detrimental for children of impressionable age.

## CONCLUSION

In today's time, Web communication provides students with significant communication tools that help them build their careers in an effective manner. It also helps them to main-

tain their virtual as well as their real social circle and also provides them with various entertainment options. It also has some downsides, but if students make judicious use of such communication, its disadvantages could be outweighed by its advantages.

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