Social Media for Outreach

A brief behind-the-scenes look at what goes in to setting up a workshop.

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A large part of this week was spent by me at **CSE**. Initially setting up for the workshop and then conducting it. While I am no social media expert or consultant, I normally like to show users some of the technology behind the tools they use or would like to use. Of course, I have to do this in such a way that the session does not seem technical but seems rather human and understandable. Not an easy job, I can vouch for that. My plan was actually a very simple one. I would introduce the participants to some of the things happening on the social media scene and then move on to a completely hands-on workshop getting them to develop a simple website using a CMS, using Mediawiki and hence having the ability to contribute to Wikipedia and finally end with some analytics to measure their success or fine tune their online presence. The CSE website had a very impressive course outline explaining what the course would be about and the intended audience.

However, when I landed up to setup my workshop server I found that a sudden burst of interns having descended upon CSE meant that all desktops and spare computers (there's no such thing as a spare computer) were immediately deployed. This meant that I did not have a machine for the workshop. After a minor struggle, a hard disk swap and some bruised egos I did finally get my machine. For the setup I needed WordPress and Mediawiki. For really quick installs and virtual servers I tend to use Turnkey Linux I already had the WordPress appliance downloaded with me and had it up and running in a few moments. The problem was I needed this installation to work in multi-site mode so that the participants could make sites working in groups or individually as they preferred. In the past, I have used WordPress MU, but for some time now this functionality has been available in the newer versions (3.x) of WordPress and I was keen to try that. I live dangerously, no point doing something if you are not going to try something new and learn in the process. For some strange reason, my initial configuration for multisite did not work and I finally had to scrap the appliance and start afresh. Must go back and investigate what happened but in the meantime work had to be done.

I went back to the trusted old Centos and did a minimal install, this normally takes less than 10 mins. I added the Centos-Testing repo to get the latest version of PHP and with that installed the rest of the process went rather smoothly. The wordpress "network" was ready. I installed a bunch of themes and a few plugins and network enabled them and we were set.

The participants who attended were from all over the world, we had two people from Nepal, two from Sri Lanka, one from the Republic of Congo, one from Nigeria and the rest were from all over India. All the participants were basically from the communications or media departments of their respective oragnisations and had little or no control over their current websites. In fact, they are dependent on either an internal IT team or an outsourced web design firm. They did feel a little trapped beacuse of this and were looking forward to being more in control.

Day 1 was WordPress day, by the end of the day we had seven websites with varying degrees of complexity, lots of nice designs, photos, features etc. Some even embedded videos and slideshows. Was totally great. Around lunchtime, I did overhear some of the participants say it was very technical, but by the end of the day the results were in front of them. I got them to make quick presentations and the rest to critique and they were all happy.

Day 2 was to be Wikipedia. So we started with some background on Wikipedia and how we are all happy consumers but rarely contributors. The problem came when they actually started using the internal Mediawiki server that we had setup to start creating and populating

the wiki. The installation was a default install and had the basic editor, while the editor has buttons for some of the markup, it still displays the markup in the editor and that started confusing people tremendously. What seemed like "technical" the day before now seemed to be a breeze and this was way too complex! But the team from CSE worked hard and we finally had everyone back on track, by the end of the day the wiki was looking good, tons of information had been populated. We did have the scare of one of the users nearly wiping everything out, but did not have to deal with that. It ended rather well. Later in the day they got a session on using Photos and Videos for Advocacy from Sanjukta Basu which they all seemed to have enjoyed.

Day 3 was reserved for strategy and analytics. It started with the team from Blogworks featuring Rajesh Lalwani and Rajika Talwar on marketing and online media strategies, very insightful sessions and despite Rajesh's promise of "boring sessions" the participants seemed to have really enjoyed themselves and found the sessions invaluable. We finally ended with some web analytics, I showed them statistics on the sites they had created and they were reasonably amused with that. Webalizer did a good job of collecting stats on the multi-site wordpress and the internal MediaWiki and it was interesting for them to see how quickly stats can be collated and interpreted. The last section was on Google Analytics and despite the fact that I was dealing with a new/changed interface using the stats from many of the CSE sites, we managed to show how useful looking at this information could be.

I did find some rather interesting stats on mobile usage. SymbianOS showed up as the number one mobile OS, with iPad lagging behind by just ONE hit! The carrier information too was quite fascinating to look at. I had not noticed how much mobile stats had been added to Google Analytics.

In all I would say a great workshop, fantastic time and as always lots of learning. I must also mention that I had some great help form the team at CSE, Kiran Pandey, Bobby, Saroj Sahoo, Gora Mohanty and several others at CSE.