

## Why You Should Know About Screencasting

Earlier this year, we sent out a reader survey and asked you to share your opinions and experiences as a business information professional. One question we asked was what, other than business research, were some of the major duties you were performing in your current job. The reply with the highest number of responses (along with managing/negotiating vendor contracts and licenses) was *training* for end users.

If you are doing a lot of training, or are thinking about doing more, are you putting screencasting as a training tool to its best use? Screencasts, which are often used to create tutorials for instructing remote audiences, have been around for a while, but we've been seeing more

of them pop up recently. So we felt this would be a good time to look at how quality screencasts could be an effective training strategy and could serve to help you expand and enhance your role in your organization.

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Several converging factors are giving screencasts a more prominent profile.

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First things first—what exactly is a screencast? Most of you have likely seen at least one. In its simplest terms, a screencast is basically a movie of something on a PC—which could be a PowerPoint slide presentation, a video, a flash demo, etc.—and is typically accompanied with audio commentary. Unlike a WebEx presentation, a screencast does not occur in real time, and there is no live interaction. Instead, it is a media file that can be opened, played, and viewed at the viewer's convenience.

There are other useful definitions of screencasts. According to Jon Udell, the man who coined the term, a screencast is “a digital movie in which the setting is partly or wholly a computer screen, and in which audio narration describes the on-screen action.” You can read a couple of detailed explanations on Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Screencast>) or at the O'Reilly Digital Media site ([www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/oreilly/digitalmedia/2005/11/16/what-is-screencasting.html](http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/oreilly/digitalmedia/2005/11/16/what-is-screencasting.html)).

### Screencasts Gaining in Popularity

Several converging phenomena appear to be giving screencasts a more prominent profile on the Internet. First, there is the ongoing growth of remote teaching and distance learning. There's also now near-universal access to a high-speed connection, making it easier for anyone to view large multimedia files. The growing popularity of downloading and uploading video over the Web has increased the awareness and appeal of watching movies on a PC. And, since podcasts and online videos are being created by nontechnies, creators of multimedia software (including screencasting vendors) are trying to reach that market by making newer versions easier to use. This spurs even more interest and activity among non-technical users.

Screencasts offer several advantages as a format for remote training:

- It does not take any technical training or special skills to create a screencast.
- Screencasts can reach thousands of people, or more.
- Screencasts can be revised as needed with updated versions with new information.
- Screencast creators have the opportunity to be creative and have fun.
- Screencasts can add some zip and interest to what could normally be seen as a fairly boring and straightforward training activity.
- Viewers can open up, play, halt, re-open, and refer back to a screencast

## HIGHLIGHTS

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- ▶ ⑥ Blog Searching: What Do Technorati's Competitors Offer?

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## Why You Should Know About Screencasting

at any time, whenever convenient, to review the content.

For information professionals, creating screencasts is also a way to keep your expertise front and center in your organization, to establish or cement your reputation as being on the cutting edge of Web-based information delivery, and to promote the use of your information center's resources. Furthermore, creating screencasts can enhance your overall reputation since, in the words of blogger and trainer Beth Kanter (<http://beth.typepad.com>), screencasts project an image of "transparency, trust, and authenticity."

### Putting Screencasts to Use

What are some of the ways that you can put screencasts to use? The most popular applications have been instructional tutorials, such as how to search online databases. Both Jason Eiseman, the computer automation librarian at Schwabe Williamson & Wyatt in Portland, Ore., and Jule L. Kind, the director of Off Campus Library Services at Indiana Wesleyan University's Adult and Graduate Studies program, located in Marion, Ind., have told us they use screencasts in this way.

But screencasts can be used for other purposes too. Kind, for instance, has created screencasts for training her users in how to use Endnote bibliographic software. Eiseman told us that he has used them for creating animations to go along with his presentations.

Eiseman shared with us several other thoughts he has had on screencast uses. For example, he has begun experimenting with using them as a kind of FAQ tool to answer common questions from his users. He has also created screencasts for demonstrating complicated procedures, such as showing how cataloging work is done (e.g., how to add a volume to a serial, how to create a new copy, or how to change locations of an item).

Eiseman says he is also considering using screencasts to capture knowledge on how technical problems that occur on his intranet are fixed, thereby preserving institutional memory in his department. The screencasts could, he says, explain what to do when encountering certain error messages that can

occur on the intranet. Ideally, Eiseman says, someone looking at the tutorial will be able to fix a problem without actually knowing the meaning of the error code. The tutorial might say: "when you get this error message" (showing a screencast of error) "it means such and such." "Open this file, in this folder" (showing a screencast of opening folder and file). And so on.

What are some other possible uses? Web search guru and author Greg Notess told us that screencasts could also be useful for providing instructions on how to install new software (the software industry has been using screencasts for some time to assist its new users) and perhaps for reporting and documenting technical problems.

Screencasts capture knowledge, so they offer some interesting knowledge-management-like applications. In fact, Beth Kanter, who has written extensively on screencasts (see the Further Information Sources section), has written the following:

Whether you are doing a screencast of frequently asked for procedures or documenting the work flow of an entire project, screencasts can be an excellent addition to your organization's knowledge capture toolbox. Some people have dubbed it "Rich Media Documentation." The important thing to think about is what content is most appropriate to present on video. While this genre of screencasts may only have an internal audience and somewhat lower production values (or not depending on your skill levels), rich media documentation helps preserve organizational memory. Another interesting form of knowledge capture is a screencast that captures tacit or expert knowledge about a process related to using a software tool ... ([http://beth.typepad.com/beths\\_blog/2007/03/screencasting\\_p.html](http://beth.typepad.com/beths_blog/2007/03/screencasting_p.html))

Possible uses of screencasts are only limited by your imagination (well, and your time, too!) and might include things like the following:

- An introduction to the online resources available at your library/information center
- How to join and participate in a

newly launched wiki, online social network, or other collaborative online site

- A demonstration of the differences, features, and search strategies for various types of Internet search engines
- How to perform tagging and use social bookmarking sites like del.icio.us
- Creating or forwarding videos uploaded to the Internet, such as conference presentations or recordings of internal meetings

### Choosing a Vendor

So, what does it take to actually create a screencast? One of your most important decisions will be what vendor's software to use, and there are both free and fee-based options. Perhaps the most popular screencasting product is Camtasia, a product of TechSmith ([www.techsmith.com/camtasia.asp](http://www.techsmith.com/camtasia.asp)). Another popular program is Adobe's Captivate ([www.adobe.com/products/captivate](http://www.adobe.com/products/captivate)). A lesser-known competitor is Qarbon's Viewlet Builder ([www.qarbon.com](http://www.qarbon.com)), which is the product that Eiseman uses.

Notess says he has also tried a free product called Wink ([www.debugmode.com/wink](http://www.debugmode.com/wink)), though he says the audio doesn't seem to be as high-quality as some others. You can view some sample Wink screencasts that were created by the University of Calgary's distance librarian Paul R. Pival, aka "The Distant Librarian" blogger ([http://distlib.blogs.com/distlib/2006/09/examples\\_of\\_scr.html](http://distlib.blogs.com/distlib/2006/09/examples_of_scr.html)).

How do you know which screencasting software to select? Notess advises trying out "whatever free ones are available," as well as fee-based ones that offer a 30-day trial. Doing this can help you determine which one feels right and is easiest to use. Ease of use is still an issue when it comes to using screencast software, Notess told us, "because of the bells and whistles." He cautions that "there is a learning curve."

### Tips and Techniques

This brings us to what is perhaps the biggest problem that users, particularly new ones, can run into: the amount of time it can take to produce a good screencast. Notess shared some advice with us on this point. First, he said,

“don’t worry too much about perfection of the end product. Create a couple of them, get them up, and get feedback from users.” (Actually, a little bit of a rough edge and informality in the production is part of a screencast’s “charm” as a friendly and informal mode of instruction.) Also, Notess said that whatever planning you can do up front, mapping out the various steps in “story-board” fashion and having all of your examples clearly tested ahead of time will save time when you actually create the screencast.

But there is probably no getting around the matter that, at least for the moment, creating a good screencast is time-consuming. But there are lots of available resources and detailed advice on how to produce a quality screencast—including the important matter of how to keep people’s attention and not be boring! We have grouped these resources together at the end of this article.

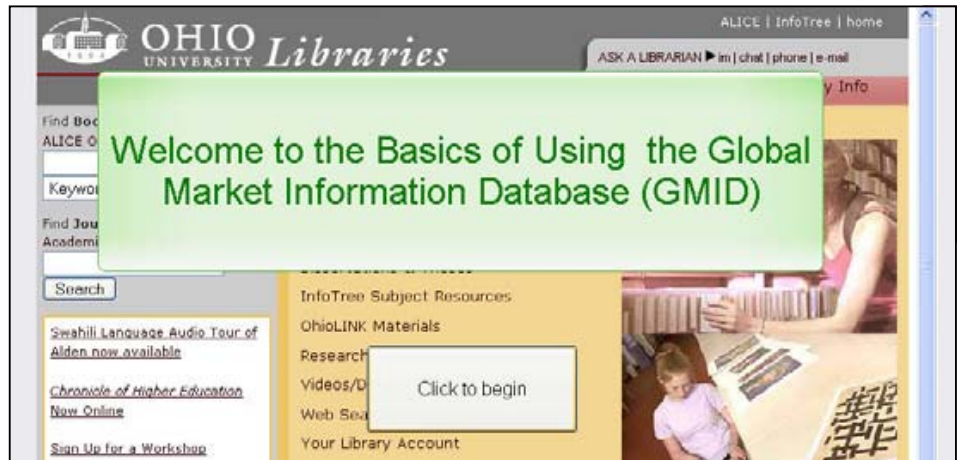
Another decision that you’ll need to make is how to deliver your completed screencast. Sending screencast files by email is generally not considered a good option, simply because of their size. Most organizations will put them up on their own server and make the screencasts available to anyone who wants to view them right there. If getting access or space on your organization’s server is problematic, another option is to upload it on YouTube or another Internet video sharing site. You can then direct users to a permanent URL or embed it on a blog. One advantage of posting a screencast on YouTube is that viewers will be able to leave comments. (You can mark your video as “private” too—see YouTube’s instructions on how to do this at <http://tinyurl.com/2cuc8s>.)

### Sample Screencasts

In researching this article, we’ve come across lots of excellent screencasts—here are some that you might want to review as models.

The following five tutorials were created by Chad Boeninger, reference and instruction technology coordinator at Ohio University’s Alden Library Ohio University:

- The Basics of Using the Global Market Information Database (see Figure 1)



This is the beginning of a screencast on how to use Euromonitor’s Global Market Information Database. It was created by Chad Boeninger, reference and instruction technology coordinator at Ohio University’s Alden Library.

Figure 1

- Using Mergent to Compare Companies in the Same Industry
- Finding Industry Information with Market Insight
- Using Hoover’s “Build a List”
- Finding Businesses by Geographic Location
- Finding Export Data in TradeStats Express

The above tutorials can be found on BizWiki: Business Database Screencasts at the following sites:

- Ohio University [www.library.ohiou.edu/subjects/biz/wiki/index.php/Business\\_Database\\_Screencasts](http://www.library.ohiou.edu/subjects/biz/wiki/index.php/Business_Database_Screencasts)
- Baruch College: Beginners Guide to Business Research [www.baruch.cuny.edu/tutorials/zicklin/research](http://www.baruch.cuny.edu/tutorials/zicklin/research)
- InfoWorld’s Jon Udell: Language Evolution in Delicious <http://weblog.infoworld.com/udell/gems/delicious.html>
- RSS Tutorials for Law Librarians, Jason Eiseman [www.schwabe.com/library/rss\\_tutorials.htm](http://www.schwabe.com/library/rss_tutorials.htm)
- NebraskAccess Tutorials. Developed to introduce Nebraska librarians and residents to the NebraskAccess databases [www.nlc.state.ne.us/nebraskaccess/toolbox/tutorials.html](http://www.nlc.state.ne.us/nebraskaccess/toolbox/tutorials.html)
- Learn to Use the Citation Linker, Choosing a Database, and Boolean Searching. Created by Michelle Mach, Digital Projects Librarian, Colorado State University. Links to tutorials on this ALA page [www.ala.org/ala/acrlbucket/is/](http://www.ala.org/ala/acrlbucket/is/committees/webpages/emergingtech/site/july2004.htm)

[committees/webpages/emergingtech/site/july2004.htm](http://www.ala.org/ala/acrlbucket/is/committees/webpages/emergingtech/site/july2004.htm)

- Enabling RSS Alert Feeds in EBSCOHost Databases [www.screencast.com/users/ppival/collections/Default/media/a9a21d93-1756-49de-96b9-9dc835b51aae](http://www.screencast.com/users/ppival/collections/Default/media/a9a21d93-1756-49de-96b9-9dc835b51aae)
- Calgary Public Library Tutorials (Intro to computers and the Internet, Internet Explorer, Google, E-Library, and more) <http://calgarypubliclibrary.com/library/tutorials.htm>
- Orange County Library Online Tutorials [www.ocls.info/Virtual/tutorials/default.asp?bhcp=1](http://www.ocls.info/Virtual/tutorials/default.asp?bhcp=1)
- Beth Kanter’s Screencast on Tagging and Social Bookmarking for The Nonprofit Technology Network: NTEN [http://beth.typepad.com/beths\\_blog/2007/02/the\\_making\\_of\\_s.html](http://beth.typepad.com/beths_blog/2007/02/the_making_of_s.html)
- The Machine is Us/ing Us <http://mediatedcultures.net/ksudigg/?p=84>

### Further Information Sources

- Libcasting: Screencasting and Libraries, Greg Notess ([www.notess.com/screencasting](http://www.notess.com/screencasting)). Notess also puts on workshops, which include “Creating Online Tutorials in Less than 30 Minutes” (see <http://notess.com/speak/workshops.shtml>)
- Show and Tell The Easy Way—An Introduction to Screencasting, Paul Pival, distance education librarian, University of Calgary ([www.sirsidyntx.institute.com/seminar\\_page.php?sid=71](http://www.sirsidyntx.institute.com/seminar_page.php?sid=71))
- Beth Kanter: A Screencasting Primer [an excellent discussion!] ([http://beth.typepad.com/beths\\_blog/2007/03/screencasting\\_p.html](http://beth.typepad.com/beths_blog/2007/03/screencasting_p.html))

# Tracking Trends on the Net: Beyond the Buzz Trackers

The following article is an edited excerpt from a forthcoming book by the editor, *The Art of Strategic Listening*, scheduled to be published this fall by Paramount Market Publishing, Ithaca, N.Y.

*All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident.*

—Arthur Schopenhauer

How can you identify the critical emerging trends that will affect your firm, industry, and market? It's pretty clear that understanding unfolding trends can provide a competitive advantage to any organization. But a commitment to trend tracking is not commonly found in an information center or even in other parts of today's business. Why?

Although tracking trends is all about being prepared for the future, ironically the phrase itself has something of a retro, anachronistic sound. Perhaps this is because "futuristic"-sounding activities like trend tracking bring to mind now-dated cultural icons that represented the future in the '60s and '70s: *Future Shock*, the Picture Phone, World's Fairs, and George Jetson, for instance. It also doesn't help its image that, over the years in the corporate setting, trend tracking activities have been given dusty and dull titles like "environmental scanning" or "current awareness," which conjure up images of clerks hunched over piles of newspapers, clipping out articles.

But whatever we call it and however it's performed, the fact is that being aware of larger unfolding changes that will affect one's industry, company, products, market, and potential customers allows an organization to anticipate market changes and take necessary actions to be in a more competitive position. The earlier an organization can spot the emergence of a new trend, the more control and options it has in dealing with the trend on its own terms.

Learning how to detect trends requires cultivating a kind of peripheral vision that lets you see what's going on around you, even as you do your day-to-day

work. It's the kind of peripheral vision discussed in the book *The Intuitive Manager* that basketball star Bill Bradley had when playing his game: By looking closely at what was in front of him, but also rapidly scanning his environment around him, he was able to detect slight movements in his peripheral field that gave him a head start in making a successful move.

Today, there's renewed interest in scanning blogs and other online sites where consumers share opinions and experiences. But how can you filter the meaningful trend signals from the noise? This article looks at how you can effectively scan discussions on the blogosphere to discern relevant trends that may affect your organization.

## Trends Versus Fads

First, what exactly counts as a notable trend? A trend is a phenomenon that builds over time, has staying power, and is long-lasting. Trends typically emerge because of some underlying cause. A fad, by contrast, is a fast-moving phenomenon. Fads may seem to appear out of nowhere and are gone as quickly as they arrived. Fads reflect the mood of the moment rather than a steadily growing, deeper, long-lasting force and are not nearly as important to track as trends.

The table shows some examples of trends and underlying causes.

Note that many of these examples, as well as other key trends in general, can be traced to generational forces. Because of their sheer numbers, baby boomers in particular have been the

largest force behind emerging trends since their appearance 60 years ago, and they continue their influence today.

## Spotting Trends on the Web

These days, watching what's happening on the Internet, and on blogs and consumer conversation forums in particular, represents the latest and sexiest way to find new social trends. And sites like Google, IceRocket, and BlogPulse, among others, have introduced some interesting automated graphing tools and ranking lists that purport to surface the popular "memes," buzz, and trends on the Net. Although these are fun to review (and they can provide some interesting data on what people are currently searching, discussing, and linking to in the blogosphere), we do not recommend relying on these tools for any kind of deep and meaningful trend tracking. Their primary drawback is that, at heart, these tools really are only a *counting* mechanism—a quantitative method that answers the question *how many?*—how many times have bloggers mentioned a particular word or phrase, how many links are there to a particular news story, how many bloggers are linking to other bloggers, and so forth.

This is fine, as far as it goes. Sites and tools like this can alert you to interesting phenomena about what news story is hot at the moment, or what news story, blogger, etc., is currently popular. But a quantitative approach is not the right method for discerning meaning from a phenomenon as human and messy as an emerging social trend; that kind of

Trend	Possible Underlying Cause
Purchasing second or even third homes, including homes abroad	Baby boomers' increased disposable income and retirement planning
Growth of locally grown foods found in supermarkets	Baby boomers' concerns over health and environment; general increased awareness of environmental issues
Increased sales of hybrid vehicles	Higher gasoline costs; concerns about greenhouse gases and environmental issues
Increased downloading of movies to watch on PC	Younger people's preferences for online media; cultural expectation that all media should be free on the Web
Reduction in personal privacy	"Internet generation's" lowered expectation of what should be considered private; preferences for transparency and openness; self-branding on the Net
Increase in hiring of retired people as consultants for businesses	Brain drain from corporations as baby boomers retire; can hire without paying healthcare; desire for baby boomers to supplement income and remain active in work force



job requires a much more subtle analysis. Neil Postman, the late great educator and social critic, made this important distinction in his essay “Social Science as Moral Theology” in his book of essays, *Conscientious Objections*. There he distinguished between a *blink* and a *wink*: a blink is a natural biological mechanism and well-suited for quantitative, scientific methodologies to uncover its underlying mechanisms. A wink, being a willed, social action, is not well-suited to quantitative research techniques, and trying to derive larger meanings by using a quantitative approach would be a mistake.

The art of discerning emerging trends cannot, in our view, be neatly quantified simply by counting something up and looking at the resulting numbers. Instead, it requires a deeper immersion into the phenomenon, a knowledge of broader context, understanding of the subtleties of what one is looking at, and then posing some hard questions and doing analysis. Ideally, such immersion is done by actually interacting with people so you can experience what you want to find out about, but the good thing about the Internet is that it allows anyone to partake in a virtual immersion as a substitute.

## Locating Key Conversations

In what part of the Internet should you try to immerse yourself? What you really want to find and be regularly scanning and reviewing as your source material is what you might call the “key conversations.”

We would define a key conversation as one where the most involved, informed, and dynamic individuals within a particular industry, discipline, or issue are highly active. It’s where the back-and-forth discussions that take place at these lively and informed online forums are pushing knowledge forward and helping it evolve to a higher state.

How can you spot a key conversation? I’d say that key conversations include the following characteristics:

- Lots of activity: There are daily postings/discussions.
- Lots of energy: You can almost feel it emanating from the blog or forum.
- Lots of passion: You can tell that most of the participants care a great deal about the topic.
- Plugged-in members: The participants are on top of early developments and

the latest news, and they share their findings with others in the group.

- A sense of community: It’s clear that many participants know the other members.
- Little or no spam: This is a sign of a closely watched over and cared for forum or blog.
- Leaders: Often there are one or more people who take on leadership roles. They might pull together the threads of the discussion, provide larger context, reference some history, etc.
- Out of the mainstream: People on the fringes raise the topics and concerns that have the potential to eventually bubble up and affect the larger population.

A characteristic of some key conversations is that they emanate from or revolve around a well-known figure in the industry.

If you are already plugged into key conversations that are occurring around your industry or research area, that’s great. But how do you go about locating these from scratch? There’s no one single formula, of course, but here is one suggested approach:

**1. Make a first cut.** You might start your research by locating the most well-known, popular, and linked-to blogs and forums, as these would represent *potential* places where key conversations are occurring. For this first cut, you might try to locate 50 such conversations by using these sites and tools:

- *Technorati*: Perform a keyword search and set the “authority” filter to the highest level. This will retrieve only those blog posts that not only include your keywords, but also where the bloggers are linked to by the highest number of other bloggers.
- *Google Web Search*: Doing a keyword search and attaching the word “blog” to your search will increase the odds of retrieving blogs and conversations in your results list. Although your results will be a mixture of static Web pages and blog postings, only those blog postings that received a high Google “PageRank” will appear toward the top of the list, a good indicator of a popular site.
- *Google Blog Search*: Do a keyword search and see which bloggers appear toward the top of the search results, which means that Google’s

algorithm ranks it as of high “quality.” [*Editor’s Note*: See our article on blog searching in this issue for detailed information on how Google ranks its bloggers on quality.]

- *Yahoo! Groups*: Search for the groups with the highest number of members and that are the most active.
- *Traditional media*: Review articles in newspapers and trade journals on your industry/issue to note the names of bloggers quoted or cited by reporters. In this way, you leverage the work that the journalists have already done in locating a leading or popular blogger.

## 2. Winnow down to your finalists.

Now that you have an initial list, subscribe to those blogs and forums’ feeds in a newsreader such as Bloglines. Spend a week or so scanning the conversations. Doing this will help you make the next cut, where you’ll choose about seven to 10 key conversations to read and monitor regularly.

To make this cut, develop a level of self-awareness while you are scanning the conversations. Note to yourself which ones you end up getting sucked into and spending the most time with. Which are the ones that you find most intriguing and thought-provoking? Which conversations make you want to contribute and participate? Which ones challenge the way you have always thought about your market or customers and provide a fresh perspective? These are all indicators that what you are reading may be a key conversation.

When you are doing this initial reading, be attuned to a couple of other important matters. Are certain bloggers or people’s names frequently cited in a matter-of-fact way that implies that others in that group are aware of that person and his or her work? If so, that’s a good sign that that person is a respected and influential person. If he or she has a blog and it is not in your first cut, you may wish to add it. If, during this initial scanning, you discover that particular people consistently make the sharpest, most relevant, and insightful comments, you should pay close attention to who *they* cite and see if those people also have blogs you might add to your collection.

After taking a week or so to immerse yourself in this first batch of conversa-

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# Blog Searching: What Do Technorati's Competitors Offer?

Most researchers have come to realize that Technorati is the king of the blog search arena. Technorati indexes nearly 80 million blogs, and it offers many advanced and helpful features for sorting and filtering blogs.

But, just as you need to remember that you should use more than one Web search engine, it's also important to know the competing blog search sites. While it's true that Technorati's competitors are not as comprehensive or as fully featured, you may turn up blog postings that did not appear on Technorati. Each of the alternatives offers its own special strengths and should be part of your blog search toolkit.

What makes for a good blog search engine? In general, we feel that the most important features in a blog search engine are as follows:

- Number of blogs/feeds indexed (as comprehensive as possible)
- Accuracy of the blog ranking algorithm so that the most valuable blog postings are toward the top of the retrieved list (when searching blogs, the most valuable blog postings are the most recent, the most popular, and those with the most relevant content)
- Advanced search features, including Boolean searching and the ability to limit a search by fields; e.g., words in title, URL, etc. (to create a more precise search)
- The capability to identify the number of incoming links from other bloggers or Web pages or from the number of feed subscribers (to help assess the popularity of a blog)
- Highlighting of keywords in the excerpted text in the search results page (to make it easy to scan the listing for the most relevant and useful results)
- Retrieval of very recent blog postings within, say, 30 minutes from posting (for the most timely results)

Another key characteristic that distinguishes one blog search engine from another is whether or not it actually employs a crawler to go out to the Web

and index the words on the blog posting pages or if it just indexes the feeds produced by blogs. Sites that only index feeds can be less comprehensive, as these will miss blogs that do not produce feeds and may only index the short summaries contained in the feeds and not the full text.

For this article we examined several key competitors to Technorati and looked at these and other capabilities and features. The blog search engines we review here are Ask.com's blog search, Feedster, Google Blog Search, IceRocket, and Sphere. In what follows we give a summary of what we found to be the most significant features and capabilities for each.

As part of our testing, we searched for blog postings for a couple of prominent breaking business news stories: one was an announcement of the takeover of audio equipment maker Harman by KKR Group, and the other was the proposed acquisition of Dow Jones by the News Corporation. When running these searches, we paid close attention to the number of blog postings retrieved, their timeliness, and their relevance to our search query.

## Ask.com

When it comes to its blog search feature, Ask.com searches only feeds, but it includes two tabs for searching: "posts" and "feeds." Ask.com distinguishes the two by defining feeds as information from a single publication and posts as single stories. So if you select the "feeds" tab to do a search, you will actually be searching on the titles, tags, and summaries of the various feed providers.

In our test searches on the breaking business news stories, Ask.com returned the highest number of posts. Virtually all were relevant, and the postings themselves were extremely timely. Ask.com uses its own Bloglines crawler to check each feed in its database for updates every 30 minutes.

Ask.com's special strengths include its advanced search capabilities, a nice mouse-over preview of the blog page,

and a richly detailed results returned page that included keywords in context and bolded. We also liked Ask.com's ability to subscribe to a feed in one click, as well as the option to post it to one's blog or one of several other social bookmarking sites.

Interestingly, Ask.com distinguishes between popularity and relevance and offers a choice of the two in how to rank the matching blog posts. Popularity is defined simply as the number of users who subscribe to the blog's feed on Bloglines. Relevance relies on Ask.com's proprietary Teoma algorithm to determine which post is most relevant and looks at factors such as frequency of keywords, popularity, and freshness.

## Feedster

Feedster was one of the earliest sites to introduce an ability to search content from blogs. As its name implies, Feedster specializes in searching feeds, not the blog posts themselves. It did well in our test searches, returning a high number of feeds. Virtually all of them were relevant, although we did encounter some duplicates. We liked Feedster's simple one-button RSS subscribe option, its advanced searches, and excellent help pages. We found it a little harder to use than some of the others because it did not identify our keywords in the summaries of the feeds it retrieved.

## Google Blog Search

Google's Blog Search also searches only feeds. While its Blog Search initially did not get much praise from the blogger community, it retrieved a high number of relevant results in our tests and returned very timely postings.

Perhaps Google's biggest strength as a blog search engine is its sophisticated algorithm that it uses to rank blog postings, the details of which were just recently revealed online. This past March, Google's patent application for its blog search algorithm, which it originally filed in September 2005, was made publicly available. This shed some interesting light into what goes

into Google's blog ranking algorithm. While you can read the details on how this works on a couple of blogs (see, for instance, [www.seobythesea.com/?p=541](http://www.seobythesea.com/?p=541)), roughly speaking, the patent revealed that the key characteristics of a blog that Google uses in making its rankings and assigning each blog a "quality score" are as follows:

- Popularity of the blog, as measured by the number of RSS subscribers
- Implied popularity of the blog, based on how many people click on a link to a blog after conducting a keyword search (presumably on Google)

- Inclusion of the blog in other bloggers' blogrolls
- Existence of the blog in other "high quality" blogs' blogrolls
- Whether and how many users are adding tags to the blog
- References to the blog by sources other than blogs
- Google's PageRank of the blog (a measure of incoming links)

Interestingly, Google also penalizes a blog's "quality score" if it discovers certain characteristics that indicate potential spam: too many postings of the same size at the same intervals, lots of

duplicate content, and, naturally, if the blog's content includes words commonly associated with spam. (To view Google's blog ranking patent, you can link to <http://tinyurl.com/35etd4>.)

### IceRocket

IceRocket, like Google, searches feeds and has been around as an alternative blog search engine for some time. We found that this blog search engine had strong plusses as well as strong minuses. On the plus side, IceRocket is the only blog search engine other than Technorati that permits searching by tag, a very useful feature,

Blog Search Engines Compared						
	Ask.com	Feedster	Google Blog Search	IceRocket	Sphere	Technorati
<b>Locates Blogs By</b> –Blogs HTML page –Feeds/Pings	NO YES	NO YES	NO YES	YES YES	YES YES	YES YES
<b>Blog Search Page Also Searches</b>	News	News, podcasts	Nothing <sup>1</sup>	News, images, MySpace, Web	Photos, news, books	Blog directory, podcasts, videos
<b>Boolean Advanced Search</b>	YES	YES	YES	YES	Minus for NOT	YES
<b>Boolean Fields</b> –Title –Author –Subject –Body –Description –URL –Date/Time –Tags –Other	YES YES YES YES YES YES NO Language, Citation	YES YES NO NO YES YES YES Domain, Host	YES YES NO NO NO YES YES SafeSearch	YES YES NO NO NO YES YES N.A.	YES NO NO NO NO YES NO N.A.	NO NO NO NO YES NO YES Favorites, Blogs About
<b>Display Shows</b> –Headline –Blog Name –Excerpt –Keywords –Poster's Name –Date/Time –Other	YES YES YES YES YES YES YES	YES YES YES NO YES YES Size of posting	YES YES YES YES YES YES "More results," "References"	YES YES YES YES YES YES Size of posting, number of blogs linking in	YES YES YES YES NO YES N.A.	YES YES YES YES YES YES Number of blogs linking in
<b>Sort By</b> –Relevancy –Date –Other	YES YES Popularity	YES YES N.A.	YES YES N.A.	NO YES N.A.	YES YES English language	NO DEFAULT N.A.
<b>Post Search Filtering By</b>	Date/time	N.A.	Date/time	Date/time	Date/time	Authority
<b>One-Button Save Search as RSS</b>	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
<b>Save/Share Capabilities</b>	Save	NO	NO	FaceBook, Digg, Newsvine	NO	NO
<b>Special Features</b>	Mouse-over preview, subscribe to feed, post to Bloglines, Blogger, Digg, del.icio.us, Newsvine, and Reddit	N.A.	Create email alert for search; add "blog search gadget" to Google home page	Surfaces hot topics; Maps trends	"Sphere it" to retrieve; related news	View in mini; create/search favorite blogs; search directory; view bloggers "authority" ranking; more. View blog profile.

1. Of course, Google also allows for separate searching on the Web, News, Local, etc.

and it offers several excellent advanced search options.

We also liked the fact that the returned blog post listing identified the number of incoming blog links (though these did not always work correctly), and the name of the blog author. We appreciated that we could save and share (on FaceBook, Digg, and News-vine) what we found. We also liked Ice-Rocket's cool "trend it" feature. On the downside, though, IceRocket retrieved far fewer results from our test searches and did not include the newer postings retrieved on the other blog search engines. We also thought its interface and search results page was a bit messy and jumbled. We found some duplicates along with a few sites that were not relevant to our search.

### Sphere

Sphere is one of the newer blog search engines, having launched in May 2006, and it searches both feeds and actual posts (see Figure 2). Sphere is unusual in that its goal is to surface all varieties of "conversational media." It does this by surfacing links and related stories between blogs and those published in online mainstream media



The Sphere blog search engine can also locate related news articles from online mainstream media sites.

Figure 2

sites. After running a blog search, we could click "Sphere it" under a particular blog result to instruct Sphere to find related content and stories on those mainstream media sites that Sphere has set up partnerships with, such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, and other prominent media. Sphere employs semantic analysis to determine what counts as a relevant story. We found that, for most of our searches, this matching method worked quite well, though of course not perfectly.

As we were going to press, Sphere launched its version 1.2, which revamped much of how it operated. One

of the big changes was that blog search now only retrieves blogs from the last 7 days.

Note that since we have covered Technorati extensively in recent past issues, we are not describing it in detail in this article; however, we include it in the feature chart for comparison purposes.

Overall, while we still like Technorati for its comprehensiveness and various advanced searches and filtering capabilities, its interface seems to be getting increasingly cluttered. For those who prefer a cleaner high-quality blog search, our picks are Ask.com, Feedster, and Google Blog Search.

tions, you should zero in on the seven to 10 or so that you felt were relevant to your industry or issue, met these criteria, and just felt right to you based on your understanding of the issues or environment.

Ideally, the conversations you select in this final cut would have some built-in diversity. In this way, your sources would follow a fundamental principle of pre-Web trend tracking, which is that one's media and reading should draw from a wide range of information sources and reflect a diversity of views. So you might try to include the following in your final list:

- At least one, and preferably two or three, conversations where the discussions occur primarily outside of your country.
- One that seems quite fringy/alternative and whose members' views are not accepted by the mainstream thinkers

in the field.

- One that has a loyal and dedicated following but whose perspective and outlook you disagree with.
- One that represents mainstream conversation; reading this will give you a good yardstick for what is generally accepted thinking for this field/issue.
- A few whose focus is outside of your field, but where the conversation relates to issues where you think there may be some overlap and possible influence. For instance, say you are in an industry that sells healthy foods in school cafeterias—you might also include a key conversation on good parenting. If your firm is planning to market fuel cells for home use, you might include a conversation on, say, sustainable home building, as there would be an emphasis on self-sufficient living in that discussion as well.

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