

# Caught in the Current of Writer River: Building and Participating in Community-driven Websites

By TOM JOHNSON, Member

A couple of years ago, I went through a Digg phase. I listened to the Dignation podcast and set my home page to the most popular posts on Digg.com. Digg is a community-driven news site that allows any user to post links to interesting articles and other online content. Others can then vote on the submitted articles. Articles with the most votes appear on the front page.

Digg's main focus is technology, and I always thought it would be cool to have a tech comm version of Digg with news more relevant to me. One weekend I sat down and created a Digg imitation using software called Pligg. Pligg is pretty much a Digg clone, so I thought it would work out perfectly. I called the site Writer River, referring to the idea of content that continuously flows down a river, all merged into one stream of information that bystanders can observe from a single view, perhaps picking out an object for a while and then sending it back down the river.

The site was well-received, and it seemed to be taking off, gathering around 50 registered users within the first week. But if I was hoping for a Digg clone, I had a lot to achieve. For starters,

whereas the typical number of votes on articles submitted to Digg was around 500+, the number of votes on Writer River was a bit depressing—3 or 4, and sometimes 9 if I voted several times.

The movement of unpublished articles to the front page (through an increasing number of votes) simply wasn't happening. The site lacked the robust, thriving community of Digg, which made me realize a fundamental truth about Web 2.0 sites: it's all about the community, not the technology.

I posted less frequently on Writer River and grew more frustrated with the number of spam posts appearing as pseudo articles (for example, posts on hand cream). I'd set Writer River as my home page, and one day while launching my browser I didn't see the site but rather a message that said, "Your site was hacked by Silahsiz Kuvvetler, the Turkish Hacker."

To be honest, it was a bit of a relief. I felt I needed to regroup and come up with a better implementation of Writer River. By then Twitter was all the rage, and I'd heard good things about Prologue, a Twitter-like WordPress theme in which people could leave brief messages directly from the home page without logging in to the administration panel.



Since I was comfortable with WordPress, I sat down one Friday night and worked on version two of Writer River.

In version two, I didn't want voting. I just wanted to see articles float across the home page. In large communities, where perhaps 100 new articles are submitted a day, you need a voting mechanism to filter the content, but not with

my community. The average submission was about two posts a day.

People were excited to see the site back, and while the sink/float voting features of the original version were gone, the second implementation proved a lot more functional. Rather than walking through several wizard-like submission screens, Writer River 2.0 in-

cluded WordPress's new "bookmarklet," a script-based bookmark that you drag to your browser's Links toolbar. When you read an article you like, you click the bookmarklet link, and a small window appears with the link to the article you're reading. All you do is hit Publish, and it appears on Writer River. It literally takes three seconds.


It's been several months since I launched Writer River 2.0, and so far it's working well. The bookmarklet made me realize that with technology, what's convenient gets used. Replace a posting process that takes 30 seconds with one tenth of the time, and you suddenly find yourself posting a lot more frequently.

This is true of the phenomenon of blogging in general. Blogs make it easy to publish content; as a result, millions of people are blogging daily, publishing new content at unprecedented rates of about a million new posts per day.

The nearly infinite sea of information—one million new posts a day—makes sites like Writer River necessary. We need human aggregators, people who'll sift through hundreds of feeds each day (like Robert Scoble, a famous tech blogger), to highlight the most important content and pass it on.

Other community-driven sites are taking off. The latest, StackOverflow.com, combines a question-and-answer site with Digg functionality. Users submit questions, others respond with answers, and readers vote on the helpfulness of the answers. When people vote positively for your answer, you accrue reputation points that appear below your name. The more reputation points you gain, the more administrator privileges you have on the site.

When hundreds of people engage in content-generation and exchange, impressive results can occur—namely, you find a lot of interesting, accurate content. Writer River doesn't have a large enough community to be on par with these sites, but it's a step in the right direction.

You can visit Writer River at <http://writerriver.com>. After registering in the sidebar, add the Post It link to your browser's Link toolbar, navigate to an interesting article, and click your browser's Post It link. 

*Tom Johnson (tomjohnson1492@gmail.com) is a senior technical writer for User Education team at The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and a member of the Intermountain chapter in Utah. He has a blog about technical communication at <http://idratherebwriting.com>.*