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## The Edge: Online combination plate aims to build community

A University of Minnesota website seeks to build community by combining blogs, podcasts and video.

**Steve Alexander**, Star Tribune

To keep up with rapid changes in Internet technology, the University of Minnesota is offering students, faculty and staff a combination of three popular online services: blogs (written material), podcasts (spoken audio) and amateur digital movies.

"I wanted to see whether we could build a university community out of blogging software," said Shane Nackerud, Web services coordinator for the University of Minnesota Libraries. He supervises the free "UThink" project. "I get calls about it from other universities, because it's a young technology that not many other schools are using."

It's all delivered via the Internet. Opinion-oriented blogs (shortened from the phrase "Web logs") can be read through a Web browser. Podcasts, which tend toward commentary, are linked to the blog pages and can be downloaded and played by a PC's MP3 music player software. Video linked to the blog pages comes in many formats depending on the camera used to record it. So users are on their own to find the correct computer software to play the video, said Rich Reardon, a media producer at the university's Digital Media Center.

All three forms of Net expression are combined using commercial software operated by the University of Minnesota Libraries. The blog software is two years old, but the podcasting and video download capabilities were added late last year. So far, 2,403 people affiliated with the university have tried the system, although not all have kept their creative efforts up to date, Nackerud said.

One blogger quit updating after the 2004 presidential election, leaving behind this observation: "We have one guy who can't use words bigger than two syllables and a guy who looks like he just woke up from the dead." Another user writes the "Bosco Dog Blog," which was updated last week with the continuing first-person story of a dog who lives with a woman named Joan. One of the more elaborate efforts is "Mr. Cheer Or Die's Viking Underground," a blog that includes player photos, football game video, a "Zygi Wilf Job Approval Rating" chart and opinion podcasts.

A few faculty members are trying to use the Uthink project as an extension of the classroom, either by requiring students to write online material or by using the service to present classroom information, Nackerud said. Undergraduate

students use UThink for schoolwork, but haven't embraced it for personal use, he said. That's probably because undergrads already are using the popular "myspace.com" commercial website that combines blogs, music, photos and video, he said. U of M graduate students are the ones most likely to use the service for personal communications, he said.

Contributing to the blog-podcast-video collection requires a University of Minnesota logon, but the site can be browsed at [blog.lib.umn.edu](http://blog.lib.umn.edu). Individual pages such as the "Bosco Dog Blog" can be located quickly with a Google search.

"Google loves UThink," Nackerud said. That's probably because Google's search algorithms favor Web pages with university or library Internet addresses. "The addresses give us more credentials."

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