

The World Wide Blog

Joichi Ito, founder of Neoteny and other Internet companies, finds that cyberspace is embracing its roots -- collaboration, community, and personal communications -- with bloggers leading the way.

Joichi Ito is the founder and CEO of Neoteny, <http://www.neoteny.com>, a venture capital firm focused on personal communications and enabling technologies. He has created numerous Internet companies including PSINet Japan, Digital Garage and Infoseek Japan. In 1997 *Time* ranked him as a member of the CyberElite. In 2000 he was ranked among the "50 Stars of Asia" by *Business Week* and commended by the Japanese Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications for supporting the advancement of IT. In 2001 the World Economic Forum chose him as one of the 100 "Global Leaders of Tomorrow" for 2002.

UBIQUITY: You seem to be doing all kinds of things. What are you mainly focused on these days?

ITO: Let's see, currently the main thing that I do is Technorati, which is a search and notification engine for live stuff happening on the Net, currently focusing on blogs. I'm on the board of Creative Commons, which is an effort to create copyright licenses to make the sharing of content easier and better. I'm also the CEO of Neoteny.com, which is a venture investment firm and the lead investor in Six Apart, which is one of the leading blog software companies.

UBIQUITY: Tell us something about your background.

ITO: My background is that I started one of the first Web companies in Japan. I started PSINet in Japan, which was sold to cable and wireless when the U.S. PSINet disappeared. And I started Infoseek Japan, which is now the second largest portal in Japan.

UBIQUITY: How would you sum all that up?

ITO: I guess by saying that one of the things I do is I make Japanese subsidiaries of parents, and the subsidiaries try to survive the parent. Besides that, I also do a lot of government policy work in the area of security and privacy,

and lately other things like business and finance. I spend a pretty big chunk of my time blogging. I'm on the board of a Wiki company called SocialText and a bunch of other smaller companies. I do angel investing. I have been admitted into the International Business Strategy Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) program at the Hitotsubashi University Graduate School of International Corporate Strategy and will be writing a book on the "Sharing Economy". I guess in a nutshell that's what I do.

UBIQUITY: How did you get to this point?

ITO: I was studying computers in college for a little while at Tufts, and then the University of Chicago, but I decided that being in school was not how I wanted to learn about computers, so I dropped out of both of those schools and became a disk jockey. I was involved in media-related things and doing a lot of computer stuff on my own -- consulting and just hacking. But my day job was really everything from music promotions, to disk jockey, to working on television, motion pictures and live concerts. I think it was back when Netcom first started their IP service that I had an "Aha!" realization that a convergence between media and the computer networking stuff I was doing was definitely going to happen. This was back in the early '90s. That's when I really decided what I was interested in doing. Of course, I'd been doing computer networking and messing around with Arpanet and stuff like that, but that's when I decided I would shift my focus entirely to the Internet.

UBIQUITY: What were you doing at your day job in those days?

ITO: At the time when I was doing a lot of the TV and motion picture stuff, a pretty big chunk of my energy was being spent on computer graphics and virtual reality. In fact I first started hearing about ACM because I used to go to all of the SIGGRAPHs. What's interesting right now for me is the fact that, although a lot of the dot-com was about commerce and big companies and big projects, after the bubble the Internet sort of fell back to its roots: empowering individuals through networked computing, ad hoc open standards, and lots of smart hackers working on cool stuff.

UBIQUITY: Let's go back for a moment to the formal part of your education at Tufts and Chicago. Were you a computer science student?

ITO: I did engineering with a focus on computer science at Tufts, and then at University of Chicago I did a couple of years of physics. But nothing substantial and nothing worth boasting about. I basically dropped out and did a lot of computer networking stuff on my own, and did odd jobs in the media. To be more specific, in '91 or '92 I worked on "Indian Runner", which is a movie that Sean Penn directed. In '92 I helped set up Magic Box Productions, a computer graphics company. And around '93, '94 I started seriously doing a lot of Internet work.

UBIQUITY: What was your first company?

ITO: It was started in '94 and called Eccosys. It eventually merged into a company called Digital Garage and eventually went public as one of the first Web companies in Japan.

UBIQUITY: What's the best site to refer to give to people who want to get to know you?

ITO: joi.ito.com. If you go on the right-hand side there's a section "About Ito" offering a verbose sort of walk-through of what I've done. Towards the bottom of the page there's a link to my CV, which gives companies and titles and stuff like that.

UBIQUITY: A lot of your efforts are in Japan now, right? Is that where you're based?

ITO: I'm based in Japan but I've been spending about 80 percent of my time in Europe and the U.S. Most of the companies I'm working for or with are in Silicon Valley.

UBIQUITY: Where did you grow up?

ITO: I was born in Japan, and I moved to Canada and then the United States when I was about two or three years old. I was in the U.S. until I was about 13, when I went back to Japan, attended the International School and then the American School and then came back to the States for junior high and high school and college. All my life I've gone back and forth between Japan and the U.S. (and more recently Europe) without being in one place very long. I flew

100,000 miles in the first three months of the year, and I spend most of my time on the plane.

UBIQUITY: Let's go back to what were you saying about the dot-com bubble.

ITO: After the bubble burst, it freed up a bunch of really smart engineers who were stuck in pretty big, pretty stupid projects, to be honest about it. What happened then is that instead of having these big VC-funded projects, you would have teams of two or three people working on really cool stuff. This is similar to how the Internet was in the early '90s. So what happened was that people started saying, OK, we've got XML, and we've got all these great new standards, but why do we have to make them all so big and complicated? Why can't we rally around some open standards and build tools that just work? Rather than having to work with these big standards bodies and things like that.

UBIQUITY: And the blogs fit into this notion?

ITO: Yes. Weblogs are, from a technological perspective, just content management systems that use a bunch of the technologies and standards that have been developed in the community -- things such as style sheets and syndication formats, the ability to import and export entries between software packages, and the existence of a common API that allows you to write a client for all the different blog packages. It's really what the Internet is all about, and what the big companies are NOT all about.

UBIQUITY: Expand on that idea.

ITO: A good example would be the various instant messaging systems, which became popular during the days of the dot-com, and which were unable to talk to one another. There was no standardization or any friendliness at all, whereas if you look at blog software, all of the good blog software has a common API, and you can write client software that will talk to all of them. That's what makes the blogs so great -- the fact that they're tools built by people who are using them themselves with a very, very close connection to the user and the customer. Therefore blogging was able to evolve much more quickly in terms of API feature sets and standardization, and the modern Weblog now is quite a sophisticated combination of Web services and standards. When new entries are created on a blog, they ping -- send messages to -- a bunch of central sites that tell everybody

that a Weblog has been updated, and then you've got Web services that come and index them, and you've got other Web services that notify other people.

UBIQUITY: How do syndication formats fit into this scheme of things?

ITO: Because the syndication formats have been standardized, you can actually go and get the XML syndication of everyone's Weblog, and then you can aggregate them, and you can filter them. In addition, there's all this wonderful work being done in what we're calling micro content production and sharing management.

UBIQUITY: Give us a good example.

ITO: A good example is Creative Commons, the nonprofit I serve on as a board member. At Creative Commons we've created a metadata format to mark up content with copyright notices that give permission to other people to share or mix or create derivative works from content that's been uploaded. Again, we've got search engines that are now indexing this metadata. The upshot is that it's just amazing how you can get all these developers and users to work together when you take away a lot of formal structures that were in place. If you look at the Mozilla project, or Safari, or Opera, I don't know if you've noticed but just recently they've taken off in a new direction away from the W3C. They've started implementing a whole bunch of new tags that remind you of 1993 or 1994, in the days when Marc Andreessen was making things like blink tags and stuff, and getting all the elders all mad. He just kept making all these new tags with Mozilla, and then later with Netscape. So what's happened is that a lot of the Internet used to be about ad hoc open standards to do things despite what dad was saying, but now the Internet has become dad himself. You've got this new generation of Internet people and companies going off and doing it on their own again. It's probably a cyclical thing, but right now we're in an interesting cycle where there's a lot of innovation. There's also a lot of chaos in the standards, but people are moving along quite quickly, and we've got a huge number of users who have been waiting for something new like this to come out, who are adopting it very quickly.

UBIQUITY: The chaos is controlled?

ITO: Yes, and it's all very exciting. I think many people are focusing on the upturn of the economy and the buzz and the venture capital business. But really what's exciting for me are all of the amazing new products for sharing photos and writing and indexing Weblogs, and all this stuff for personal communication and sharing that's coming out right now. Other people use the term "social software," but if you look at Wikipedia and all these great, collaborative projects that are happening online, you'll see that they are all things that people used to talk about, such as the potential of the Internet and so on. I think we were waylaid for a couple of years in a kind of dot-com online vending machine period, but that now we're back to the roots of the Internet, which is really about collaboration.

UBIQUITY: So "collaboration" is the key idea?

ITO: Absolutely. If you look historically -- at Minitel, Delphi, or any online service -- they always started out thinking they were going to sell packaged products, whether it was content or physical goods, to consumers, and yet at the end of the day most of the people just want to talk to each other. That is what blogs are all about -- a group of people talking to each other in a new medium.

UBIQUITY: Do you happen to have any numbers or statistics on this whole phenomenon?

ITO: Yes. One of the companies I work for is Technorati, and we index Weblogs. Some of the recent statistics will show that we're currently indexing three million blogs, and we only index blogs that send us messages to ask us to index them. Our statistics show that there is a new Web log created every 5.8 seconds and that the rate of increase is accelerating. We see about 275,000 individual new posts every day.

UBIQUITY: Big numbers.

ITO: Yes, and the other interesting thing about Weblogs is that they're not by any means all in the United States. There are a huge number of Iranian Weblogs in Persian. China's got a Weblog boom going, Poland's got a Weblog boom going, Japan's just starting up. Unlike traditional chat rooms and things like that, a lot of the discussion is quite substantial, and I think that Weblogs will play an increasing role in checking the media, participating in politics: everything from fact-checking to activism.

UBIQUITY: You mentioned the various countries where blogging has taken hold. Compare its use in the U.S. and some of those other countries.

ITO: The U.S. is still by far the largest country in terms of the number of Web logs. I pick Poland and Iran as examples of places you wouldn't expect to see them, but that are on the rise. In China a lot of people are trying to use Web logs for free speech. Japan has been quite slow in getting started, but we've just launched a couple of big sites in Japan and blogging is finally hitting a stride and becoming more popular.

UBIQUITY: Why do you think Japan would be slow in getting started?

ITO: I'm not sure. Japan has always had a diary culture, and Weblogs and diaries are very similar, and Japan has also had this huge online anonymous bulletin board culture. So Japan had been addressing some of the issues using different technologies, and blogging didn't seem like anything new to the Japanese for a while. Also, I think that with a lot of these things there needs to be a Johnny Appleseed factor. In Iran a guy named Hoder wrote the first Persian Web page about how to create and manage a blog, and you can trace most of the blogs back to that post. In the same way, that kind of word-of-mouth phenomenon in Japan has started people coming online. I guess a lot of this has to do with what you might think of as "needware." In Iran there was more suppression of free speech in the blog and a lot more professional journalists went into blogging very early on. I don't know for sure, but I think that we're seeing Japan finally come online.

UBIQUITY: Do you have any concern that blogging might just be fad, and not really a lasting innovation? For awhile everyone in the U.S. was talking about CB radio, and now you never even hear it mentioned.

ITO: Yes, but there are a variety of things the Weblogs have that we haven't had in the past. One is that we are creating a lot of new Web services such as, for example, Google's facility for ranking pages by reputation.

UBIQUITY: How does that work?

ITO: When you do a Google search for a term, it will determine -- based on who's linking to whom -- who has a strong reputation and it will rank that site higher, and show it earlier in the results. There are a huge number of people who spend a lot of time criticizing, or debunking, or fact checking, the quality of information on Weblogs, so that blogs are now overlapping with the traditional media. There's a great book coming out by Dan Gillmor, who's a columnist at the *San Jose Mercury News*, called "We The Media," which talks about how the audience often knows more than the journalist now, and is really becoming part of the media. I don't know whether you want to call it audience activism, or participatory media, but that whole movement of waking people up and getting them to participate is a phenomenon that blogs are enabling. I wrote a paper called "Emergent Democracy," which talked about how the positive feedback and the negative feedback elements of blogs allow an emergent leadership and behavior that didn't occur before with a normal Web page. Because blogs are like conversations, and when somebody links to me I know that they've linked and I can check who's linking to them.

UBIQUITY: You call it conversation, but people can't make entries on your blog.

ITO: They can comment on my blog. And they do. If I make an assertion on my blog, which I often do, I will get sometimes hundreds of comments, automatically posted on my blog.

UBIQUITY: Hundreds? Doesn't that make sort of a mess?

ITO: Sometimes, but usually not. For instance, suppose I see something on the wire that says something like, "Rumsfeld Bans Camera Phones in Iraq," and I post this item that says, this is what I heard, but it's a single source, it looks kind of sketchy, what do you guys think? And then Xeni on Boing Boing, which is another blog, calls the Defense Department and basically debunks the story just as the traditional media are just picking it up as though it were a fact. Then I have a bunch of people talking about this and I have somebody logging in from an Internet café in Baghdad, Private First Class, saying here's the deal and this is what's going on in Baghdad.

UBIQUITY: So your audience plays a real role in the show.

ITO: Yes. Because I have a reputation to protect I'm very careful about the assertions I make on the blog, because I know that tens of thousands of people read my blog every day now -- conservatives, soldiers in Iraq, Chinese, Japanese and many others -- so everything that I post must be fairly rigorous and defensible because, unlike the newspaper, people can post a comment, everyone else can read it -- and it ends up becoming part of my Google results.

UBIQUITY: Do you consider yourself a journalist?

ITO: A lot of journalists tell me that I am an amateur journalist because I don't have training. But I have yet to hear a single thing that a journalist has told me about journalistic ethics or his code that doesn't sound like nothing more than common sense to me when I post a blog entry. Although I often post earlier and with less information than a traditional newspaper journalist would, that's also because I get such wonderful comments on my blog -- with information from the sources. For example, I have reverends commenting about religion, I have U.S. Military posting about the war. It's often interesting just to pose a question and have the people discuss it.

UBIQUITY: Do you impose editing control over what's posted on your blog?

ITO: I don't. I have a policy of not taking down any posts that are critical of me, or corporations, or technologies. But I do take down posts that are slanderous attacks on other people or things that are particularly emotional.

UBIQUITY: What if they're just dumb and/or bombastic and/or verbose?

ITO: I leave a lot of that stuff on just because you can skim through it. I don't like to censor things unnecessarily. But I often check the e-mail address and e-mail a person and try to fact-check some things sometimes. If somebody doesn't have a valid e-mail address, that'll often trigger me to take down a post. This is kind of knock-on-wood, but I have an interesting comment section because a lot of my readers have developed into a community, and so I don't have to often go down and beat up and chase down every jerk who posts on my blog. The people who post on my blog kind of protect it as if it were their hangout. And actually, I have an IRC channel, Internet Relay Chat, where there's always about 100 or so people camped on, many are readers of my blog, and they've developed their own community and they have meet-ups and things like that. So my blog has

become a place where people hang out, and that's really an important thing because it's self-moderating. I used to have to beat up every troll that came into my space, but usually now my readers are the ones who take care of people who are out of line.

UBIQUITY: In addition to looking at your Web site, what recommendations do you have for people who are just getting interested in blogs?

ITO: When we're done I'll give you the URLs of some blogs to look at. For starters I would suggest a blog called Baghdad Burning, which is written by a woman in Iraq who uses the pseudonym Riverbend. The best overall blog is Boing Boing, a group blog. Blogs have everything from soft porn to geek blogs. Also, check the hottest blogs and blog entries on our Technorati site. We list everything from the top 100 most popular blogs, to the breaking stories that bloggers are pointing to. The important thing is to find a couple of blogs about topics you're interested in, and make use of newsreaders or news aggregators, which are XML syndication feed aggregators that allow you to take a whole bunch of blogposts from blogs -- just the text -- and read it in the news reader as if you were reading e-mail. For instance, I have 2,000 blogs in my newsreader, and I read everything new from all 2,000 blogs every day.

UBIQUITY: Not just new on certain subjects, but everything that they have?

ITO: Yes. It lets you scan things very quickly, and lets you just read the new stuff without going to a bunch of Web pages.

UBIQUITY: So should everybody in the world have his or her own blog?

ITO: A lot of it has to do with what the definition of a blog is, but to generalize what a blog is, you might think of it as a content management system for micro content and standardized syndication, filtering format and notification format. That includes everything from how to post pictures from PhotoShop, to Alzheimer's patients talking to their families, to all kinds of things. If everyone is interested in sharing content with others, I think that everyone will end up, in some way, becoming a blogger, and part of what could be called the consumer publishing movement. A lot of it has to do with the fact that our computers and our phones are becoming so much more powerful that you can create and edit content, and you can post it and share it.

UBIQUITY: So it's not just for pundits.

ITO: No. The people who are leading the way are people who like to have opinions and share opinions, and talk. But at the end of the day I think that everyone has something to say. Blogging is for everyone.

[END]

Some blogs worth looking at:

<http://www.technorati.com/cosmos/top100.html>

<http://www.boingboing.net/>

<http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com/>

<http://www.hoder.com/weblog/>

<http://accordionguy.blogware.com/>

<http://www.typepad.com/>

<http://joi.ito.com/>

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