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## Bloggers banish the keyboard

Voice recognition software is being used to update websites remotely, says **Maija Palmer**

The Consumer Electronics Show, a technology conference that kicks off today in Las Vegas, is a stressful place for bloggers.

Thousands of journalists and commentators battle it out for limited space in the media centre. Some are contorted over minuscule portable keyboards, typing furiously in order to be the first to update their web pages with news.

This year, however, some bloggers will be trying out a new speech recognition tool that may help them beat the competition. Voice blogging software allows its users to dictate their entries into a mobile phone. These are then converted into text automatically and posted directly to a website – no hands or keyboards needed.

Ricky Cadden, who writes the SymbianGuru.com mobile technology blog, used the software – which is produced by UK company SpinVox – while covering the Nokia World Exhibition in Amsterdam in December. He vows to use it at all future conferences.

“Rather than walk about focusing on typing updates onto a TV keypad, I was able to keep my eyes alert while still updating my readers on what was going on. To me, this made everything 10 times easier,” he writes in a post mortem on his website.

Mr Cadden is a technology enthusiast. But in addition to early adopters such as him, voice blogging is starting to be used by athletes who want to provide blow-by-blow updates to fans and supporters.

Anna Hemmings, Britain's current world champion marathon canoeist and 2007 BBC London Sports Personality of the Year, for example, updates her blog by voice, chronicling her punishing training regime on the go.

Paul Mitson, a British driver who was due to compete in the cancelled 16-day Lisbon-to-Dakar rally race, had set up the facility so that he could update friends and family “live” while on the road.

Others are also experimenting with voice blogging for use at times when they cannot reach a computer – such as on a long drive, a remote beach holiday or when they want to capture a moment at a concert. SpinVox, a Buckinghamshire-based

company, is one of the key companies offering blogging by voice.

The company started out with a focus on converting voicemail messages into text, but is now branching out into internet applications.

“The opportunity for this technology is greater than just voicemail – it can be used for speaking to the web,” says James Scroggs, head of SpinVox's consumer division.

Last year, it signed a deal with LiveJournal, the San Francisco-based blogging site, to provide voice blogging technology for its 12m users. A few months after its launch, it was estimated that more than 10,000 members were using the technology.

The company says similar deals are likely to follow this year, as mobile access to the internet becomes easier and people want to update their social networking pages remotely. Nuance Communications, a Massachusetts-based technology company, has also been promoting its speech recognition technology to bloggers for the past year, stressing that it can be three times faster than typing.

Google and Microsoft are interested too. The search engine has been running a speech-recognition-based directory service in the US for the past year. A truly accurate speech recognition service has to be “trained” to recognise words spoken in many different intonations.

By donating their voice samples, those who call up the Google information service help the company create a system that could be used for a number of internet applications in the future.

Microsoft, meanwhile, bought Tellme, the California-based voice services company, in March. Tellme also runs directory services in the US, and has a voice-enabled mobile search operation.

SpinVox says it has been in discussions with both Google and Microsoft over its speech technology, but Christina Domeen, chief executive, has so far been unwilling to sell the company.

Some analysts are sceptical of the broader potential of blogging by phone. Caroline Chow, research analyst at Canalys, a technology research group, says functions such as voice-enabled navigation – asking a satellite navigation device for directions while driving – and telephone enquiry services are likely to be the main uses.



Hands-free: canoeist Anna Hemmings blogs by phone

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