



FIRST STEPS LINUX BEGINNERS SERIES

Web 2.0 The new web tools

Make the most of blogs, image sites and more with Andy Channelle.

LAST
TIME

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The world wide web is heading into adolescence and there are big changes on the horizon that will change the way we use it. Though the technology that underpins the whole edifice has evolved to provide faster speeds, more reliable connections and better ways of finding information, the same can't be said at the user end. Scratch the surface of your browser and you'll find a pretty similar application to the first *Mosaic* browser that came out of the National Center for Supercomputing Applications in March 1993. Despite many refinements, the web browser still basically displays pages formatted in HTML and stores the addresses of websites for later recall. But that is changing as developers start to toy with the possibilities – and original promises – of the internet as a true read/write medium.

This tutorial is all about accessing and using second generation, or Web 2.0 applications that run on the internet rather than a local machine. They can be apps designed for displaying images, saving bookmarks or jotting down your thoughts for the world (or just yourself) to see.

Of course, anyone who's used Yahoo Mail, Hotmail or some other webmail system will have been doing this for years, but the latest innovations in online apps are far more sophisticated. And it's testament to the perceived future value of these things that the biggest names on the internet have been buying up Web 2.0 companies as though the dotcom bubble had never burst. Perversely, we'll be concentrating a bit on established local apps that can interact with these marvels of Web 2.0 loveliness.

PART 1 – WEB-BASED BLOGGING

Personal web homepages have been available for ages, but it's only with the advent of services such as Blogger and LiveJournal that it has become simple enough for anyone with a PC to publish their ideas to the rest of the computer-owning world. Setting up an account with either of these services (or any other one just a quick web search away) is incredibly simple.

But what we're concerned with here are applications that allow you to post content to a blog without having to log into the actual account. The simplest option is the Blog This extension for *Firefox*, which works with Google's Blogger service.

You can get it from Tools > Extensions > Get More Extensions in *Firefox* or from <https://addons.mozilla.org/extensions/> under the Blogging header. You may need to add this site to the list of URLs allowed to install software if you haven't installed any extensions before, and this can be done from the yellow bar that appears at the top of the *Firefox* window when any attempt is made to install something from the web.

As its name suggests, Blog This is ideal if you're making notes on websites. To launch it when you're at a comment-provoking site, double-click anywhere on the page and select

the appropriate menu entry to launch the applet. Once you have logged in with the applet, a new window opens with a toolbar across the top and a large text area for your rant. This toolbar contains a decent set of text formatting tools and a drop-down list of active accounts, so if you're maintaining a number of blogs under the same username, it's easy to select which one you're posting to. Once the missive has been written, hit Publish to have the text, plus a link to the original article sent to your blog. It's possible to save a post as a draft for later editing too. Cancel a post just by closing the window.

Going deeper

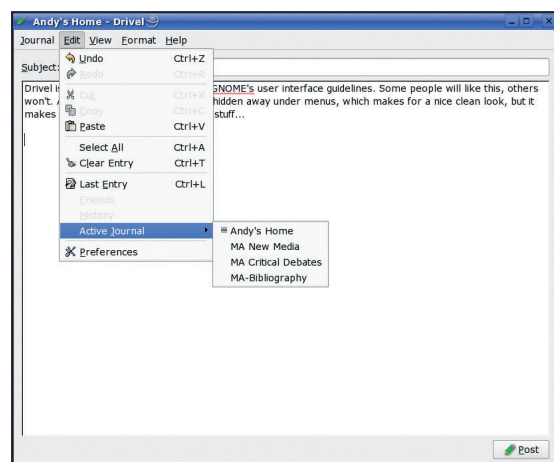
There doesn't seem to be an equivalent of Blog This for LiveJournal; however, there is a complete *Firefox/Mozilla*-based application that will do the job called *Deepest Sender* (<http://deepestsender.mozdev.org/>). Again, this will install into the latest version of *Firefox*, but this time is available via the Tools menu. The big difference here is that once you're logged in, *Deepest Sender* provides almost all of the functionality of a Live Journal desktop blogging client. Users can update their music or how they describe their mood, post images, set user/community tags and define the public/private status of a post. It's the sort of web-enabled application that *Firefox* (and before that *Mozilla* and *Netscape*) users and developers have been looking forward to for ages. And as with Blog This, there are options for selecting from different LiveJournal accounts for posting.

For complete integration, *Deepest Sender* will slot nicely into a *Firefox* or *Mozilla* browser sidebar – for instant access while browsing – and the latest version makes a decent stab at providing access to Blogger and WordPress (another blogging service) too. To add it to a sidebar, select View > Sidebar > Deepest Sender. If you install only one browser-based blog tool, make sure it's this one.

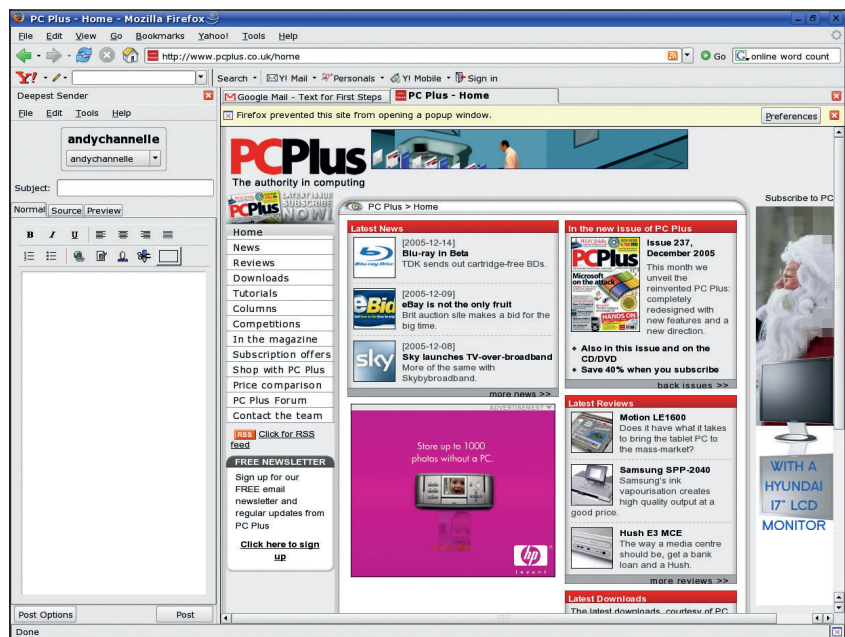
Direct mail

Of course there's nothing to say that a user must launch a web browser in order to post to a weblog, and thanks to broad availability of many blog hosters' APIs – that is, the software that hooks into the engines running the system – anyone can build an application capable of posting content to Blogger or LiveJournal. Oddly, there doesn't seem to be a native KDE application or applet available for the former, though *KLuje* (who comes up with these names?) does a good job of hooking into the latter.

In contrast, the Gnome desktop has at least three usable applications – including a system tray applet – that are happy dealing with most of the prominent blog engines. I've chosen *Drivel* for two reasons: firstly, it's widely available on most distros



Great name, great app. *Drivel* is an all-round good egg.



For 'always on' blogging, shoving *Deepest Sender* into a sidebar is pretty hard to beat.

and covers Blogger, LiveJournal, Advogato and Movable Type; and secondly, it has the best name ever for blogging app! The downside is that the developer has opted to secrete every single tool in menus, so it might take a little getting used to.

When you launch *Drivel* it's distressingly blank: just a menu bar, subject line and huge, intimidating expanse of white space waiting to be filled. You can just throw in a subject title and then start typing, but if you want to add some style or post to a different blog, you may need to hunt around a bit. Font options, as well as link and image tools, are in the Format menu, while the Active Journal option – which enables you to choose which of your many blogs to post to – is (non-obviously) under the Edit menu. This menu is also where you'll find the preferences where it's possible to set up spellchecking, and also ensure that blog-tracking service Technorati is notified whenever your blog is updated. It's well worth exploring the interface.

FLOCK: A 2.0 BROWSER

The next generation internet needs a next generation browser, and that's just what the leaders of the *Flock* project are attempting to produce. Taking the guts of the *Firefox* browser, the *Flock* team have bolted on a new theme and extras that take advantage of web services such as Delicious, Flickr and Blogger. The Bookmark utility, for example, doesn't store bookmarks locally, opting instead to send them to your Delicious account, complete with descriptions and tags if necessary.

The new top bar can optionally display the contents of your, or someone else's, Flickr photostream, or a list of active blogs, which you are able to access with a click of the mouse. The Blogger Top Bar also has a Drag Stuff To Blog It feature, which allows users to simply drag a link, page or image into a space and launch a blog editor (much like *Firefox*'s Blog This extension) with the links formatted and ready to go.

There's also a very useful Shelf utility, which lives in a separate window. URLs, images and snatches of text can be dragged and dropped



into this shelf for later use. The great thing is that whatever you drop in here is persistent and will only go away when explicitly deleted – it's great for online research, shopping and everything else. Finally *Flock* has some great RSS features such as live bookmarks and 'on the fly' aggregation.

The big 'but' is that this is software in the early stages of development, and so may be a little flaky in use. The very cautious might sit back and wait for some of these features to be added to a more mainstream offering such as *Firefox*.



PART 2 – TAKE FLICKR FURTHER

A picture is, apparently, worth a thousand words, and if you're pictorally-minded Flickr (or some other image-sharing service) is a good alternative to text-heavy blog services. As with blog websites, you will need to set up an account before you can do anything on Flickr. Fortunately the company, which has been bought by Yahoo, has a free account which limits users to 20MB of uploading per month. This is adequate for most of us, but if you start going mad and taking photos of road signs, spiders and so on, you may want to think about buying the Pro account for \$24.95 a year.

Flickr gives everyone a space to store and display photos, but it also allows users to set privacy levels – you could grant access to family photos only to other members of your family, say. The software also has the facility to 'tag' every image you upload, so that it's easy to search, for example, for pictures of the Eden Project, London or Spiders. As I often mention in this series, though, you only get decent results from this type of software if you put in the effort.

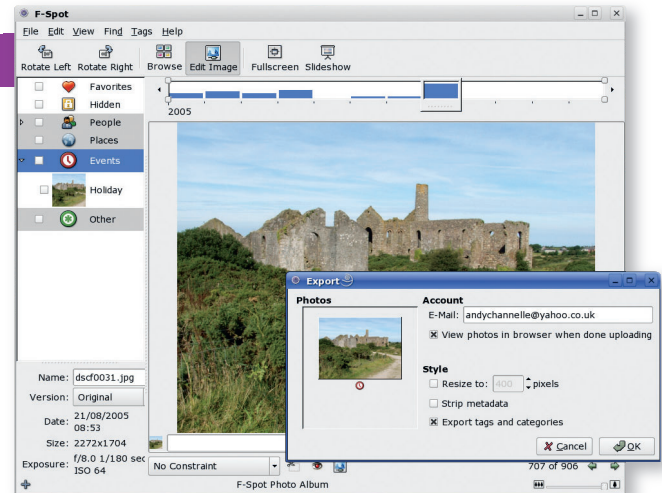
Other facilities of Flickr include slideshows, group/pool photos (so that lots of members can contribute pics from the same event such as a wedding) and an Organizer, which allows you to move photos around, rotate them and create sets but doesn't yet allow any actual editing of pictures. As with blogging, above, for this tutorial I'm interested in the ways we can get pictures on to the site, rather than what we can do once they get there.

Emailing images

The most cross-platform-friendly way of uploading pictures is to email them and this, inevitably, is done through your regular email application.

When you sign up to Flickr, you're given an email address which will have the format 'wordnumberword@photos.flickr.com', ie linux77format@photos.flickr.com. This is the address you send a picture to, and like magic it will appear in your collection. However, it will inherit the account's default settings, so we need to change a few things.

The first thing to change is the privacy settings. In addition to the Private setting, which ensures that the photos are only visible to the account owner, Flickr has Family, Friends and Public settings too. To give your photos different privacy settings, you need to append the first part of the email address. So, linux77format+friends@photos.flickr.com will send the



F-Spot is a cool Mono application that is gaining favour among distro vendors.

photo to Flickr and allow people within your Friends group to see it. Similarly, you might type linux77format+family@photos.flickr.com for designate a picture as accessible to users within your Family group. To set it to Family and Friends, use [ff](#); to keep the image to yourself, add [private](#).

It's also possible to add titles, descriptions and tags to a photo being sent by email. The title of an image is defined in the subject line of the email, while the description is added from the body of the message. It's possible to add tags to either the subject or body, and have them appended to the image. Simply type 'tags: tagnames' in either space. You might email a picture of your new Linux computer to your account:

To: linux77format+family@photos.flickr.com

Subject: My lovely new computer tags: computer

Christmas "Linux Box" Linux PC

Body: I can't believe my husband got me a new, beautiful Linux PC for Christmas.

Attach the picture, hit Send and then wait as it is forwarded and processed for inclusion in your collection.

From the desktop

The next good cross-platform method of uploading is to use Flickr's own online *Uploadr*. This is similar to the tools used to add attachments to emails in webmail apps and is very simple to use. However, for the most elegant solution, nothing beats uploading photos from the same desktop application you use for managing images. It makes sense to have one app that will take images from your camera, allow some editing and then send the final result to your online service. The two best Linux applications for this are *F-Spot* and *Digikam*. *F-Spot* is a Mono application that has quite a lot of dependencies but is becoming a standard feature in many distributions, while *Digikam* is an established part of KDE and should be available in all of the mainstream distros.

Both of these applications are very smart utilities in their own right, but I'm most interested in their ability to tag pictures and upload to Flickr. We'll start with *F-Spot*, which has had Flickr integration from its earliest versions. Images within this application can be tagged and categorised with a variety of pre-made or bespoke tags, and the cool thing is, these can be exported as native Flickr tags with no editing required. *F-Spot* follows the convention of selecting multiple images using either the Shift key (for continuous selection) and the Control key (for non-continuous). Once you've made a selection, it can be exported using the File > Export > Export to Flickr option. This will launch a new dialog box with some options for you to select before connecting to the service. It's possible in here to strip out

WHAT ABOUT ONLINE OFFICE APPS?

Ever since Sun started blowing the Java trumpet, online office applications have been "almost here". Any chance to lower IT costs, lighten the grunt work of client computers and improve control and security would appeal to business, but the waiting games has continued since the nineties, although in the Web 2.0 world, the buzz is more likely to be about Ajax (Asymmetric JavaScript and XML) than Java. There has also been a lot of talk about Google throwing money at OpenOffice.org to pull the entire suite online.

While there are interesting Ajax products out there that cover the whole gamut of productivity work, webmail applications have been growing in stature so that something like Gmail works as a pretty effective, if basic, word processor. It has an array of text formatting options, highlighting, automatic linking for web addresses, spell

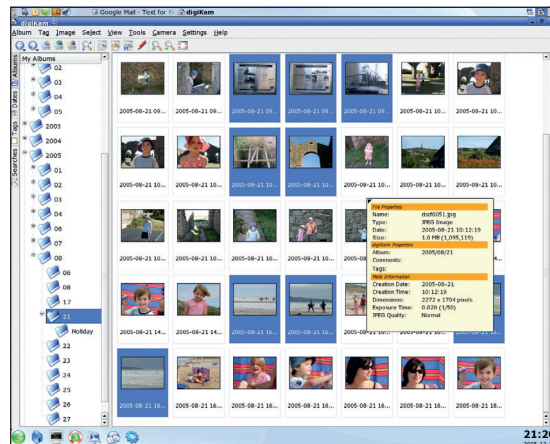
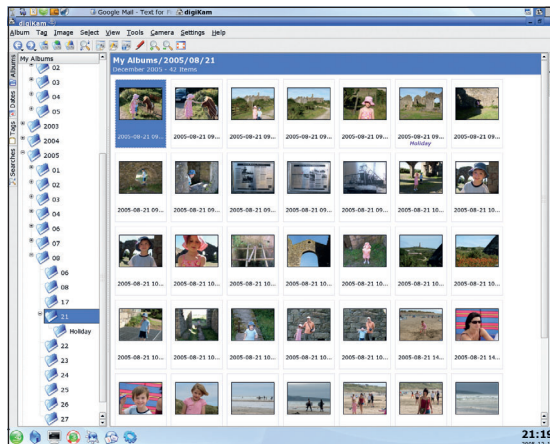
checker and works brilliantly with *Firefox* (and other browsers) on any platform. A recent addition is an autosave feature which puts a copy of a document/email being worked on in the drafts folder and saves it every couple of minutes. Once a document is completed, it can simply be emailed to its destination (it's fantastic for collaboration) or printed directly from within the mail client. When working with other people, each draft is automatically saved in the Sent Mail box too, so there's never any danger of losing a precious document, and everything is searchable and can be labelled using the Gmail interface.

So while we've all been watching developments in OpenOffice.org, Google has released a cool, cross-platform text editor, with email and backup facilities built in. Let's just pray they add a word count soon...

metadata from the picture, that is information such as the focal length of the shot, date, time and so on, and also to resize the pictures. This dialog is also where you would set whether the application will convert *F-Spot* tags into Flickr ones. If the *F-Spot* tags don't correspond with a pre-existing Flickr tag, a new one will be added to the list. Then it's simply a case of adding some login details and hitting the Export button.

Now to *DigiKam*, currently the most fully-featured photo management application for KDE. Thanks to its use of Kipi plugins, it has a decent Flickr export option. However, unlike *F-Spot*, this app doesn't attempt to use its own tagging system to interact with the web service, which means possibly having to tag images twice. But it does make up for this by having options to set the privacy level of photos as you upload them.

PART 3 – UPLOADING WITH DIGIKAM

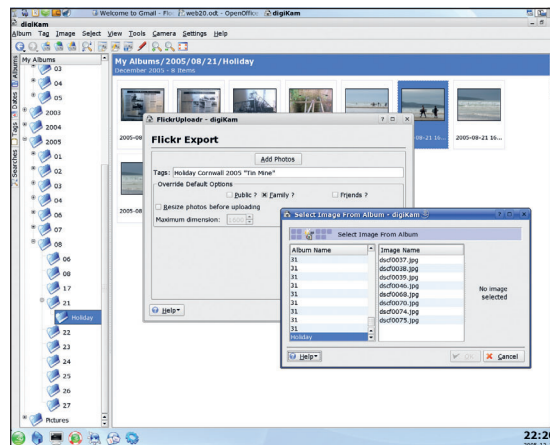
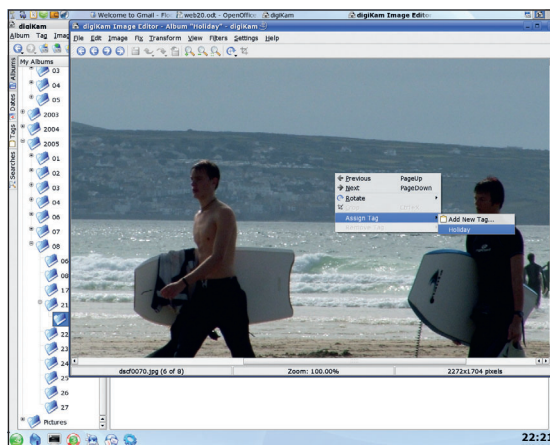


The DigiKam interface

For those with a penchant for KDE-flavoured applications, *DigiKam* offers the best combination of style and substance, and though it looks a little more complex than *F-Spot*, in use its Flickr integration is very easy to get to grips with. It's obvious, though, that the Flickr facilities come in the form of a plugin rather than a native feature, because you'll find it's impossible to just select a couple of images from the main browser and upload them.

Gather the images

Due to the way *DigiKam* works with exports, it's best to select the images that are going to be sent to Flickr and then drop them into a new 'album'. To do this, select Album > New Album and give it an appropriate name. If you're super-organised you might like to make a catchall album called Export or Flickr and just copy and delete pictures as and when they were needed. Once the album has been created, drag and drop images into it in the usual manner, selecting Copy rather than Move when prompted. Then select that album.



Edit and label them

Once you have navigated to the correct album, *DigiKam* has a selection of effects and edits that can be applied. To put an image into 'edit mode', double-click on it in the browser window, and a selection of adjustments can be made via the menu bar. To add app-specific tags, right-click on the main image and select Assign Tag > Add New Tag (or choose an existing tag). I've found it quicker to resize images in this section too, rather than wait for the export dialog to do the job. Do Transform > Resize and select the appropriate size, keeping the Aspect Ratio option checked.

Last-minute checks

Once all adjustments have been made, go back to the browser with the new album selected and then do Album > Export > Export To Flickr. It's important to define tags, set the privacy options, and any resize command before selecting the images. Now hit the Add Photos button and select the entire contents of the export directory. When you click on the OK button, the upload begins, so make sure all the settings are correct before doing this. If it's the first time you've connected the app to Flickr, it will launch *Konqueror* in order to set up the account to receive photos. **LXF**

NEXT MONTH

We'll turn the OpenSUSE distro into a fully-fledged, multimedia desktop system.