

# is&t

News about information services and technology throughout MIT

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## Condor Searches for Cool Trends and Trendsetters

• Robyn Fizz

How well did you predict the Oscar winners this year? Well, let me break it to you gently. The odds are that a piece of software made more accurate predictions than you did. Condor is the name of this prescient forecaster of the Oscars – and other phenomena like consumer trends and election outcomes.

Condor makes its predictions through the dynamic analysis of social networks. Put another way, it mines information shared on the Internet in online forums, blogs, RSS feeds, and Twitter posts.

To predict the winners of the Academy Awards, Condor begins by mining the Oscar Buzz message board on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) at [imdb.com](http://imdb.com). People who contribute to this online forum discuss their “picks and prognostications for the next Oscar race.” Monitoring this message board, Condor looks at the interplay of posts and responses over time. People who quickly get many responses to their posts are rated as trendsetters and given more weight in Condor's algorithms.

Condor then performs sentiment analysis. The software has been programmed to value various words as positive or nega-

tive. It can examine all the posts that discuss *Revolutionary Road*, for example, and rank its popularity by calculating the number of positive and negative words used to describe it.

Condor succeeds because the collective mindset of virtual communities closely mirrors that of the real world. The choices made by the members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences create the real-world drama we witness on Oscar night. But these choices are already reflected in the pre-Oscar buzz on the Web.

### Condor's Evolution

Condor has been around for six years. It is the brainchild of Peter Gloor, a research scientist in the MIT Center for Collective Intelligence ([cci.mit.edu](http://cci.mit.edu)). With the help of colleagues and students, Gloor has developed, tested, and refined the software, which he acknowledges is “made by geeks for geeks.” In its earlier incarnation as TeCFlow (Temporal Communication Flow analysis), the software parsed the email directories of teams, revealing patterns of connection and collaboration. Using TeCFlow's Imapcrawler, individuals could analyze the communication patterns in their own mailboxes – a virtual mirror that provided insights, and sometimes surprises, about their role in their own social networks.

In the last couple of years, with the boom in online social spaces, Condor has taken flight. While it can still be used to analyze email archives, the software excels at

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## Condor

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mining and analyzing online posts in narrow domains, like movies and politics. The software is also more accessible now through its Condorview search engine. (New users can request an account at [condorview.com](http://condorview.com)).

Condorview works like the Google search engine. By entering keywords into its search field, you can track the popularity of people or trends. For example, when you enter two political candidates' names (x versus y), Condorview can determine which one is garnering the most public interest. Condorview initially filters posts from political blogs based on Google's page ranking. It then constructs its own map of URLs and takes a metric called "betweenness." This measures how influential a blog (or person or concept) is. Blogs like *Instapundit* and *The Huffington Post* have higher betweenness rankings than political blogs with, say, 50 readers.

Gloor's group used Condor to follow the candidates' trend lines throughout the 2008 presidential campaign. While there were clear oscillations over time, Obama's trend line showed him as the frontrunner throughout the race.

## Coolhunting and COINs

With its ability to uncover trends before they become mainstream, Condor makes an exceptional "coolhunting" tool. The term coolhunting has been used by marketers since the 1990s: coolhunters are those who make predictions about the next big thing, whether in fashion, electronics, or industrial design. With its ability to mine the Web systematically, Condor has taken coolhunting to the next level.

One of Gloor's key findings has been that the coolest ideas often come from the collective mindset, and that the "carriers of innovation" are the early adopters and improvers of ideas.

Gloor has also identified a new type of organizational model made possible by the Internet, which he calls collaborative innovation networks, or COINs. These are "cyberteams of self-motivated people with a collective vision, enabled by technology to collaborate in achieving a common goal – an innovation – by sharing ideas, information and work."

Gloor points to the creation of the World Wide Web and the development of open-source software, such as Linux, as examples of the COIN philosophy in action. While Tim Berners-Lee is identified as the

creator of the Web, and Linus Torvalds as the chief architect of Linux, both men campaigned to make others aware of their ideas and gave away power to like-minded collaborators. These contributors, energized by what they were building, put in untold hours without pay. Gloor points out that this is not altruism per se: participants in COINs are motivated by working with others, learning new skills, and making a difference. A new job or business opportunity may ultimately result from their efforts, but this is not why COIN members get involved.

In doing social network analyses of COINs, Gloor finds that their communication patterns demonstrate openness and transparency. Instead of having one person at the center controlling everything, meritocracy rules. Gloor predicts that COINs will become the dominant model for innovation. Just remember, he was right about the Oscars.

### Digging Deeper

To learn more about coolhunting and COINs, read Gloor's book, *Coolhunting: Chasing Down the Next Big Thing*. For a regular dose of cool insights, check out Gloor's blog at [swarmcreativity.blogspot.com](http://swarmcreativity.blogspot.com). §

## Deposit Your Ideas in MIT's New Bank

Inspired by Google Moderator, the Institute-wide Planning Task Force has established the MIT Idea Bank at [ideabank.mit.edu](http://ideabank.mit.edu). This web site is a forum for open discussion among members of the MIT community. Its focus is on ways to improve Institute operations while reducing expenses.

Once you log in with your MIT certificate, you can rank ideas in the database, sort them in various ways, and add your own ideas – anonymously if you prefer. MIT alumni can log in as well, using their Infinite Connection account.

### Features

The MIT Idea Bank has several user-friendly features. It displays a list of the most recent ideas, along with **The Top Ten**. The **From the Vault** sidebar pulls up random ideas every time you refresh the home page, so that older ideas don't get lost.

When you're ready to add an idea, you are asked to choose from a set of categories – such as Procurement or Student Life.

When visitors to the Idea Bank click **View all deposits**, they are shown the full list of categories and can refine their search accordingly.

You can rank any idea by clicking one of the five stars next to it: one star is the lowest ranking and five stars the highest. You can also comment on any idea and read comments posted by others.

### Building the Bank

To create the MIT Idea Bank, the Planning Task Force worked with two IS&T teams – Departmental Consulting and Application Development (DCAD) and Application Management and Integration (AMIT) – as well as with the Alumni Association. The site was built using Drupal, an open-source content management system. §



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### Managing Editor

Robyn Fizz

### Writer/Editor

Lee Ridgway

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Send comments or subscription requests to:  
**MIT Room N42-290B, 77 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02139-4307**

Phone **617.253.0540**

Email **fizz@mit.edu**

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