

“Blogging:

An opportunity for librarians to communicate, participate and collaborate on a global scale”

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INTRODUCTION

Blogs are an important element of the second generation of the web; or 'Web 2.0' as it is commonly referred to. 'Web 2.0' refers to the evolution from static "read only" web pages (Web 1.0) to dynamic, interactive pages encouraging users to create, interact and share content across multiple applications (O'Reilly, 2005). Blogging, along with other Web 2.0 technologies such as social networking, wikis, social bookmarking, photo sharing, video sharing, and microblogging, form part of the emergent 'social media' family; a collection of online tools that encourage users to communicate, participate, and collaborate on a global scale. Many library and information professionals have embraced blogging as a platform to document their career, enhance their profile, network with other librarians; and share anecdotes about their lives as librarians.

The aim of this article is to present a brief overview of the history of blogs and a short review of literature related to blogging, libraries and reference librarians. It will also provide a list of recommended blogs, a discussion of the advantages of reading and writing blogs and some top tips for starting up your own blog.

WHAT IS A BLOG?

In 1997, Jorn Barger coined the term 'weblog' in reference to a series of links featured on his website, *Robot Wisdom*, which 'logged' the places that he had visited on the internet and recorded his online journey (Wired, 2007). Two years later, another internet user, Peter Merholz shorted this to 'wee-blog', then to 'blog' (Economist.com, 2006). Since then, 'blog' has developed into a word that is used regularly, both as a verb and a noun. A concise definition of a 'blog' is offered by Doctorow et al:

A blog is a web page that contains brief, discrete chunks of information called posts. These posts are arranged in reverse-chronological order (the most recent posts come first). Each post is uniquely identified by an anchor tag, and it is marked with a permanent link that can be referred to by others who wish to link to it (Doctorow et al., 2002, p.ix).

Blogs are located online, in a space which is often referred to as the 'blogosphere'; "the intellectual cyberspace we bloggers occupy" (Quick, 2002). Blogs have evolved considerably since the late 1990s and many blogs now combine the following key elements in their content; text, visual, audio, links to external pages, Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds, mash-ups, and instant messaging.

Today, thanks to a number of free blog publishing software platforms, such as *Blogger* and *WordPress*, there are millions of blogs run by enthusiastic 'bloggers' from all over the world. No matter what you are interested in; books, knitting, running, music, technology, libraries; there will undoubtedly be somebody online blogging about it. In recent years, the blogging community has experienced further excitement with the introduction of a new 'microblogging' service called *Twitter*; a 'short' blogging platform which requires users to post updates about 'what they are up to' in 140 characters or less. Twitter has enjoyed exponential growth since it was launched in 2006 and following a 1,382 percent growth over the period February 2008-February 2009 its popularity shows little sign of slowing down (NielsenWire, 2009). However, as this is an introductory article to blogging, the authors will focus more on traditional blogging, rather than microblogging.

LIBRARIANS AND BLOGGING

Although the worldwide library community is relatively small in comparison to the size of other professional communities there is a strong community of blogging librarians online. In 2007, Stephens completed a PhD thesis which examined the relationship between librarians and blogging (Stephens, 2007). His work presents an overview of the history of librarians, libraries and the web and offers an introduction to many of the pioneering librarian bloggers, such as *The Shifted Librarian* and *Librarian.net* (Stephens, 2007, p. 8). Following on from Stephen's groundbreaking research in this area, Michael Hopwood, a student at the University of the West of England carried out an evaluation of academic library blogs in the UK, as part of his MSc dissertation. Hopwood's research revealed that:

"Blogging is being adopted widely but cautiously in the United Kingdom...a small number of librarians and libraries are advocates of blogging, while most are using it in a relatively limited way... the potential of library blogging, [...] has yet to be fully realised" (Hopwood, 2008, p. 74).

In writing this article the authors have also found very little research in either the professional or academic press related to the benefits of blogging for reference librarians. Therefore, although we do acknowledge that there are several fantastic UK based library and librarian blogs out there, it would be gratifying to see more blogging activity within this sector.

In the next section we will provide some of the key advantages of blogging, in the hope that it might encourage readers to read and/or write more blogs.

ADVANTAGES OF BLOGGING

Reading blogs can help librarians keep up to date on professional news and developments, informed about interesting projects, and learn from others experiences and knowledge (Carver, 2003). Library/librarian blogs are of obvious relevance, but you can also use blogs to find out about other fields which impact on the work of an information professional (e.g. technology, marketing, and education blogs).

You can subscribe to some blogs by email, but in order to keep track of a larger number of blogs, it is advantageous to use an RSS feed reader such as Google Reader or Bloglines. This way you can organise your blogs and easily view new blog posts without having to individually check each blog. For a comprehensive introduction to RSS feeds, see Common Craft's popular video, RSS in Plain English (Common Craft, 2007).

Library blogs can be written for different purposes – such as an external tool (i.e. to share your experiences with the wider profession) or an internal tool (i.e. for use within your workplace). Internal blogs can be particularly useful for reference desk work where staff can use a blog to keep each other up-to-date and share knowledge to assist in complex enquiries.

Blogging as an individual can also bring many personal advantages. As well as a tool for reflection, sharing your views, and developing ideas, it can expand your professional network, both nationally and internationally, and help to market your skills. Blogging and microblogging about your interests within librarianship can lead to further opportunities in the profession such as collaborating on

projects, authoring or co-authoring articles, and presenting at conferences (Stephens, 2008). Opportunities such as these have arisen for the authors through networking via their blogs and microblogging, including authoring numerous journal articles and contributing to and speaking at international conferences.

RECOMMENDED BLOGS FOR REFERENCE LIBRARIANS

The following is a list of blogs that the authors have come across whilst researching this article, including some examples of reference librarian blogs. It is by no means a definitive list of blogs written for or by reference librarians, rather it should be considered as recommended blogs to help reference librarians keep up to date with developments in their sector.

Adventures in Library Land – blog of Kate Wenger, a reference librarian at a small liberal arts college in Pennsylvania, USA. Includes posts about improving library services and reference experiences.

Digital Reference - blog of Stephen Francoeur, Information Services Librarian at Baruch College, USA. Stephen blogs about a variety of different topics to do with reference librarianship – mainly new developments in digital reference such as chat, IM or email reference, but also including roving reference and face-to-face reference.

From the Reference Desk – blog posts written by reference librarians at Nashua Public Library, USA. This is a public blog which is used to highlight new books, interesting articles the library subscribes to, and news about their library services.

Information Wants To Be Free – longer, more discursive posts written by Meredith Farkas, Head of Instructional Initiatives at Norwich University, USA. Meredith is an expert in social software use in libraries, discussing many innovative ideas on her blog.

Librarian In Black - one of the longest running library blogs, written by Sarah Houghton-Jan, Digital Futures Manager for San José Public Library, USA. Sarah writes regular, short informative posts summarising recent developments and news in the information field.

Phil Bradley's weblog - Phil blogs regularly about search engines, internet tools, and latest developments in the information profession. As an independent internet consultant, Phil gives an unbiased and honest opinion on web services following testing.

Reference at Newman Library – internal blog (though publicly available) used by reference librarians at Newman Library, USA. The blog is used to keep staff informed about relevant information for their work providing reference support.

Swiss Army Librarian – blog of Brian Herzog, public reference librarian from USA. Brian blogs updates and offers his opinions on topical issues in librarianship, but the highlight of his blog is the Reference Question of the Week. Every week he shares (anonymously) one reference question he has received and explains how he went about answering the query. These are incredibly insightful, interesting, and often amusing.

Tame The Web – blog of Michael Stephens, Assistant Professor in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at Dominican University, USA, along with other regular contributors and occasional guest blog posts. Regular short news posts sharing good practice and innovation from across the profession.

CREATE YOUR OWN BLOG

The first consideration when setting up a blog is whether to have a hosted blog (an external company hosts your blog content), or one that you host yourself. A hosted blog is the simplest option and can be set up in a matter of minutes, but gives fewer options for customisation. If you have your own webspace and a web address, you can download blogging software to host your own blog. This offers full customisation options such as designing your own theme (useful if you are hosting a corporate blog and need to use the in-house style) and adding extensions to increase functionality.

Once you have established your blog, populate it with a section explaining the purpose of the blog to any visitors (usually in the form of an “About” page or a paragraph in the blog sidebar). Ensure your RSS feed is working to enable others to subscribe. You may wish to use Feedburner to manage your RSS feed as this will also allow you to add enhanced feed options such as email subscriptions or dynamic HTML blog widgets for websites (updated with recent posts), and it can also track feed statistics such as the number of subscribers.

You can then choose the design of your blog and add extensions or customise the views – you may wish to add links to other websites or blogs you think may be of interest to visitors, show your recent posts/comments on your sidebar, or link to your other accounts (e.g. Twitter, Facebook).

Then you’re all set – get blogging!

TOP TEN TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL BLOGGING

1. Make it interesting (for yourself and your readership – write about your passion)
2. Keep it current
3. Write regularly
4. Be consistent in your writing style (tone, language etc.)
5. Maintain confidentiality where necessary
6. Include links to further information where relevant
7. Incorporate other media (e.g. pictures, videos, media files and presentations)
8. Encourage comments
9. Engage with your audience
10. Enjoy!

CONCLUSION

The list of blogs provided by the authors in this article in by no means exhaustive, but it is a good starting point. Once you have familiarised yourself with the concept of blogging and taken the time to read some of the recommended blogs you might feel inspired to create your own blog. This will give you *a voice* within the global library community; to promote your service, to ask the difficult questions, to challenge the status quo; to communicate with people you might never have met in your daily life.

Blogging is a fantastic communication and learning tool, offering countless opportunities that will help you develop professionally and keep up to date with news and developments relevant to your job. Go on, give it a go – join the global conversation!

Recommended blogs:

<http://librarylandadventures.blogspot.com/> - Adventures in Library Land

<http://www.teachinglibrarian.org/weblog/blogger.html> - Digital Reference

<http://blogs.nashualibrary.org/reference/> - From the Reference Desk

<http://meredith.wolfwater.com/wordpress/> - Information Wants To Be Free

<http://librarianinblack.net/> - Librarian In Black

<http://philbradley.typepad.com/> - Phil Bradley's weblog

<http://blsciblogs.baruch.cuny.edu/newmanreference/> - Reference at Newman Library

<http://www.swissarmylibrarian.net/> - Swiss Army Librarian

<http://tametheweb.com/> - Tame The Web

Useful URLs:

Blogging software

<http://wordpress.com> – Wordpress hosted blogs

<http://blogger.com> – Blogger hosted blogs

<http://wordpress.org> - Wordpress blogging software for self-hosted blogs

RSS Feeds:

<http://reader.google.com> - Google Reader

<http://www.bloglines.com> - Bloglines Reader

<http://feedburner.com> – Feedburner

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