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Blogs and Law Librarians

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According to the 'About Us' page at Technorati,¹ one of the most widely know blog-indexing sites, they index more than 112 million blogs. There are more than 175,000 new blogs created each day. There are more than 1.5 million new entries posted daily, which is better than 18 posts per second. Clearly there are a lot of people out there with something to say, and a good new platform on which to say it.

In contrast, here in the United States, Bonnie Shucha at the University of Wisconsin Law Library keeps a page of law librarian blogs.² As of 16 May 2008 she counts 142. This is up from the 120 she listed on 3 August 2007. These are not the numbers that one might hope, but it does show that we are slowly learning to use this new tool. How successfully people use it, however, is another matter.

We plan to launch a blog here at the Indiana University Law Library this summer. As someone who has some experience with blogging, this project has fallen in large part to me. I have thus spent the last several months comparing blog software, putting together a presentation to educate our faculty about blogs, and comparing as many of the best and worst blogs that I can find. Unfortunately, there are law library blogs that fall into the latter category.

Librarians, like all groups, have multiple stereotypes attached to them. Setting aside the one

of the lady with a bun and glasses who shushes people, there is the librarian who knows everything and is willing to share. The librarian as innovator – eager to learn each new way to disseminate information. The librarian who pokes through each new database, and thumbs through newly received legal volumes out of personal interest. This is someone who should have a blog. Librarians are often trailblazers in information retrieval, and blogs should be no exception.

Blogs free us from the restraint of geographic boundaries. They are not only great for their ability to put scholars in touch with one another, but they also let us watch. Of course these scholars might meet at some conference and share ideas, but to do so in such a public forum really is new and exciting.³

Blogs can also be bound by the geographic community. But this can be a strength. One of my hopes for our new blog is that it will emulate the Lewis and Clark Law Library's *BoleyBlogs!*⁴ This blog is especially impressive in its use of community. Its blogroll is not limited to other well-respected legal blogs, but also highlights the blogs of the law school's faculty, students, and alumni. I like the idea of maintaining that connection even after a student has left – that sense of community. And, of course, most alumni are probably happy to be listed on the same page as some of the law school's more famous bloggers, such as Jack Bogdanski.⁵

1 Technorati, *About Us* <<http://technorati.com/about/>> viewed at 11 July 2008.

2 Bonnie Shucha, *Law Library Blogs and Blogs by Law Librarians or Law Library Associations* <<http://library.law.wisc.edu/wisblawg/bloglistpublic.htm>> viewed at 11 July 2008.

3 One especially good example of many of the top US legal scholars able to have a discussion in a public forum is Slate, *Convictions* <<http://www.slate.com/blogs/blogs/convictions/>> viewed at 11 July 2008.

4 Paul L Boley Law Library, *BoleyBlogs!* <<http://lawlib.lclark.edu/boleyblogs/>> viewed at 11 July 2008.

5 Bogdanski, Jack, *Jack Bog's Blog* <<http://bojack.org/>> viewed at 11 July 2008.

Similarly, Harvard Law School is now encouraging its community bloggers by offering free blogs and support.⁶

Blogs are also excellent marketing tools. Many lawyers in the US follow the SCOTUSblog,⁷ which keeps up with the US Supreme Court. This blog is a great service to its readers, but it is also a way for the law firm that runs it to get its name out there. Publishers also know this. I go to the HeinOnline blog when I need advice on searching, and in turn, I think of them first when I need an article.⁸

I recently read a very interesting article⁹ about blogs. The author, Paul Ohm, was a guest blogger on the *Volokh Conspiracy*¹⁰ for a week, and decided to track his download count on the Social Sciences Research Network (SSRN)¹¹ to see if it increased. It did – he got a slow rise in people interested in his work. The big breakthrough, however, was when one of the biggest blogs out there – *Slashdot*¹² – linked to his posts. His SSRN numbers went through the roof.¹³

Ohm draws two important conclusions from this experience. One is that blogs are having a large effect on scholarship these days. The other conclusion, which I think is also true for law librarianship, is that his field – the legal one – does not have a terribly big slice of the pie. One of the best legal blogs gave him a little bump. One of the best technology blogs shot him into the stratosphere.

This can be attributed partially to the type of field. There simply are more people with a job or a casual interest in technology than there are in law. I think that librarianship is a prime field for good bloggers simply because it is so all-inclusive. As people who specialise in the flow of information we can talk about anything and still be relevant. We can draw in people from all fields. Librarians have an ear to the ground and a reputation for spreading knowledge. Blogs are a great place to live up to that reputation.

With all this potential it is especially sad that some library blogs are devoted only to posting hour

6 Harvard Law School, *Weblogs at Harvard Law School* <<http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/>> viewed at 11 July 2008.

7 Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP, *SCOTUSblog* <<http://www.scotusblog.com/wp/>> viewed at 11 July 2008.

8 HeinOnline, *HeinOnline Weblog* <<http://heinonline.blogspot.com/>> viewed at 11 July 2008.

9 Ohm, Paul, 'Do Blogs Influence SSRN Downloads? Empirically Testing the Volokh and Slashdot Effects' (2007) *U of Colorado Law Legal Studies Research Paper No. 07-15* <<http://ssrn.com/abstract=980484>> viewed at 11 July 2008.

10 Volokh, Eugene et al, *The Volokh Conspiracy* <<http://volokh.com/>> viewed at 11 July 2008. (One of the largest and most well-respected legal blogs here in the States.)

11 Social Science Electronic Publishing, Inc., *Social Sciences Research Network* <<http://www.ssrn.com/>> viewed at 11 July 2008. (This is a repository of articles in progress. People post drafts and receive comments from peers and interested parties.)

12 SourceForge, Inc., *Slashdot: News for Nerds, Stuff That Matters* <<http://slashdot.org/>> viewed at 11 July 2008. (One of the oldest blogs on the net, this site deals with computers and technology.)

13 In fact this is not uncommon. There is even a term – the 'Slashdot effect' for smaller websites that have been overloaded by a sudden influx of traffic when Slashdot links to them.

changes and such. A medium with no editorial control is pretty freeing – at the same time it makes it that much more important to enforce our own editorial control, and that can be difficult. On top of that it is a lot of work to make posts both regular and interesting enough to keep people coming back for more.

So how do you reach this balance? One piece of advice that I have been given by more than one law librarian blogger is to not try to do it alone. If you are solely responsible for getting out an interesting and substantive post a day on your library's blog it is easy to burn out. It is probably also a good idea to have numerous different types of posts. This not only keeps your readers interested, it also keeps you from getting bored.

The proposed blog at IU is going to replace our library newsletter. Not only is this blog going to be a way to advertise our excellent library to the

world at large, but it is also going to be used for communicating with our specific student and faculty community. This means that we will be working especially hard to see that we appeal to both audiences without losing either. The Harvard Law Library blog, for example, does a good job of posting library news and information, but also covering the larger legal world.¹⁴

So blogs are suddenly filling several roles at once. They disseminate information of all types – library hours, interesting law news stories, humorous videos, etc. They build community. They advertise the author or organization responsible for them. And they let people talk across boundaries. That is a lot to ask for a new medium. Librarians have been filling multiple roles since long before blogs came around, and if there is anyone who can make the most of this new tool it is us. The Indiana University Law Library is just about to give it a shot, and I hope that we are not alone.

14 Harvard Law School Library, *Et Seq.* <<http://etseq.law.harvard.edu/>> viewed at 11 July 2008.