Testing the Waters:
Blogging for User Needs Analysis, Information Access, and Building a Community of Practitioners

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ABSTRACT

This panel session will focus on three strategies for using blogs to improve access to collections, understand information needs of those searching the collections, and build communities of practice with information professionals serving similar user groups. Three presenters will share their experiences, goals, methods, and results. A facilitated discussion with the audience will follow the presentations and allow attendees to brainstorm on possible uses of blogging outside the box to reach the goals of their current projects or initiatives that they are hoping to undertake in the near future.

Keywords

Social Media, End User Requirements, Communities of Practice, Innovative Use of New Technologies

INTRODUCTION

Blogging as a social media tool continues to support new and innovative approaches to reaching audiences for libraries, archives and museums (LAMs). Blogging has become prolific amongst LAM professionals and is adopted for a variety of purposes. There are bloggers who focus on a given collection (e.g., A View to Hugh: Processing the

Hugh Morton Photographs and Films, http://www.lib.unc.edu/blogs/morton/); there are bloggers who aggregate content on new projects and innovative tools that are being tested and adopted by the profession (e.g., Kate Theimer's ArchivesNext, www.archivesnext.com); and there are many more who share their personal observations and reflections on their experiences in an evolving profession (e.g., http://www.librarian.net/; http://diylibrarian.org/; http://strangelibrarian.org).

This panel will focus on how blogs can be used to better understand and engage with end users. The speakers will present on the use of blogs to research user needs and preferences, to build and support ongoing dialogue with a community of practitioners, and to provide an interactive and lively platform for sharing content with end users. The Biodiversity Heritage Library (BHL) publishes one-on-one interviews with end users as part of their ongoing collection of user feedback. The Field Book Project curates guest blog posts on related work to engage a community of practitioners in the development of a multi-institutional resource. The University of Massachusetts "Catablog" delivers content through a low-cost, innovative application of blogging technology that makes the content approachable and provides a platform for easily engaging end users. Speakers will deliver Pecha Kucha style presentations on their goals, methods, and results with blogging. These presentations will be followed by a guided discussion with audience members similar to facilitated exercises developed by the We Are Media Project (www.wearemedia.org).

PECHA KUCHA PRESENTATIONS

Pecha Kucha presentations are brief presentations that generally include 20 slides which automatically advance after 20 seconds. Following this format, this panel will be comprised of three short presentations that will summarize each of the projects. The short format of Pecha Kucha presentations was chosen to allow for ample time to support a wider, group discussion. Attendees are encouraged to come prepared to discuss current or future projects that might be implemented in a blogging framework, challenges they face or anticipate, and the anticipated benefits.

Biodiversity Heritage Library

The Biodiversity Heritage Library (BHL) (www.biodiversitylibrary.org) is a consortium of 12 natural history and botanical libraries that cooperate to digitize and make accessible the legacy literature of biodiversity held in their collections and to make that literature available for open access and responsible use as a part of a global "biodiversity commons." As part of our outreach activities, and in order to gain a better understanding of our users, we began a series of posts on our blog entitled "BHL and our Users," (http://bit.ly/mfMYru) in which we highlight a different user in each post, questioning them about their own research activities and how BHL helps support those endeavors. While virtually no research has been published about using blogs to assess user needs and drive service improvements, there is a great deal of literature on using surveys and user studies to do so (Perley et al., 2007; Kyrillidou & Persson, 2006; Grefsheim & Rankin, 2007). Such research encouraged us to pursue this method in order to find out more about our users, while at the same time putting a novel twist on the process by capturing and presenting this information via blog posts. During this portion of the discussion, the panelist will demonstrate how these interviews have allowed us to explore research questions on audience demographics, information needs, and information use, all of which have directly influenced our future development and priorities.

The Biodiversity Heritage Library has a very broad range of users, from scientists and taxonomists to educators, computer scientists, humanities scholars, and citizen scientists. This blog series has afforded us an opportunity to not only learn more about who our audience is, but also, by highlighting this diversity in our users, how a collection of scientific texts can be used in a variety of ways across a multitude of disciplines. Furthermore, with this series, we have been able to determine which of our services are most valuable to our users and thus should be a priority for upkeep and improvement, as well as which services our users would like to see in the future, thus directing our continuing development.

Field Book Project

The Field Book Project (http://www.mnh.si.edu/rc/fieldbooks/index.html) is a collaborative initiative between the National Museum of Natural History and the Smithsonian Institution Archives. The overall mission of the Field Book Project is to provide one online location for field book content. This process will begin as a Smithsonian-wide initiative and lay the foundation for an online Field Book Registry comprised of content contributed by the entire biodiversity community.

As a community resource, the Field Book Project is committed to fostering dialogue to ensure that the design of the Field Book Registry is informed by those who participate in its growth and use. The use of social media, and blogging in particular, has been integral to achieving those goals. On the Field Book Project blog, there is a section entitled "Beyond the Field Book Project" (http://bit.ly/jLDr0A) that is devoted to guest blogging to initiate dialogue, highlight related work, and build a sense of community among practitioners and end users.

With a recent shift towards crowdsourcing in LAMs, some archives are looking for ways to leverage the efforts of end users--for the benefit of other end users. Gerenscer et al. (2009) describe how they use blogging software to share reference questions and results on the Dickinson College Archives and Special Collections website. Similarly, one of the overarching goals behind the Field Book Project guest blogs is to create a resource where the community can learn not only from one another but also from end users. Guest blog posts generally fall into two camps: (1) those who are involved in current or recent projects related to improving access to field books and (2) those who will ultimately use the Field Book Registry as part of their research. During this section, the panelist will present on strategies for recruiting guest bloggers, methods for curating content, and results in terms of trends in content and comments.

UMarmot Catablog

UMarmot , the online catalog for the Department of Special Collections and University Archives of the UMass Amherst Libraries (SCUA) is a project in the application of appropriate technology (Cox & Kovacs, 2010). Having struggled with the related problems of finding a suitable online catalog for archival materials and a system that could be adopted by our peers with scarcer financial and technological resources, SCUA began using WordPress blogging software to emulate a catalog. The UMarmot approach offers enormous flexibility in design and display and a user-friendly interface while keeping the barrier for entry very low. A sophisticated, standards-compliant (including the ingestion of EAD finding aids), open, and sustainable solution, supporting multiple research styles and social interaction, the catablog concept has been adopted by about a dozen institutions ranging from tiny local historical societies to research universities. Murphy et al. (2011) provide a detailed overview of their own process and evaluation of the catalog at the L. Tom Perry Special

Collections (LTPSC). UMarmot's goal, in part, is to encourage archivists to consider taking on projects that will resolve long-standing problems in access for smaller institutions by using technologies that can be adapted to their resources.

DISCUSSION

As a session focused on engaging dialogue, this panel will include a facilitated discussion initiated at the beginning of the session. Notecards will be made available to attendees with a set of pre-defined questions for framing a discussion around the current projects or goals for new initiatives that attendees are involved in and how to incorporate blogging to move those goals forward. Questions may be modeled after the open source exercises available on http://www.wearemedia.org/. Once the discussion approach has been shared with the audience, the three speakers will deliver Pecha Kucha style presentations. The short format of these presentations will ensure that the majority of the session can be dedicated to a focused discussion with attendees. Following the presentations, the notecards will be collected and the presenters will facilitate a discussion using information gathered on the cards as a means for moving the discussion forward in a group brainstorming effort.

SPEAKERS

Grace Costantino received her B.A. in Studio Art and her M.S. in Information Management and Information Systems from the University of Maryland, College Park. She currently serves as a Digital Collections Librarian for the Smithsonian Institution Libraries, working chiefly with project management, user services, and social media for the Biodiversity Heritage Library. Heavily involved in user outreach and feedback management, she has presented on the user-feedback management system used by the project at an SIL ALA special presentation entitled "Managing User Feedback in a Digital Library," and is a co-author of the 2011 De Gruyter Saur/IFLA Award-Winning paper on the subject, entitled "Heeding the Call: User Feedback Management and the Digital Library."

Carolyn Sheffield is the Project Manager on the Field Book Project and serves as the primary contact for external institutions wishing to participate in the system's development and testing or through the contribution of content to the Field Book Registry. Prior to joining the project, she was the Project Manager and User Studies Coordinator for CLiMB, a large scale research project at the University of Maryland that focused on metadata extraction for image access. She has contributed to publications and presentations on user studies methodologies and results. More recently, she served as Co-Chair for an all-day Pre-

Conference session at ALA 2011 on Library and IT Collaborations. Carolyn holds an M.L.S. from the College of Information Studies at the University of Maryland, College Park and a B.A. in Visual and Performing Arts from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

Rob Cox has served as Head of Special Collections and University Archives since 2004, following stints at the American Philosophical Society and the University of Michigan. A former paleontologist and molecular biologist, his MFA, MLS, and PhD (Early American History) are from the Michigan, and he currently teaches in history and archives at UMass and as an adjunct at Simmons College. He is author of Body and Soul: A Sympathetic History of American Spiritualism (2003) and A History of Chowder (2011, with Jacob Walker), and editor of The Shortest and Most Convenient Route: Lewis and Clark in Context (2004), along with occasional articles in archives.

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