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Bridging the digital divide:

libraries providing access for all?

Are users interested in library blogs?

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present the Hungarian liblogosphere and to analyse their comments. Most of the library blogs target users and are intended to form a virtual community around them. This research analyses comments and tries to identify those people who read blogs and communicate through this channel. Since the emergence of web 2.0 paradigm Hungarian libraries have developed several sites trying to build virtual communities. Most of the sites built by libraries could not become as popular as librarians expected.

We selected 10 library blogs targeting users and analysed all entries and all comments in a 3 months period. We tried to identify those who write comments and observe if virtual communities came up around blogs. We also identified the most popular topics of blog readers.

The most surprising result of the blog analysis was that there are hardly any users who write comments. Virtual communities have been built just around a few blogs. It seems that the Hungarian liblogosphere is much more the librarians' common virtual playground than an attractive tool for our users. We could not collect data on real readers just make conclusions from the comments. Further research should observe who are the real readers of library blogs.

It is an original research.

Keywords: libraries, blogs, web 2.0, virtual communities, survey

Introduction

After the O'Reilly media's first web 2.0 conference in October 5-7, 2004 San Francisco, the „doctrines” of web 2.0 spread as a wildfire around the world. Librarians were pioneers in adapting the principles of web 2.0 to their services creating the word „library 2.0” by Paul Miller (2005). Maness (2006) gave a synthesis of library 2.0 theory and draw up the most important services that librarians can adapt to their users' needs.

According to Maness (2006) the theory for library 2.0 could be understood to have these four essential elements:

- It is user-centered;
- It provides a multi-media experience;

- it is socially rich;
- it is communally innovative.

Blogs are perceived as typical web 2.0 services. As one of the core messages of library 2.0 is building user-centered virtual communities, it is obvious that using blogs for library purpose can be very beneficial. The number of library blogs available on the web has continued to increase at a high rate. Moreover they become more and more popular both among users and librarians since the emergence of the web 2.0 revolution.

LIS literature suggests that library blogs can enhance attracting more users around the libraries' website. Due to their potential effects – e.g. virtual communities are being formed around library blog, users perceive library website more relevant, it gave a fascinating appearance – it is worth considering start a blog in the library.

The libraries should function as low-intensive meeting-places both in virtual and physical spaces (Audunson 2005). Blogs have the potential to raise interesting issues that users consider relevant and tell us their opinion concerning certain questions. It is also a good tool for collecting feedback from them. The possibility for getting comments beguiles us with the promise that we can get them to be co-authors of the library website.

Literature review

Due to the abundance of blog sites Maxymuk (2005) analysed their relevance to librarianship. He surveyed a number of library blogs and examined the content of each with the goal of determining their value and usefulness to librarianship. He concluded that library blogs permitted a free exchange of ideas on both general and narrowly defined library topics. Comparing with traditional media he found that posting on blogs fostered a timely exchange of information that traditional publications could not offer.

Ramos and Piper (2006) illustrated some of the major uses and limiting factors of blogs and wikis, as well as the ways that these resources can be used by librarians and educators. They concluded that these socially mediated tools were rich in potential for communication, information sharing, and collaborative endeavors. Librarians and educators should embrace and use blogs and wikis in their work and practice. Blogs provide an excellent, interactive way to communicate, and rich content, that explored with a critical eye, can yield information found nowhere else. These tools engage users in ways that keep everyone involved and motivated.

Maness (2006) consider blogs and wikis as the most obvious solutions for moving library collections and services into Web 2.0. „This beginning of Library 2.0 makes collections and services more interactive and user-centered, enable information consumers to contact information producers and become co-producers themselves. It could be that Library 2.0 blurs the line between librarian and patron, creator and consumer, authority and novice. The potential for this dramatic change is very real and immediate, a fact that places an incredible amount of importance on information literacy.” He predicts positive effects concerning the development of information literacy skills. „In a world where no information is inherently authoritative and valid, the critical thinking skills of information literacy are paramount to all other forms of learning.”

Bell (2006) reviewed the increase in the number of academic library blogs and the barriers to their use such as boring content. He also reported a survey showing that 75 percent of students were satisfied with the blogs that were posted and wished them to continue.

Lee and Bates (2007) investigated the use of, and perception of weblogs in the Irish library and information profession, in order to ascertain the extent weblog technology is used by Irish librarians, and what factors promote or discourage the use of weblogs. They conducted a content analysis of existing Irish library and librarian weblogs and surveyed Irish librarians concerning weblogs and other social communication technologies. They also interviewed Irish librarians who maintain blogs. The study found that a high proportion of Irish librarians read weblogs, but these are not extensively used as an information resource or communication method. The professional use of weblogs was found to be associated with simplicity of use, and a proactive attitude to technology and to library users. Constraining factors included time concerns, fear of misuse of the weblog, the limitations of the linear nature of weblogs and the newness of the technology. Interest in blog technology is growing and its uptake will ultimately depend on the interest of the librarian and the perceived and actual needs of the library users.

Chawner (2008) conducted an online survey asking about respondents' use of a range of Web 2.0 technologies. She concluded that librarians and information managers of all ages are experimenting with these technologies to some extent, particularly reading blogs and using RSS feeds. Active content creation is less common. The barriers that prevent people from being able to access Web 2.0 applications are personal, technical, and organisational.

McIntyre and Nicolle (2008) described two case studies conducted at the University of Canterbury which demonstrate the potential of blogging as an internal and external communication tool. The internal blog was used to communicate and manage information for service staff across the library system, while the external blog communicated content and service updates to the academic community. A survey of academic staff on their use of information and information technology was also conducted. They concluded that blogs are a successful strategy for disseminating internal information to library staff working in public services. They provide a convenient medium for the transfer of day-to-day communication, facilitate best practice and create an archive of institutional knowledge. They stated that blogs are also a valuable tool to communicate targeted subject specific library information to academic staff. The experience at UC Library suggested that, although faculty were heavy users of the internet, this did not necessarily generalise to their use of blogs, and librarians needed to take a leadership role in promoting blog technology as a way of transforming internal communication and external relationships with library users.

Torres-Salinas, Cabezas-Clavijo and Delgado-Lopez-Cozar (2008) analysed several indicators of production and participation in Spanish library and information science blogs, based on a sample of 46 personal and corporate weblogs. The 12 blogs with the highest number of incoming links logged more than 70% of the total number of links received by the whole group. Their results detect an important decline in production during the study period (2006-2007), keeping constant the comments-per-post indicator. More than 50% of comments are written by the library blog authors and 4 blogs show higher than average indicators of production and participation.

The Hungarian liblogosphere

The first Hungarian library blog was Könyvtároskisasszony ('Library Mistress'). It was started as a professional blog, a lady who works in the library posted her experiences in an informal way. Influenced by the web 2.0 revolution in 2006 some library students created the <http://klog.hu> site that was intended to ensure a free blogging space for librarians and libraries. (Takács 2007) The KLOG name was given after the Hungarian word for library: 'könyvtár' blog. Today it is still be biggest hosting service for library-related blogs.

A recent masters thesis tried to collect all Hungarian library-related blogs. Hubay (2009) grouped library blogs into the following 6 categories. (In the brackets one can find the number of the library blogs in each categories which is followed by the percentage in the Hungarian liblogosphere):

- public library blogs (15, 16%)
- school library blogs (29, 31%)
- personal professional library blogs (23, 24%)
- library associations', organisations' blogs (10, 11%)
- library education related blogs (5, 5%)
- other library blogs (12, 13%)

As in our survey only those blogs were analysed that target directly the library user and not the professional community this grouping wasn't proved relevant in this connection. Instead we used the widely accepted library types for group the blogs (public, academic, school, special and national library).

Survey:

We examined 10 randomly selected Hungarian library blogs and analysed all entries and all comments in a 3 months period. We selected those blogs that met the criteria of targeting users with their content and were active between March and May, 2009.

The following libraries' blogs were analysed (in brackets one can find the city where the library operates, the URL where the blog can be accessed and then the abbreviation of the library/ collection that will be used in this study):

- European Union Collection of Ervin Szabó Metropolitan Library (Budapest) – <http://eufszek.blogspot.com/> EU
- Music Collection of Sándor Bródy County and City Library (Eger) <http://hangtarnok.klog.hu/> MC
- National Library of Foreign Literature (Budapest) – <http://oik.klog.hu/> NLFL
- Zsigmond Justh Public Library (Orosháza) – <http://blog.justhvk.hu/> ZJPL
- Library of Hungarian Central Statistical Office (Budapest) – <http://kshkonyvajanlo.blogspot.com/> LHCSO
- Erzsébet Galgóczy Public Library (Győr) – <http://blog.gevk.hu/> EGPL
- Library of Loránd Eötvös Science University (Budapest) – <http://egyetemi.klog.hu/> LLESU
- Public, School and Children Library (Jászfényszaru) – <http://blog.jaszfenyszarusuli.hu/> PSCL
- Library of „Rókus” Primary School (Szeged) – <http://rokusikonyvtar.freeblog.hu/> LRPS

- Library of Dániel Berzsenyi Grammar School (Budapest) – <http://berzsenyi.klog.hu/>
LDBGS

Though due to the selection method we can not regard it representative sample Regarding library types these blogs more or less represent the Hungarian liblogosphere,.

Among the analysed libraries 2 special collections can be found, both are departments of a public library (EU, MC). There are 2 public libraries (ZJPL, EGPL), 2 special libraries (NLFL, LHCSO), 2 school libraries (LRPS, LDBGS), 1 academic (LLESU) and 1 that serves both school children and the general public (PSCL).

Although it is not the main goal of this research we also tried to identify those who write comments and observe if virtual communities came up around blogs. Finally we also analysed those entries that got the most comments to find what are those topics that users are really interested in.

Results

In this study the most interesting result was that the total number of entries (193) exceeds those of comments (170). That means that on average 6,43 entries were created on behalf of the libraries, while they got just 5,67 comments per month. (1. figure)

1. figure Total number of entries and comments in the sample

Library	Total number of entries	Total number of comments
EU	4	2
MC	30	81
NLFL	10	2
ZJPL	36	82
LHCSO	16	0
EGPL	30	0
LLESU	25	2
PSCL	19	0
LRPS	14	0
LDBGS	9	1
Total	193	170

In 4 out of the 10 library blogs there wasn't any comment in the 3 months period. It is also conspicuous that 2 blogs (those of MC and ZJPL) got the 96% of all comments, the others just very few. It seems that the blogs that gets most comments are among the most actives. Both create an entry at least every third day.

If we examine how many percent of the entries were commented we can see that it was only 19%, and the same two libraries' blogs (MC, ZJPL) generated the most vivid community life in the sample. (2. figure)

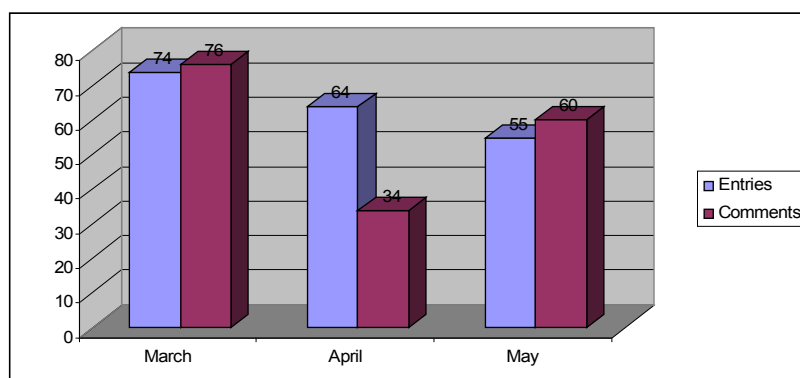
2. figure Commented entries

Library	Total number of entries	of which commented	%
EU	4	1	25
MC	30	12	40
NLFL	10	2	20
ZJPL	36	19	53

LHCSO	16	0	0
EGPL	30	0	0
LLESU	25	2	8
PSCL	19	0	0
LRPS	14	0	0
LDBGS	9	1	11
Total	193	37	19

Alltogether less then 20% of all entries are commented.

The most active period within this three months was March and it continuously decreased in April and May. As the chart below shows the users had the least active period in the mid of spring when half as many comments were created as entries. The cause is clear: the two blogs that attract 96% of the comments (MC and ZJPL) were less active in April.



An analysis by library types shows that the two blogs that got most entries serve adults. One is for the general public and one is for an audience with special field of interest (music). In our sample there was no any library blog targeting children that got any user comment.

As all of the analysed sites target users, we can suppose that comments should also originate from them. We tried to identify the authors of the comments. We regarded as a 'librarian' those who commented their own entries and those who are known to be a librarian according to our previous knowledge. We regarded as 'users' those who can not be regarded as a librarian. There is a significant uncertainty regarding this issue, because only the librarians could be surely identified. Therefore we can only state that out of 170 comments at least 75 were created by librarians and just the remaining 95 can be from the users. It is also interesting that 62 comments (out of the total number of 170!) are created by just two active librarians: those who are responsible for the library blog in MC and ZJPL. It is 36% of all comments. These librarians read and comment each others' blogs as well. This causes the high proportion of their virtual presence. Other librarians are mainly editors of professional blogs who follow other library-related blogs as well.

This brief analysis does not aim to investigate the themes of the most commented entries, but it was interesting to take a look at those that stimulated extensive discussions. 14 entries got more than 5 comments, of which 6 got more than 10. All of these entries are from the MC or the ZJPL blog. As the first is a special collection for music it is not a surprise that its entries are about music programs, music videos, newly published albums. The blog of ZJPL serves the general public and in this case the topics are much diverse. There are discussions around such hot topics like the Hungarian bookcrossing game (called 'Lose a book!'), the question of reading from the monitor vs. reading from paper? why man read? is censorship acceptable in libraries regading

porn or creating bomb? etc. Other libraries usually delivered such formal information like new acquisitions, library events, actualities in an informal channel.

Discussion

The results clearly showed that in most cases library users do not participate in virtual community building around blogs. Most entries do not get comments, that suggest that patrons are still not co-authors of the content in this connection. While in 8 blogs out of the analysed 10 there was not any discussion that was stimulated by an entry in 3 months, on 2 blogs a very active community life evolved, and interesting conversations came up. These two libraries have a lot of virtual patrons who are visiting the library website regularly whenever a new entry appears. We can ask then: what are they doing better?

The results suggest that there is not direct connection between the type of the library and succesful community building. However it is conspicuous that those libraries that targets school children or at least the younger generation can not get them participating in conversations with their ideas.

While many librarians still believe that the best way to address the younger (or net) generation is starting a blog it seems that they are passive regarding interactive services. We should not presume that younger people are not interested in blogs but it seems that it is not the communication channel that attract them: the content is much more important. Presumably in the cases of the blogs targeting younger audience in our sample the librarian could not find those topics that school children are really interested in.

Perhaps this is the case with all other blogs that haven't got any comments. These libraries use the blogs mainly for informing their users about actualities, events or about new books. This is formal information transmitted in an informal way. We can assume that the library chose the blog form to exploit its full potential. Anyway users do not seem to be much interested in this content in this form. New arrivals, events are not fascinating enough to bring out the users. Maybe these libraries should try to involve their users by posting a bit more interesting entries and let these types of formal information published on the library's official website. Moreover paralel publication of such important information like events can confuse those users who do not want to while on the library's site just get the information and going away.

The results suggest that the key factor for a vivid community life around blogs is an active librarian who is engaged in blogging and community building. Blogging can't be pursued as an obligatory task. The librarian should raise interesting questions that stimulate users to become active. He or she must proactively foresee the needs of the users and post entries about fascinating topics. The frequency of entries also seems to be important. On the two blogs that attracted the most comments there was an entry at least twice a week.

The research showed that there are only a few blogs that can really attract virtual visitors. Around these blogs a flourishing community life evolved so these can be regarded as places where people like to go for just to be together with others. ZJPL blog is a good example for a low-intensive virtual meeting-place, where there is not a certain field of interest that connects people.

There were surprisingly too many librarians among those who write comments. It is normal that the librarian takes part in conversations, but this extremely high proportion of their presence suggests that a big part of the Hungarian liblogosphere is much more the librarians' virtual playground than a relevant service for the users.

Conclusion

The most interesting result of the blog analysis was that most entries (81%) were not commented at all, and virtual communities have been built just around a few blogs. There were only two fascinating blogs that could stimulate user participation in a 3 months period. These are good examples for virtual communities. These suggest that the key for a vivid community life around blogs is an engaged librarian who can raise interesting issues that bring out the user and get them taking part in discussions.

We could not collect data on real readers just make conclusions from the comments. However this is the function that enables users to take part in conversations, tell us their opinion and be together with others virtually. From the user participation's point of view it seems the most important part of blogs. Further research should observe not only those who post comments, but the readers of library blogs.

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