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We're Content Creators, Too: Libraries and Blogging

Description

One of the earliest examples of Web 2.0 technology, blogs have experienced exponential growth since the term “weblog” was coined in 1997 to describe the reverse chronologically-ordered, interactive, online “journals.” As with any new technology, reception—and utilization—by librarians has been less than uniform. For many librarians and libraries, however, blogs are an attractive entrée to the world of 2.0 librarianship.

Keywords

librarians, blog, community outreach

Disciplines

Library and Information Science

We're Content Creators, Too:

Libraries and Blogging

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*The Shifted Librarian. Annoyed Librarian.
Loose Cannon Librarian. Foxy Librarian.
Bitter Librarian. Laughing Librarian ...*

Like a litany of rejected characters from Dark Horse Comics, the list continues, seemingly ad infinitum. But these aren't stereotypes thrust upon librarians by Hollywood or the popular press, though they may be appropriate descriptions for some of our co-workers. These are but a few samples of library advocates and agitators of the "new media"—the blogosphere.

One of the earliest examples of Web 2.0 technology, blogs have experienced exponential growth since the term "weblog" was coined in 1997 to describe the reverse-chronologically-ordered, interactive, online "journals."¹ As with any new technology, reception—and utilization—by librarians has been less than uniform. For many librarians and libraries, however, blogs are an attractive entrée to the world of 2.0 librarianship:

"Blogs are a simple and efficient way for *librarians to stay informed* and for *libraries to disseminate information* in a timely manner. The format's central benefits are ease of use and clear presentation of updated content. Many blogging tools are designed to make publishing easy, regardless of the user's technological skill level." (Emphasis added).²

At the risk of being simplistic, there are two families of library blogs. There are those intended for other librarians/library staff, which perform the *staying informed* function (let's call them *professional* blogs). And then there are those intended for library patrons/the general public, which perform the *disseminating information* function (let's call these *outreach* blogs).

Before going further, an important addition should be made to this demarca-

tion of blogging functionality. If we adhere too literally to the one-dimensional ideas that blogs only allow librarians to "stay informed" or allow libraries to "disseminate information," a *crucial* function of both professional and outreach blogs is lost: the encouragement of interactivity and dialogue. Blogs' true utility to libraries and librarians is found in the union of current content and communication—in the dialogue generated between fellow professionals and staffers, and the interaction fostered between library staff and patrons.

Professional Blogs

For a profession that has been, in general, notoriously slow to adopt new technologies (but we're getting better!), professional blogging is the ideal "gateway" technology: it offers low risks and high benefits. And it's free!

Professional blogs are generally maintained by individual library professionals, library staff or others working in related areas (e.g., vendors or academics). Though some bloggers are pseudonymous, most make no secret of their identities or their agendas. Topics of blogs are as diverse as the librarians who write them; though it is little surprise that many blogs address technological issues.

The greatest benefit of professional blogs is that they lend needed immediacy to the sharing of ideas and knowledge in the library world. While traditional peer-review publications are valuable, they cannot approach the benefits of blogging:

- Instantaneous distribution of new ideas about technology, best practice, customer service, staffing, etc.—which enables quicker adoption of new/improved technologies or practices.
- The ability to comment on, discuss, and debate ideas (without clogging e-mail inboxes with list-serv messages).



- The linkage of library professionals from around the world who are writing about/working on similar issues—via *blogrolls* (lists of recommended blogs on a bloggers site) and *trackbacks* (a method of notifying a blogger when his/her work is mentioned on another blog, and a good way of keeping track of discussions that span more than one blog).
- The ability to monitor multiple information sources (blogs) at once using RSS feeds.
- The ability to publicize and respond quickly to pressing issues be they political, legislative, professional, etc.

Fittingly enough, Eric Schnell (Ohio State University) used his blog to express the role that blogs can play in professional development:

“While I respect the role that traditional publication plays in archiving our professional communications, I still can’t help but to feel that they can no longer be the trusted source for the dialog and communication going on in our profession today. *Libraries are largely dependent on and are competing with technologies that change every nine months.* How are we supposed to progress as a profession in such a changing environment when it still takes a year and a half for an article to move from submission to publication?” (Emphasis added).³

There is little doubt that professional blogs will continue to play an important role in the exchange of ideas and in the growth and development of library practice, services and technology. And while there are benefits to creating a blog with the entire library world as your audience, the

same collaborative benefits can be seen with blogs created for internal library use.

For those who are interested in starting a professional blog, free blogging platforms like Blogger (www.blogger.com) and Wordpress (www.wordpress.com) make it simple to get started.

Recommended Professional Blogs

Information Wants to be Free

<http://meredith.wolfwater.com/wordpress/index.php>

YALSA

<http://blogs.ala.org/yalsa.php>

DIY Librarian

<http://diylibrarian.org/>

Tame The Web: Libraries and Technology

<http://tametheweb.com/>

Librarians Matter

<http://librariansmatter.com/blog/>

Library Garden

<http://librarygarden.blogspot.com/>

Infodoodads

<http://www.infodoodads.com/>

Outreach Blogs

Outreach blogs take librarians from behind the desk and place them, their skills, and their resources, in patrons’ homes and online lives—all with the benefits of immediacy and interactivity. Depending on the type of library, the blogging possibilities may differ, but the underlying goals should remain the same: provide patrons with a forum that puts a personal face on the library; provides current, desirable, and valuable information; and provides an opportunity for patrons to interact with library staff (via blog comments). Some examples:

Academic libraries are perfect candidates for *subject blogs*—blogs devoted to a certain area of study or research. Librarians can write about research tools, new library classes, and anything else relevant to scholars in that area. Faculty or students can



subscribe to the blogs via RSS feeds, and receive updates automatically.

Examples

University of Oregon Literature & the Library
<http://libweb.uoregon.edu/tools/blogs/literature/>

Oregon State University Archives
http://blogs.library.oregonstate.edu/osu_archives

All libraries—from school to public to academic—can benefit from *blogs aimed at specific patron groups*. One common example is a public library teen services blog. Blogging for teens is a logical combination; it’s a familiar venue for many teens and, most importantly, one in which they will feel comfortable.

Examples

Tigard Teen (Tigard Public Library)
<http://tpltigardteen.blogspot.com/>

Birth to Six News (Corvallis-Benton County Public library)
<http://www.corvallislibrarybirthtosix.blogspot.com/>

Wired Distant—Pierce Library News & Views (Eastern Oregon University’s Distance Education blog)
<http://answerlandpierce.blogspot.com/>

News blogs are perhaps the most common type of outreach blogs used by libraries. As the name implies, they are an excellent means of posting current events and other important information related to the library—new resources, programs, materials, staff, etc.

Examples

OHSU Library What’s New
<http://library.ohsu.edu/blog/>

Library News from Watzek (Lewis & Clark College)
<http://library.lclark.edu/newsblog/>

The possibilities for outreach blogs are only limited by the library’s scope, and the

library staff’s time (and imagination). While some larger libraries may decide to purchase a blogging platform such as MoveableType or Wordpress (which also offers free blogs), free blogging platforms are more than sufficient for almost all blogging needs. And a free way to expand a library’s online presence—while reaching out to patrons—is certainly attractive.

Four Blogging Tips

While blogging is free, and easy, consider the following before falling headlong into online authorship:

- **Innovation for the sake of innovation is, well, pointless.** Don’t blog without a purpose. You may feel swept up in the heady rush of “twopointopia” (a condition which compels otherwise rational people to implement Web 2.0 applications just because they’re new and different), but it’s important to consider why you are blogging and who you are blogging for.
- **Know your (technical) limitations.** For some public and school libraries, internet firewalls and filtering software may be set up to block blogs. If this is the case, you may find it hard to start even an inter-staff blog. Contact your system administrators beforehand to make sure it won’t be a problem—and if it is, work with them to find a work-around.
- **Be consistent.** The very heartbeat of blogging is the promise of new material. Without constant attention and posting, a blog’s audience will quickly wane—rendering your blog irrelevant.
- **Be yourself.** Whether you are writing a professional blog or an outreach blog, authenticity on your part will be respected (and expected) by your readers.

See *We’re Content Creators Too* page 27

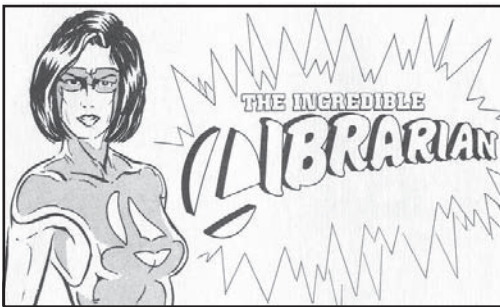


Americans make decisions by what they believe, by what they know in their hearts. They don't need Mr. Webster to tell them what's what! Reading the facts just encourages people to question, and questioning is very unpatriotic. We're watching you.

6. **Librarians purportedly promote “freedom of choice.”** Freedom is not free, baby! Choice is bad. It creates false hopes and just fills peoples' heads with dangerous ideas. It leads to anarchy and plants the seeds of terrorism. Well, are you with us or against us? Libraries are a code RED on this Patriot's warning system! 🌿

Look! Up in the Sky!

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preservation information. It was also bilingual—you can flip it over and read the same material in Spanish. Unfortunately, despite promises of full issues to come, the Incredible Librarian only appeared on a lavender T-shirt and this tantalizing sample issue.

The pages of comic books reflect the world around them. Over the past decade, costumed heroes have increasingly used online resources and sophisticated research skills nearly as much as muscles and utility belts to defeat injustice and tyranny. The Justice Society, the world's first superhero team, hired an archivist to manage their more-than-60-year history for them. With her vast information and communication network, Oracle may well be the most influential hero in the DC Universe. Who knows where the next costumed librarian may show up, fighting for truth, justice and a meaningful reference interview! 🌿

We're Content Creators Too

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Final Thoughts

If they did nothing else (and they do), blogs would be valuable for one simple reason: they allow librarians (and libraries) to shape their identities in the eyes of patrons. Visions of Katherine Hepburn and Shirley Jones—or even a “shush-action” Nancy Pearl—may be hard to shake, but blogs give librarians a new way to communicate their true value and expertise, along with the depth of library resources and the importance of library-related issues.

By utilizing a platform that is only increasing in popularity and visibility, library staff can share ideas with each other, collaborate on innovative new services, and further convince patrons of what we already know—libraries (and librarians) are relevant, current, accurate and authoritative. And kind of cool, too. 🌿

References

¹“It's the links, stupid.” *The Economist* 379(8474), Special Section: 5-8.




²Schwartz, Greg. Blogs for Libraries. *Web-Junction*. Available at <http://www.webjunction.org/do/%20/DisplayContent?id=767>. Posted February 22, 2005.

³Schnell, Eric. Where is my manuscript? Part 2. *The Medium is the Message*. Available at <http://ericschnell.blogspot.com/2007/08/where-is-my-manuscript-part-2.html>. Posted August 7, 2007.

A Librarian Mom's Thoughts

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college students still think of librarians in such stereotypical ways? And, what does this mean for those students and adults who need assistance but won't ask because of this image? What does it mean for the future of libraries if their caretakers (librarians) are viewed as unapproachable?

Will our children, and their children, see libraries as welcoming community spaces? We must keep trying to reach children and adults through our services and resources to create richer communities—and to create an image that outweighs the weight 

Who Do They Think We Are?

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⁵Jesella, K., A Hipper Crowd of Shushers, *The New York Times*, July 8, 2007.

⁶Block, M., from Party People, accessed on Ex Libris at <http://www.marylaine.com/ex-libris/>.

⁷Kneale, R., Librarian Image Study at <http://www.infotoday.com/mls/nov02/kneale.htm>.

⁸De Rosa, C., et al., Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources: A Report to the OCLC Membership (Dublin, Ohio: OCLC Online Computer Library Center, 2005), Part 6 (Conclusions), page 3. Accessed at <http://www.oclc.org/reports/2005perceptions.htm>.

Librarians and Pop Culture

Continued from page 21

Emily Lloyd shares the stories of Jan, who is trapped behind the reference desk, and her clueless boss; the questions and situations Jan deals with regularly make me glad I'm not on a reference desk myself!

There are plenty of other things out there—toys, books, movies, even search en-

gines “modeled” on librarians, one of which was released in late 2007 (findingDucinea, which bills itself as “Librarian of the Internet”). Keep your eyes open—as long as these activities are going on, then librarians have pop relevance! 