Blogging and Uses of Blogs in Libraries

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Abstract

Today, the terms like Web 2.0, library 2.0 and blogging are the buzzwords. Along with web 2.0, blogging is also getting popularity among the library professionals. Weblog or blog is the website consisting of journal like entries that are arranged in reverse chronologically order. These are distinguished by their frequent, usually short, post, and by the way they reflect their owner's personality. This paper discusses the Blog and its uses in library & information centers.

Keywords : Blogs, Weblogs, Blogging, Web 2.0.

1.   Introduction

Weblogs or the blogs are the sites that capture particular views, ideas, or opinions overtime. These are the web applications, which contain periodic posts on a common web page. These posts are often but not necessarily in reverse chronological order. Each blog tells a story, be it about a person, an organization, an event, or any other subject such as the environment, healthcare, disasters, language, literature, etc. The person who maintains a blog is called a blogger and the act of creating and maintaining a blog is called blogging. In a blog, the entries are read, commented on, and discussed by an even larger community, often fostering active debate. This may sound similar to a listserv and, in some ways, it is. However, unlike a listserv, blogs are typically accessible to the public at large, thereby encouraging more diverse readership and disseminating information further and with greater speed. The hypertextual, link-centric nature of weblog entries further facilitates this rapid exchange and distribution of information. A blog is variously defined as under:

- It is "a Web application that contains periodic, reverse chronologically ordered posts on a common Web page" (wikipedia, 2008).
- To Peter Scott (2001), a blog is "a page containing brief, chronologically arranged item of information. A blog can take the form of a diary, journal, what's new page or links to other websites".
- Clyde (2004a) states that from the viewpoint of the user or visitor, a blog is a Web site with content arranged as entries of text and hyperlinks, posted in reverse chronological order, a timestamp for each entry so the reader knows when it was posted, and an archive of previously posted content that can be easily accessed by visitors.
- A Weblog is a dynamic, flexible tool that is easy to use whether you are creating with it or simply viewing the results (Richardson, 2004).

Though the term Weblog was coined by John Barger in December 1997 and its short version Blog by Peter Merholz in 1999, website, http://info.cern.ch/, the site built by Tim Berners-Lee at CERN is

said to be first blog. Berners-Lee from this page pointed to all the new sites as they came online. Winner states that the content of this site has been archived at the World Wide Web (WWW) consortium (newhome.weblogs) (Clyde, 2004b; Clyde, 2005). From this a community of bloggers sprang up. NCSA's "What's New" page was the major blog on the Net from 1993-96. The World Wide Web exploded and the Weblog grew along with it. Winner created his first Weblog, "The Scripting News" in February 1996. It was one of the earliest Weblogs and is currently the longest running blog on the Internet. Among the other early blogs are the Rebecca's Pocket and Cam World, which documented new bloggers and today has a great influence in the blogosphere.

These early Weblogs were link-driven sites with a mix of links, commentary and personal thoughts and essays and could only be created by people who already knew how to make a website. Blood (2002) states, "Today, however, through the introduction of how-to-manuals, blog IDs and several user friendly web tools, even the least savvy people can create a Weblog" (rebeccablood.net). A fine and useful example of such tools is the Rich Text Editor (RTE) as offered by Printexx, which claims that 'No HTML to Learn' and 'No Software to Download and Install', but with the RTE, how one's entry appears on his screen is how it will be published on the web.

Today, the blogs have been emerging as an effective way to publish and communicate to a Web. There were only 26 blogs in 1996 but now there are millions of blogs (Blood, 2002). According to an inference, there are currently upwards of 63 million blogs on the web. The total number of blogs in existence is doubling approximately every six months. There are about 1.3 million new blog posts made each day, which is about 54,000 posts per hour. Most blogging sites are free, and they come with built-in templates that allow you to make a blog without having to deal with complicated coding and formatting. Blogs have a strong immediacy - they can address topics nearly and instantaneously. Sometimes blogs break news even before more traditional media sources.

2.   Writing a Blog/Library Blog

The art of creating and maintaining a blog is called blogging. Whether writing your own blog or contributing towards a collaborative effort, there are some points to be kept in mind. Schwartz (2005) mentions some reasons to consider in writing or contributing to a collaborative effort in blogging such as:

Writing a Blog keeps You Current : You may want to know what is going on in the world before you start talking about it. Posting regularly to a blog encourages you to actively engage the process of information seeking and current awareness.

Blogs are the Advocacy Tool : If you want change, you have to talk about it. Blogs are a great forum, not only for exposing the world to the issues facing both libraries and librarians, but also for thinking through your ideas and cultivating means of expressing them effectively.

Blogs build Community : Some of you are probably thinking that no one will read what you have to say. Schwartz (2005) said 'when I started my blog, Open Stacks, I shared your skepticism. As it turns out, no matter who you are and what you write about, there will be others who share your interests. I was surprised to discover that, as a librarian, you already have a built-in community of people interested in you and your perspective.' You can, and probably will, meet people that you may not have met otherwise, becoming part of a very progressive segment of the LIS community.

You are Unique : One of the problems with librarianship is image. Stereotypes of librarians abound. Publishing a blog is an opportunity to demonstrate your individuality and thereby work to dispel some of those pervasive myths. Even if you do not think of yourself as unique and fear being redundant, your voice is yours and yours alone, so join the chorus.

Do it for You : Never discount the power of writing as catharsis.

Lastly, it is easy, so no excuses and go for writing a blog.

3.   Library Weblogs

Blogs are perfect for dissemination of information as the system of dated entries makes it easy for viewers to identify new content. A number of the system's libraries have caught the fever as well. The growth of library weblogs has noticeable growth during last several years. In 2003 there were only 57 library weblogs, while in 2004 the numbers increased to 198 weblogs (Clyde, 2004b). This number has reached up to 392 in the year 2006 (Karami and Oloumi, 2006). Doug Goans and Teri Vogel (2003) have described a weblog project in an academic library to deliver information about library news, services and resources to the science faculty and students at Georgia State University, they developed a blog. Caver (2003) lists several public libraries that are using blogs to publicize news and events, while Harder and Reichardt (2003) suggest that academic libraries can develop department or subject specific weblogs to reach faculty and graduate students with content customized to meet their information needs. Clyde (2004b**)** has also investigated library weblogs in the late 2003; her findings show that public and academic libraries were more likely to have a weblog than other types of libraries. The most common aim or purpose was to provide news, information and links to Internet resources for library users. Few provided interactive facilities, and when provided, there was little evidence that the facilities were used to any extent. Only one-fifth of the weblogs are updated within the last day and only half within the previous week. It is interesting to note that less than half provided an RSS feed.

Cohen is of the opinion that newer Weblog writers have the opportunity to expand themselves personally and, more important professionally by continuing their efforts as library Weblog pioneers. Bar-Ilan (2004) examines the value of blogs as information dissemination a tool by a list of blogs written in English, which was compiled from several lists directories. The findings

indicate that blogs have a high professional potential and are a novel information channel for transferring information both to fellow professionals and to other users of the Web. The main challenge at this point of time is to increase the readership of these blogs. Blair and Cranston state the stages of creation a library weblog and compassion it with the baby's arrival. They say 'expectant parents do a lot of planning before baby's arrival; expectant bloggers should do the same much like having a baby starting a blog is long-term commitment.' A clear scope, a well defined audience, a professional look, and regular maintenance do not happen overnight.

Armstrong et al., (2004) have demonstrated the ability of blogs to integrate the personal aspect of a journal or diary that documents the student's journey through the learning with the immediate publishing capability of the web creating the ability to have a collaborative, public discourse on the reflections of learners. Efimova and Fiedler (2003) explore how professionally oriented weblog projects support the emergence of loosely coupled learning networks. They suggest that some weblog ecosystems can be conceptualized as learning webs. These learning webs appear to meet the specific needs of knowledge workers for flexible and dynamic learning environments.

4.   Usage of Blogs in Libraries

Blogs are the natural for librarians. These are an extension of what we already do: identify, organize, and make information accessible in libraries. They give us an opportunity to be more responsive, to reach out to the faculty and students via our library blogs to highlight news, post student/faculty book reviews and invite comments, announce events, list new acquisitions, etc. Blogs are a simple and efficient way for librarians to stay informed and for libraries to disseminate information in a timely manner. Like other development, the Blog is also approaching library science to think about its uses. The obvious use of weblogs in libraries is to set one up to deliver news to patrons. This can be in the form of a link to the weblog on the main web page or having the news displayed right on the front page. In fact, many libraries have a weblog on the main library page. In most cases there is only one person with access to the site to update it with news. With weblogs, more users can have access to the site and update it as needed. In all instances, there can be an administrator who has total control of who can post to the site.

As such, libraries must follow new technologies very closely and the advantages of the newest innovations, such as Blogs and RSS feeds and these must be reflected in library services. Despite the increasing popularity of blogs, few libraries have taken advantage of what they offer. Adding a blog to libraries is free and easy. Librarians can collect and make information accessible to patrons and researchers – and if they want, invite them in on the discussion. Blogs can be updated easily, frequently and continuously, making them an appealing alternative to static newsletters.

Hane (2001), describes the benefits of reading blogs written by librarians. She also identifies

directories of blogs, including those specially limited to library blogs. Certainly librarians have created a number of useful and well-regarded professional weblogs. Weaver (2003) suggested that a weblog could be used as a tool for communication with library users. In fact, she notes that 'it is surprising that more libraries do not use them to keep customers informed as the format is prefer for that job'. She is supported by Alcock (2003), who says ' this tool can be used to inform clients of changes, additions and news'. Further, it can enable the library's clients to comment on the library's service. Schwartz (2005), also emphasized that libraries can use weblogs to provide up-to-date information on local events, to provide library news and to announce new books and other materials in the library collection.

The format's central benefits of Blog 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. But there are two issues (Brennan, 2007) that impact libraries when it comes to blogs–the first is whether or not you should create a library blog. The second is whether or not you can use blogs in the provision of reference services. In nut shell, the libraries may use the blogs because of :

- Some provide up-to-date information on local events, fulfilling their role as a news and information source for their community. Others provide library news (both local and national), advocating for the importance of library support.

- Still others are using blogs to provide announcements of new library acquisitions, promoting the services that they work so hard to provide.

- And then there are those who are doing all these things at once!

- Direct users to useful, new or interesting resources;

- Comment on local and national events and activities in the IT, book and library worlds;

- Provide news from the library/information service; and

- Request feedback or comments and generally help the library to engage with its users, especially those who rarely if ever visit a physical library.

As far as the advantages of blogs in libraries are concerned, they can be used in following ways:

- In current awareness service, blog can be used to highlight news or resources of interest; and to post book   reviews from students, faculty and the staff members;

- To list new acquisitions and to announce library news and events. Using of systems such as RSS technology is another blog application in libraries for selective dissemination of information.

- As the place to talk, but they are also a place to listen to what our users are telling us. Librarians and information professionals, including those working in libraries and information centers, have begun using blogs to share ideas with colleagues and solicit feedback through

the comments function. Blogs reflect a personal viewpoint, they allow readers to respond and comment. These 'give and take' fleshes out blog content and results in a sense of community among the participants.

Weblogs are the excellent way to stay current. News travels down the blogging pipelines long before it appears in print and, in many cases, online magazines and journals. Librarians are great filters of information and relying on a select group to provide your daily information can be a great time-saver. Blogs, among their other uses, are good tools for promotion and delivery of news items. Think of a library blog as a running newsletter, easier to maintain than a "news" web page. Here is a list of medical library blogs: http://liswiki.org/wiki/Weblogs_-_Medical_Librarianship (including links to blogs by MLA and NN/LM among others). For more general library blogs, one can look at http://www.libdex.com/weblogs.html. A good though dated article on the general uses of library blogs can be seen on : http://www.infotoday.com/MLS/nov03/fichter.shtml. Blogs have also been used to generate an "on-the fly" FAQ with answers to reference questions (http://libraryclips.blogsome.com/2005/09/29/libraryreference-blogs/). This approach is useful for patrons and staff, since it saves time in finding the same thing over and over.

5. Managing Responsibilities and Guidelines

The responsibility for managing a blog can be divided among multiple contributors (e.g. librarians) who have the authorization to post and update entries. A library can have one blog that many librarians across multiple departments use to publicize general library information, and the library can have a series of blogs run by smaller groups of librarians who want to deliver information to more specific audiences. Business librarians can manage one to deliver information for business faculty and students, for example. A library blog, however, is managed by one or more librarians within the organization. It has some kind of presence on the library Web site (or is at least linked to it), and the librarians use it to deliver news and information relevant to patrons at that library instead of a larger community of librarians and information professionals.

Commenting upon the relevance of blogs to librarians and to information professionals, ASIST Professional Guidelines state that information professionals should seek "to extend public awareness and appreciation of information availability." As such, librarians and information professional should not only provide information on demand and act as intermediaries between the users and the information, but should alert to the existence of novel "relevant" information, and provide access and facilitate users and fellow professionals to efficiently utilize resources, technologies and information retrieval tools. An additional responsibility of the information professional is to "uphold each user's, provider's, or employer's right to privacy and confidentiality and to respect whatever proprietary rights belong to them".

6.   Searching Tools

A number of Internet search engines and directories such Yahoo and Google, provide information about blog and lists of weblogs, and some include page from weblogs in their search results. In addition, weblog creation site such as Blogger maintain lists of weblogs that have been created using their services. Ramos and Piper (2006) state that there are now some specialist weblog search engines, the largest of which are Google (http://blogsearch.google.com) and Technorati (http://www.technorati.com). The same criteria that you use to evaluate a website for accuracy, currency, and authority should also apply to blogs. It is speculated that a primary use for blogs in reference would be for the most cutting-edge material, things that have not yet made it into the regular literature channels.

7.   Conclusion

We have seen that technology is changing fast and the library and information science is also being affected by the technology (Dhiman, 2007a, b, and Dhiman, 2008; Dhiman and Rani, 2007). Blogging is also becoming a fast cornerstone tool in the online dissemination and consumptions of information, which makes sense to briefly explain a concept that extends the concept even further. It is called syndication and the premise is simple enough. Some people, read a lot of regularly updated web materials in the course of a day: blogs, news sites, etc. Visiting each site individually is time-consuming and, since updates are unpredictable, not always fruitful. Librarians are becaming the early adopters of blogging to support informing their clients and themselves of new Web and information technology resources, of changes to library services and collection development, and for various internal purposes such as distributing information and mounting team-based projects. Blogging works best in situations where information needs to be ordered in descending chronological order. Blogging could be an efficient and effective alternative for information and knowledge transfer, resulting in a more productive workforce.

But we can say that blogging is still a grey area, though the web's potential has realized its importance in the present era of information technology. The very adjuncts of the blogging such as the semi-prominence, the public-private overlap, the interactive nature, the timeliness, the swarm of bloggers in discussion instead of single source broadcasting to the masses, all hold promise of a medium of information sharing and dissemination as radio and television, etc. did in their times (Dhiman, 1998). And the increased complexity of the application of the principles of fair use, copyright, privacy and intellectual property in the electronic world, the information professional must be constantly aware of the developments in these areas. Blog or the Weblogs are ideal for disseminating all types of information chosen by the blogger, for commenting, expressing opinions and for discussing implications. This has allowed millions of people all over the world to exercise their right to legitimate free expressions. Besides, the blogs are also being utilized to provide local information; e.g. changes

in opening hours, special lectures and new acquisitions (Barllan, 2004). Here, the choice of the right technology or development of more appropriate technologies may create a distinct advantage in the highly competitive top-levels of the blogging world.

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