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Blogging:

Rants, Raves, and Random Thoughts

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Introduction: The Rants

Unless you have been asleep or just born in the past three years, you will have found many library articles touting the growth and value of the weblog.¹ You may also have attended one of the many technology/library conferences, such as Computers in Libraries, and even an ACL Conference and gone to a presentation on blogs. You will have heard that you must blog, and in conjunction use RSS – whatever that is – if you wish to communicate more effectively with your patrons, your staff, or anyone else.² Hopping on the blogging bandwagon can “save” your institution, make you a better librarian or teacher. As Irene McDermott notes, “Just as it has been imperative for everyone to have a Web page, now everyone with the slightest interest in being au courant must, absolutely must, have a blog.”³

This paper will examine the hype surrounding blogging, the hope or potential benefits of blogging for your institution, as well as the hysteria or negative aspects of blogging. This will be accompanied by comments about my personal experience over the past 4 years with *The In Season Christian Librarian*.

Writing a formal article about blogging seems odd because the style of a blog is casual and conversational and often stream of consciousness. Marshall Brain (2004) says, “There is no particular order to [blogs]. For example, if I see a good link, I can throw it in my blog. The tools that most bloggers use make it incredibly easy to add entries to a blog any time they feel like it.”⁴ However, given the short time blogs have been around, several doctoral level theses on blogging have appeared in *Dissertation Abstracts*.⁵ This paper does not draw on dissertations but does make reference to several formal presentations at conferences in addition to national surveys and white papers. Even after 4 years, much remains unclear and undecided about blogging.

Background and Definition

Blogging has been a part of the Internet since the 1990s. David Winer credits the first weblog to Tim Berners-Lee at CERN <http://info.cern.ch>⁶. Some confusion exists as to who actually gave the form its name. According to Wikipedia’s article on weblogs, Winer also credits Jorn Barger as the first to give the new form the name⁷ in 1997 and Peter Merholz creating the change to “wee-blog” which was then shortened by other users to “blog” (Merholz <http://www.peterme.com/archives/00000205.html>).⁸

Although precise definitions for a blog vary according to the sources one visits, most describe it as a journal or chronicle of one person with commentary and links to other sites. Meg Hourihan, who co-created Pyra, the software bought by Google and now used for most blogging, notes that the weblog format unites all bloggers and differentiates them from other web publishing. This format consists of links, date and time stamps, permalinks to the archive, and daily posts. She adds, “What we write about does not define us as bloggers; it’s how we write about it (frequently, ad nauseam, peppered with links).”⁹

In fact, some definitions are positively lyrical:

Weblogs are often-updated sites that point to articles elsewhere on the web, often with comments, and to on-site articles. A weblog is kind of a continual tour, with a human guide who [sic] you get to know. There are many guides to choose from, each develops an audience, and there’s also comradery [sic] and politics between the people who run weblogs, they point to each other, in all kinds of structures, graphs, loops, etc.¹⁰

As a genre, blogging is a hybridization and creation of terms and techniques, as Susan Herring (2004) and her co-writers note in one of the few peer-reviewed articles on the topic. Their approach is a good way to identify

the character of the blog because the content is too varied for easy categorizing. Thus, the blog takes the best of webpages and e-mail correspondence and combines them to form a new communication medium.¹¹

Further evidence of this hybridization appears in newly coined words as well as the adoption of older web terms. Most of the new words have the word, “blog,” attached to a root syllable. For instance “Blogosphere” is the total web logs and blog-related webs (Wikipedia).¹² A search through Wikipedia also identifies other terms such as “blogroll,” a list of one’s favorite blogs.¹³ A quick search for “blog★” in *One Look* (<http://www.onelook.com>) pulls up forms like “blogdex,” “blogdigger,” “blogspace,” “blogsphere,” and 95 other words.

Although blogs are meant to be written in with some degree of frequency, they are more than journals because “they allow authors to experience social interaction while giving them control over the communication space.”¹⁴ The comments made to a post are often as important as the initial writing. In this manner, the blog is more like letters to an editor with the author as the editor. On the other hand a blog is not a wiki, another fashionable communication software, which is more open to comment and change by the community than an individual blog.¹⁵

Statistics

Another area of confusion when I first started this paper was the actual number of active blogs. The number varied greatly. As of 2004, most of the figures relate to studies of a number of blogs such as the report by Anick Jesdanun, which cited 3,634 blogs.¹⁶ However, no one is confused about the phenomenal growth of blogs. For instance, in August of 2005 the *State of the Blogosphere* identified over 14.2 million weblogs and in April 2006, this same report showed the number up to 35.3 million weblogs.¹⁷

Despite its apparent large appeal, blogging has not yet lived up to its potential communication power. According to the Pew Internet Report (2004), “Content Creation Online,” only two per cent of Americans actually publish a blog.¹⁸ Among the many comments regarding these

studies, Rick Bruner noted the problems involved in comparing them. For example, Pew contacted only Americans, while another survey by Perseus in the same year reported over 4 million blogs, based on a global list. Bruner added that he took these statistics with some reserve.¹⁹

For some it isn’t so much the number of blogs as the number of readers, and the surveys and counters show that the number of readers per blog is relatively few. The blog, *The Truth Laid Bear*, tracks the number of readers per blogs allied to it. These numbers currently range from over 247,000 readers for one blog to 71 visits per day for many others.²⁰ Jeffrey Henning (2004?) has calculated that the average number of readers per blog is no more than two dozen, and most blogs are composed of what he terms “nanoaudiences,” that is, extremely small groups interested in only that topic. Even for the larger, more popular blogs, the numbers are relatively small: around 100,000.²¹

The Rave: Libraries and Blogs – should we care?

Even though setting up a blog is easy, it is still takes time and effort. If less than a hundred people are really going to read a blog, why bother to even attempt one? What possible practical use can spending even a few minutes a day be derived from this exercise? If, as Goans and Vogels (2003) say, most of the library blogs are not done by the institutions but by librarians, then why should I start a blog for my library?²²

From various observations, including mine, blogs have a variety of uses which are a natural connection to librarians. Some, such as refgrunts or congrunts (which are primarily listing of events as they occur without comment), help inform people about the interactions at a place and time and put a different face on life in a library. Other blogs, such as *Rawbrick* or *Tangonat*, are more personal in nature and focus more on the interests of people who also happen to be librarians. Both of these blog types – informing and personal – draw others in and create communities, which as Garry Thompson (2003) notes is a characteristic of web media: “They offer

Hopping on the blogging bandwagon can “save” our systems, make us better libraries or academicians – or not.

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two-way interaction. They promote group identification and community.²³ Stephen Cohen in his blog, *Library Stuff*, ruminates, “like Usenet and electronic discussion lists, weblogs have become an outlet for the average librarian to connect with others around the world, exchange ideas, and belong to a group.”²⁴ The isolation many librarians in small communities may experience is ameliorated by the blogging community.

We librarians need to be more connected than ever and to find ways to share information easily. “The power of the blog lies not only in the ease of publishing new content, but also in its ability to automatically archive old posts and refresh the content of the main page.”²⁵ For example, when I set up my page, I spent more time deciding what the name would be than I did in setting up the template and structure.

Another advantage is that anyone can start a blog. Although experience in HTML is a plus, it isn’t mandatory. The host of various services for easy automation, creation, and maintaining the blog grows daily, although Blogger, Radio UserLand, and Movable Type appear to be at the forefront of the software.²⁶ Jenny Levine, *The Shifted Librarian*, has identified several advantages and disadvantages in her workshop “Blogging your new best friend.” She notes that the weblog can distribute the workload, can update your site from anywhere; lets you concentrate on content not on process, makes your site more dynamic. However she also notes that advantage can also become a disadvantage in that commitment to writing and maintaining the blog is necessary for it to be effective.²⁷ Greg Schwartz says in *Webjunction* that blogs help keep us current, promote ideas, find others of like interest and can be uniquely personal at the same time.²⁸ This incorporation of personality into blogs has allowed a more human interface about librarians to the public than the usual library web pages.

Many of the articles and weblogs seemed to comment more on the disadvantages than the advantages. Because content is so easily updated, the topics can be trivial or banal. “Today I had a cheese sandwich for lunch. It was really good. Do you like cheese?” is an example used

to show the problems of a blog.²⁹ Although not as true today, many of the library weblogs will comment on the same event on the same day without additional insight or opinion. The term is known now as Me-Tooism, thanks to several blogs on this area. In this case the discourse proved valuable to the way we view our comments and I hope in the future reignites that feature of the blog: “In this discussion, I have defended Groupthink and “me-tooism.” I may even find myself defending “uncritical me-tooism,” not because I am a me-tooist or uncritical, but because I think uncritical me-tooism achieves great things when it has the right checks and balances coming from critical thinkers like [ahem] myself, Meredith and Rochelle.”^{29b}

Another problem is the commitment involved. As Jenny Levine says the burden is shared but only if people are willing to share it and only if people are willing to commit to keeping the weblog updated.³⁰

Random Thoughts

My experiences as a blogger have echoed most of the insights found in the research. It has been lonely at times because very few people link to my page. Using site software I discovered when most people linked and have often used that as a method to organize times to write a post. On the other hand, I have become more aware of a host of great librarians who have been encouraging both personally and professionally. Their insights into various issues have inspired me to look at problems and issues through a less narrow lens.

I have gained some new confidence in using web tools which I would not otherwise have tried. I’ve also found better ways to use communication tools as a result of blogging and have moved into utilizing wikis for groups and have become a serious user of RSS for managing electronic subscriptions.

One unexpected aside is that I am often aware of library events and issues days if not weeks before it is reported in. I have also become increasingly interested in nonlibrary blogs, especially in business, literature, and education, and even photoblogs.

One area we academic librarians should consider is whether or not we should provide links to good blogs for research purposes. In some ways they represent a form or primary research heretofore unavailable.

Blogging is addictive, but I have resisted doing too much to my webpage even as others have added videos, pictures, widgets, and podcasts. I have also resisted writing lengthy blogs as it usually takes me 20 minutes to 2 hours to craft a well written entry. The very simplicity of the medium is what attracted me and continues to do so. Even as people start using other collaborative software, such as MySpace, for their self expression, blogs will continue to play a key role. †

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- ¹¹ Herring, S. C., Scheidt, L. A., Bonus S., & Wright E (2004). Bridging the Gap: A genre analysis of weblogs. Paper presented at the Annual Hawaii International Conference on Systems Sciences HICSS-37. Retrieved April 2004?, from <http://www.ics.uci.edu/~jpd/classes/ics234cw04/herring.pdf>. Page 10 contains a diagram depicting the relationship of a weblog to e-mail and other web publishing forms. Since this presentation, she has also presented another paper at the 2005 conference on *Conversations in Blogging an Analysis from the Bottom Up*. <http://csdl2.computer.org/comp/proceedings/hicss/2005/2268/04/22680107b.pdf> Her research, while not related to libraries per se, helps explain why blogs are fulfilling only a part of their promise.
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