

Throw Another *Blog* on the Wire: Libraries and the Weblogging Phenomena

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"Blogging – what kind of opportunities await libraries. Blogs are becoming one of the fastest growing methods of broadcasting information and ideas throughout the web. Are you currently following any particular blogs? Do you manage a weblog? Does your library publish a weblog?"

Posted by **Geoff and Randy** at 5:27 pm on March 14, 2003 | comments (6) |

1st comment: "Great idea! Let me know what you find out."

Posted by **Stephen A.** on March 15, 2003, 9:01 am

Look familiar? Perhaps you've stumbled across a similarly styled, time-stamped entry as you've browsed for news of the latest political scandal, library book challenge or similar Internet factoid. If so, you have already encountered the phenomenon of "blogging."

Jorn Barger coined the term "weblog" in December of 1997.¹ However, according to Rebecca Blood,² the inaugural weblog can most likely be credited to Mosaic's "What's New" page, which appeared from June 1993 to June 1996.

CLA invites readers to visit the CLA website for an expanded version of this article by Geoffrey Harder and Randy Reichardt. Members can log in with their username and password to read this expanded piece at www.cla.ca/members/feliciter/features/blogging.htm.

Its purpose was simple – to point users to useful, interesting and often entertaining web pages that otherwise might have fallen under the radar. Today's blog continues to follow in this tradition, albeit in ever more interesting circumstances and increasing numbers. *The Globe and Mail* estimated that over 500,000 blogs have come into existence, with 41,000 new blogs created in January 2002 alone.³ There are numerous historical essays for the curious to peruse, but as they say, the rest is blogging history.⁴

Blogging 101

Cameron Barrett's essay "Anatomy of a Weblog" broke ground by attempting to define the components of a successful weblog.⁵

Blogs may be generalized to mean regularly updated web pages, consisting of an online journal of news, interesting links, opinions and nuggets of information. Entries are dated, categorized and archived to enable readers to find their way around the site and to maintain a knowledge bank for future reference. Creators range from a single writer to a community of contributors – anyone may publish a weblog from a celebrity to the kid next door. Unlike other forms of publishing, the only editor to oversee the production is the one to whom the creator has given power.

All the same, why blog? Motivations for writing a blog vary, but most bloggers share one trait:

Blogging Software

Considering starting your own blog? There are a number of software programs available for use, and more are being developed. The most popular platforms include Blogger, Moveable Type, Radio Userland, Greymatter and PHP Nuke. An excellent list called "Blog Software" is available on Al Macintyre's *radio weblog* at radio.weblogs.com/0107846/stories/2002/10/03/blogSoftware.html.

More on RSS

News aggregators come in both online and downloadable flavors. NewsIsFree and Syndic8 are two popular online services that assemble RSS feeds into a single site. Users can customize the service to incorporate their favourite feeds and display them in a number of formats. If downloading software onto your system isn't a problem, you may prefer a program like Amphetadesk or FeedReader, which may allow for more flexibility to suit your tastes.

A good definition of Rich Site Summary can be found at: searchwebservices.techtarget.com/sDefinition/0,,sid26_gci813358,00.html.

A list of RSS readers is available at: blogspace.com/rss/readers.

See also: David Mattison, "So You Want to Start a Syndicated Revolution: RSS News Blogging for Searchers," *Searcher* vol. 11, no. 2 (Feb. 2003), pp. 38-49.

the desire and willingness to share information, opinions and findings with others.

Blogs range in format from very simple, hand-coded entries to professionally designed sites packed full of extras such as discussion forums, syndicated news feeds or built-in chat services. Most blogs reflect the creator's particular tastes and interests and the writer's personal viewpoint. Brevity is considered a virtue. Blogging experts concur that lengthy essays are best relegated to archived pages to avoid weakening the quick-hitting notations on the screen.

Many software applications have been written to ease the workload of bloggers. Blogger, Greymatter and Moveable Type are three of the many free apps that can establish a blog within minutes. Some services provide free web space to host the blog, especially if the author makes room for ads. The simplicity of blogging software allows for easy updating, and most require no more technical proficiency than do standard word-processing programs.

Many mainstream print journalists, such as Andrew Sullivan (www.andrewsullivan.com), have moved to blogging for timelier diffusion of their work and a higher level of interactivity with readers. Often bloggers solicit reader feedback, but unlike "Letters to the Editor" in print publications, the blog reader comment is published instantly, turning entries into dynamic,

multi-contributor conversations. These layered conversations flesh out the stories and events so they are richer and more meaningful. Sullivan's switch to blogging also demonstrated that self-publishing need not be financially burdensome. During a recent pledge week, he raised US\$79,000 from readers.⁶

Blogging in the library world

It makes sense that our profession, grounded in the value of information sharing, would be seduced by weblogs. Sites such as Library Stuff (www.librarystuff.net), Peter Scott's Library Blog (blog.xrefer.com) and librarian.net (www.librarian.net) are samples of blogs that chronicle the trends and events shaping modern librarianship. The collegial spirit is alive and well in blogs such as Blake Carver's LISnews (lisnews.com), which actively solicits readers to register and post worthy items. Most sites even provide connections to related blogs.

There are also blogs covering narrower librarian-oriented topics. PDA enthusiasts may follow *The Handheld Librarian* ([handheld lib.blogspot.com](http://handheld.lib.blogspot.com)) – "Librarians sharing news, applications, and ideas of interest with others working with handheld computer technology." David Bigwood's *catalogablog* (catalogablog.blogspot.com) offers cataloguers a place to discover findings on "cataloging, classification, metadata, subject access and related topics." Guy Aron hosts *eprintblog*

(eprintblog.crimsonblog.com) covering "E-print archives in universities and colleges . . . and the e-print phenomenon in general."

Tara Calishain's *ResearchBuzz* (www.researchbuzz.com/news/index.shtml), a popular stop for information junkies, discusses "news and information about search engines and databases."

The almost fanatical zeal of bloggers in their areas of interest can mean that their blogs are excellent sources of up-to-date information. For example, Peter Suber's *FOS News* (www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/fosblog.html) is one that tracks the "free online scholarship" movement currently occupying the minds of many librarians. And Gary Frost's blog (www.futureofthebook.com) covers current issues in the "preservation and persistence of the changing book." A blog can become your current awareness best friend.

Blogging @ your library?

Blogs can serve libraries in a number of ways. New resources, research tips or event calendars can easily be posted, allowing library patrons to check the blog and use the comment option to provide feedback. Consider the following examples of library weblogs:

In the public library

- ***Parents' advisory weblog:*** advises parents of additions to the children's library, along with reviews, news and

other relevant tidbits. Parents can provide feedback and opinions on new acquisitions, along with purchase suggestions.

- ***Children's book review weblog:*** allows children to post reviews of picture books, stories and novels they've read. Young readers can safely share ideas and comments with others while developing their writing skills and becoming familiar with the library's web site. Spin-off blogs might include a book club.

- ***Virtual book club/readers' advisory weblog:*** provides news of the latest books, CDs, DVDs, etc., and gives patrons the opportunity to post reviews and comments, as well as suggestions for the collection, to the blog forum.

In the academic library

- ***Faculty/departmental advisory weblog:*** facilitates communication with instructors, researchers and grad students in a department or faculty with customized content on acquisitions, library news and current information in their area of interest.

Or more generally

- ***Suggestion box weblog:*** Libraries might find virtual suggestion boxes are an innovative way to reach users. Suggestions could be displayed anonymously, with responses and ideas posted for others to build on.

- ***Services weblog:*** Not all weblogs have a comment function. Weblog versions of FAQs and calendars could be updated with ease, with news and information about reference services, hours of operation, events and so on.

But we digress: subject blogs

Subject or discipline-specific blogs offer librarians a means of tapping into the findings of others who monitor their research areas. Blogs are a fantastic tool for highlighting resources or late-breaking news. The Open Directory Project lists several subject-specific blogs that are good examples, including *Nanoapex.com* (nanotechnology), *Nodalpoint.org* (bioinformatics) and *www.weblogg-ed.com* (education).

Blogging pitfalls

The number one challenge each blogger faces is *time*. Basic blogging software is relatively easy to master, but tweaking and customizing your site can quickly eat away the hours. Add the time invested in monitoring new sites and creating new entries, and you may soon find you're spending more time in front of your keyboard than you planned.

There can be costs involved as well. If you wish to run your weblog using software with added bells and whistles, you will need server access that can support this functionality. If you're happy with free hosting packages, you may have to live with ads. To avoid ads, users can check

out the new hosting co-operative *LISHost.com*, which offers “books, bytes and bandwidth” for attractive rates and with library blog-friendly service.

Finding the time to keep up

The reproduction rate of blogs is growing exponentially, and you could find that keeping up drowns you in information. One coping strategy involves gathering your news in an RSS, or Rich Site Summary aggregator. RSS allows creators to easily distribute their blog postings as an XML feed to other web pages. Voilà – instant content distribution! Also, the RSS feed can be gathered into an RSS news aggregator so that readers can view content from multiple blogs in a single place.

The future

Blogging and weblogs have arrived. They have morphed and expanded from simple, online diaries into sites about news and current events, editorials and opinions, subject-specific interests, library applications, and beyond. This article just touches the surface of this burgeoning movement. We invite you to join the fray, and explore a new way to communicate with your peers, colleagues and friends.

Books on Blogging

Essays and articles on weblogs seem to appear almost daily online, in journals and in newspapers. Books on blogging are a newer phenomenon, evidenced by the publication dates of these titles:

- Bausch, Paul, et al. *We Blog: Publishing Online with Weblogs*. Indianapolis, IN: Wiley, 2002.
- Chromatic et al. *Running Weblogs with Slash*. Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly, 2002.
- Doctorow, Cory, et al. *Essential Blogging*. Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly, 2002. Doctorow edits “Boing Boing: A Directory of Wonderful Things (boingboing.net). The co-authors of *Essential Blogging* include Benjamin and Mena G. Trott, creators of the blogging software Moveable Type (www.moveabletype.org).
- Editors of Perseus Publishing. *We've Got Blog: How Weblogs Are Changing Our Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 2002. A compendium of essays by leading proponents, including Rebecca Blood, Cameron Barrett, Chris Pirillo and Douglas Rushkoff.
- Stone, Biz. *Blogging: Genius Strategies for Instant Web Content*. Indianapolis, IN: New Riders, 2002. 

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Notes

1. www.robotwisdom.com/weblogs.
2. Rebecca Blood, *The Weblog Handbook* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 2002). Rebecca Blood is the creator of one of the first blogs, *What's in Rebecca's Pocket* (www.rebeccablood.com).
3. “From Blogs to News, Internet Watcher Sees Web Maturing” (www.globetechnology.com/servlet/ArticleNews/gtnews/TGAM/20030101/MEWEBB).
4. www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html; www.chymes.org/hyper/weblogs.html; newhome.weblogs.com/historyOfWeblogs.
5. www.camworld.com/journal/rants/99/01/26.html.
6. www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/02/12/1044927651341.html.