

CREATING COMMUNITY: THE BLOG AS A NETWORKING DEVICE

Constance Wiebrands¹

¹ Curtin University of Technology Library and Information Service, GPO Box U1987, W.A, 6845.

¹ c.wiebrands@curtin.edu.au

Abstract

The so-called Information Age is having an interesting and often challenging impact on librarianship as a profession. Librarians are constantly called on to embrace change, to evolve and to adopt new technologies and practices, to better meet the needs of our varied clientele. The author argues that a strong sense of professional identity and community is vital for librarians if we are to meet these challenges. The blog, one of the new 'conversational technologies' that has arisen in recent years, has a part to play in creating and supporting our professional communities. This paper considers the place of blogs in librarians' professional practice. It defines blogging and the blogosphere, and examines them in the context of Bechtel's call for libraries to be 'centres of conversation'. Despite having been criticised for being over-indulgent, frivolous or a waste of time, the blog can be used as a tool to build trust, share knowledge, and raise and discuss professional issues within librarianship. The author informally surveyed thirty six librarian bloggers from around the world, asking them to consider how blogs fit into their professional practice. The issue of library blogs is also examined.

Introduction

This is an interesting time for librarians. We are in the middle of the so-called Information Revolution, with numerous and rapid technological changes affecting our profession. Keeping up with all these developments in technology, and more importantly, understanding the implications and the possibilities they pose for us, is challenging and daunting, and some would argue, impossible. We are all encouraged to be lifelong learners and to engage in continuous professional development activities, maintain our skills and learn new proficiencies. We need to stay engaged, in touch and connected, to remain passionate and interested. Part of this process involves us talking with each other, sharing ideas, discussing and perhaps arguing, all part of fostering a healthy professional community.

A Web phenomenon that has arisen over the last few years, the weblog or blog, has had a lot of attention from the press over the last two year or so. Here is a medium that allows anyone to write about anything they like and publish it on the Internet. Some suggest that blogging is self-indulgent and 'sheer exhibitionism' (Long, 2006). Why would you want to make your private thoughts available for anyone to stumble over on the Internet? What value could 'a web site belonging to some average but opinionated Joe or Josie' (Safire, 2002) possibly have?

When asked to investigate blogging and its implications for the Library and Information Service at Curtin University of Technology at the beginning of 2005, my first response was similarly dismissive. What value could blogging, an indulgent, over-hyped waste of time, possibly have for librarians and for the library as a whole? It took me a little while to uncover the interesting, exciting and valuable world of the blogosphere. I gradually found a whole cohort of vibrant colleagues who were writing – blogging – about their experiences and thoughts, about their libraries and their chosen profession. The difference it has made to my professional world has been immense.

The central argument of this paper is that librarians should seriously consider blogging as a useful and viable way of interacting and conversing with each other, and with the communities we serve. It seeks to shatter some of the myths about blogging and to demonstrate two major uses and benefits of blogging to the library sector, conversation, and knowledge sharing. In particular, the conversational aspect of blogging is something that can, and is already being used by some librarians to complement and foster their professional links.

Definition

Much has been written about the blog, a type of website which is 'powered by software that simplifies publishing, organizing, and syndicating Web content' (Schneider, 2005). Where the content of a 'regular' website is in the form of a series of web pages linked to each other, the content of a blog is in the form of articles posted periodically ('posts'). Blog posts are usually organised in reverse chronological order, with the most recent post first.

Provided Internet access is available, a blog can be very cheap to set up. There are a number of free blog providers, allowing anyone to try blogging without having to spend any money. Setting up a blog is also a simple process, with most blog providers providing a range of templates or display options to choose from. Once set up, a blog is relatively easy to maintain and update. Most blogging software provides a lot of the tools necessary and simplifies the process of updating and adding content significantly. For example, formatting text, making links and even uploading and including pictures in a blog have all been greatly simplified with the provision of graphical interfaces, allowing the user to point and click to modify the text.

Along with ease of creation and maintenance, the blog has other features that add to its appeal. These include the archiving or preservation of posts, search capabilities, permanent links and RSS feeds. These are 'built-in' or automated by the blogging software. Arguably the most important feature of the blog is the comments feature. This feature allows readers to write comments in response to material posted on the blog. These comments can be read and responded to by anyone who visits the blog. I would consider the comments feature to be what truly differentiates a blog from a 'traditional' website.

The Blogosphere

Of course, ease of participation or the apparent popularity of a technology or activity does not automatically mean it is going to be more worthwhile or useful. For many, the blog is merely an 'online journal' (probably the most common popular definition of the blog), a virtual and quite public space where they record their innermost and often mundane thoughts such as what they'd like to eat for breakfast or the latest pictures of their pets. Some have argued that blogging indicates 'a puerile self-importance that smacks of desperation' (Healy, 2005), that it is a 'negative factor' (Tribble, 2005) that counts against job seekers, and can be a 'career-killer' (Boynton, 2005) for others. Indeed, there have been a few documented cases of bloggers losing their jobs as a result of indiscreet postings on their blogs. Heather Armstrong was someone fired for blogging about her colleagues. This incident resulted in the creation of a blogging neologism. For example, to be 'dooxed' refers to getting fired from one's job for blogging indiscretions (see Mercado-Kierkegaard, 2006, for more examples of this phenomenon).

Even if it is true that many blogs are of limited value, it is also true that there are many blogs which do add to the ongoing 'conversation'. For some blogging advocates, blogging is 'a communications revolution... the sex god of the Information Age' (Scoble & Israel, 2006, pp.27, 43). Another popular claim is that blogging, by allowing users to 'participate', is contributing to a kind of great democratisation (It's the links, stupid, 2006). Many in the popular media, and some business sectors, are paying attention to these arguments and are investigating the use of blogging within their organisations as a result.

This is where the true value of the blog lies, in the interaction and participation it allows users. The term 'blogosphere' is frequently used when describing blogs. Because blogs 'often contain numerous links to other blogs and websites, they each act as a unit in a dynamic community. Together they form an interconnected whole or the "blogosphere"' (Xiao, 2004). Conversations develop as people read and comment and post their thoughts and ideas on blogs. Where blogging has value for librarians can be found within that section of the blogosphere that librarian bloggers 'inhabit', the so-called *biblioblogosphere* or *liblogosphere*.

Conversation

In 1986, Bechtel argued that libraries should be seen as 'centers for conversation', with librarians as 'mediators of and participants in the conversation of the world' (p. 219). Conversation, she suggested, should be the 'controlling paradigm' (p.220) by which we continually strive to improve the services we provide. By conversation, she was referring to that 'essential activity of human beings and one that informs, critically evaluates, and provides energy and renewal for their life together' (p.221).

Writing at a time when electronic sources and tools were beginning to make inroads into book-dominated libraries, and when librarians were debating the future of libraries and our responses to the impact of new technologies, Bechtel suggested that librarians' identification with and attachment to the book would doom us to being little more than custodians of 'warehouses for the storage of books and other materials, rather than hearts or centers of intellectual activity' (p.220). For Bechtel, the primary task of libraries is to 'seek primarily to collect people and ideas rather than books and to facilitate conversation among people rather than merely to organize, store and deliver information' (p.221).

Bechtel was referring to academic libraries, primarily, but I believe that her conversation paradigm can be applied equally to libraries in all sectors. By participating in conversations with our users, and 'seeking to understand and meet the needs of the library user'(Bechtel, 1986, p.220), we avoid being too inwardly focused, we maintain our focus and mission, and we remember that the library is a part of the community it serves.

As access to the World Wide Web began to increase, 'hypertext' was quickly seen as 'a liberating and empowering technology', one that would 'capitalize on the book's strengths while transcending its weaknesses' (Harris & Hannah, 1996 p.7). Ten years ago, librarians acknowledged that where the collection was once pre-eminent in ensuring that we were able to meet the needs of our users, with the Web as the delivery technology, 'the linkage between access and ownership has been severed' (Harris & Hannah, 1996, p. 8). This remains the case today, and continues to be a difficult issue as greater proportions of the budgets of academic and research libraries are diverted to pay for licensed (as opposed to owned) materials. How are we to meet the challenges posed by online

behemoths such as Google, with its search engine, provision of scholarly content, and digitisation scheme (just to name a few)?

Interestingly, this same 'conversation' is happening now, with some librarians (*Library 2.0*) arguing within the blogosphere, that the main focus for libraries should be to participate in conversation with our users. The discussion has largely been inspired by one much discussed work, *The Cluetrain Manifesto* (Levine, Locke, Searls, & Weinberger, 2000), which states that 'markets are conversations' (p. xii), and argues that business needs to use the communication channels provided by the Internet more effectively, to listen to the conversations that the Internet is enabling, and participate in these conversations or go under. A recent Pew Internet and American Life Project survey of 'technology leaders, scholars, industry officials, and interested members of the public' listed the following statement by an interviewee: 'Hyperlinks subvert hierarchy. The Net will wear away institutions that have forgotten how to sound human and how to engage in conversation' (Fox, Anderson, & Rainie, 2005). These statements echo similar arguments that were being voiced ten (Harris & Hannah, 1996) and twenty (Bechtel, 1986) years ago. The blog is a tool we can utilise to participate more fully in these conversations.

Building trust

Continuing with Bechtel's conversation paradigm, librarians need to participate fully in the conversations within each individual library, between the library and the library's users, and within the wider community. Blogs are beginning to be used in the business sector, precisely with this aim. In the business context, it is claimed that blogging 'humanises' the organisation and allows companies 'a direct line of communication' (Bob Lutz, blogger and vice chairman of General Motors, as cited by Scoble & Israel, 2006, p.50) with the people who buy their products.

A well-known 'employee' blog (Scoble) is that of Robert Scoble, who works for Microsoft. Scoble has been praised for his 'disarming honesty' and willingness to criticise Microsoft's own products and practices where warranted. According to the *Economist* (Chief humanising officer, 2005), Robert Scoble has 'succeeded where small armies of more conventional public-relations types have been failing abjectly for years: he has made Microsoft, with its history of monopolistic bullying, appear marginally but noticeably less evil to the outside world, and especially to the independent software developers that are his core audience. Bosses and PR people at other companies are taking note'.

In a provocatively titled 2005 article, *If you want to lead, blog*, Jonathan Schwartz, CEO of the prominent company Sun Microsystems and blogger, advocates blogging as a way for senior executives to 'participate in communities you want to cultivate – whether it's your employees, potential employees, customers, or anyone else – and leverage your corporate culture competitively'. He suggests that by blogging he creates a culture of openness and transparency

that 'can build loyalty and be a recruitment tool to boot' (J. Schwartz, 2005, p.30). On his blog Schwartz writes about his vision for the company, his employees, current and forthcoming projects, and even meetings with national leaders.

Library leaders are beginning to use blogging as another way of communicating with the rank and file. In the United States, for example, the president of the American Library Association, Leslie Burger is blogging (Burger, 2006). ALIA executive director Sue Hutley also began blogging in February 2006 (Hutley, 2006). Additionally, ALIA's sanction of blogging as a continuing professional development activity, acknowledging blogging as an activity that 'encourages you to reflect on professional practice; read blogs to keep up to date with sector issues, and co-ordinate content or prepare non-refereed articles for publication in electronic format' (Keep on blogging, 2005), is a good step, and one that will hopefully encourage more Australian librarians to blog.

Knowledge sharing

Another vital use of blogging is the sharing of information and ideas and the facilitation of discussion. A common misconception about blogging is that blogging is "for techies" or that it is all about technology. Although many librarian bloggers do write about technologies and their application in libraries, blogging is not all about technology. Reading the wide spectrum of blogs by librarians can be a good way of fostering current awareness about issues affecting the profession. The issues librarian bloggers are writing about vary greatly. A scan of the biblioblogosphere in May shows that librarians were writing about the challenges and joys of serving and communicating with library users, better library website design, new ways of imparting literacy and information literacy skills, the future of the OPAC, and conversations publishers and database companies are having with the library sector.

Conference blogging is becoming a very common practice. Many bloggers write about the conferences they attend, providing reports of keynote speeches, presentations, and discussion panels. Many of these reports are done 'live' and written as the speeches and presentations themselves are taking place or very soon after the event has occurred, and can be very useful for those who could not attend in person. Occasionally such writings also provoke discussion and have the effect of sparking discussion and comment among those who might not ordinarily have been aware of the issues discussed. Associated with conference blogging, many bloggers about to attend conferences also post their conference schedules online and may organise to meet up with others in this way. There is so much information being shared, and so many conversations going on, that, as one librarian blogger put it: 'It's like being at a conference every day all day.' (Jastram, 2006)

Similar to the book review (also well represented on blogs), the review of research and professional literature is a growing area with more and more librarian bloggers posting reviews of journal articles and books on topics in

librarianship. This can be very useful way for librarians to discuss research and its application in our libraries. For those of us who don't have the time to read all the scholarly journals, this can be an easy way to find out a bit more about articles on topics of interest, and then reading these in full if you find the commentary by the blogger raises further questions in your mind or piques your interest. More researchers in librarianship could be blogging and sharing their thoughts and research findings with practitioners and getting feedback.

Another manifestation of the sense of community that develops among bloggers, is the blog carnival. A blog carnival is a blog post that 'typically collect[s] together links pointing to blog articles on a particular topic' (G. Schwartz). These are interesting ways of discovering more points of view on a particular topic or issue. For librarians there is the Carnival of InfoSciences, 'a weekly weblog post that endeavours to showcase the best posts in the blogosphere about topics related to the wide world of Library and Information Science' (G. Schwartz). Like the traditional travelling carnival that moves from location to location showcasing the fine and strange acts associated with it, the Carnival of the Infosciences is hosted by a different librarian blogger every week, provokes comment and discussion, and attracts lots of visitors.

For the individual librarian, maintaining a blog and writing posts for it can function as writing practice. The blog can serve as an outlet for expression and for considered argument or debate. It can facilitate interaction and engagement with peers and colleagues. One does not need to actually maintain a blog to participate in the conversation. Active reading and commenting on others' blogs can be as stimulating and interesting as actually maintaining one's own blog.

Survey

To answer some of my questions about blogging, I decided to conduct a brief, informal survey of a few of the librarian bloggers I had become acquainted with since beginning blogging in June 2005. I contacted five of them by email, asking if they would be willing to answer a few questions about blogging and why they continue to blog. As I hoped, they all agreed to help, despite the fact that the long term bloggers among those I contacted had already addressed this issue before, whether on their own blogs or in conversation with other librarian bloggers.

This survey was a perfect example of how the blogosphere functions on links or the blogosphere's version of 'word of mouth'. I had not intended to conduct a comprehensive survey of blogging librarians and only hoped to hear the insights and comments of a few librarians. However, once I posted my survey questions on my blog, the survey came to the attention of some of the 'big names' in the library blogosphere (I define 'big name' bloggers as those who have been blogging for some years and who have large readerships). Once my survey was mentioned and linked to on these blogs, this brought a quite unexpected number of responses to my email inbox. In the end I had thirty six responses, from the

United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Singapore, France, New Zealand and of course, Australia.

One of the questions I asked was: *Would you agree that blogging has improved your professional practice?* Of the thirty six responses, twenty six were definitely positive:

'Yes, I strongly agree that blogging has improved my professional practice. ...One of the things I do in my professional blog is keep track of articles I read for professional development. It also helps me keep track of ideas to develop, so the positives outweigh the small negatives. I think I continue because what started as an experiment has turned out to be an excellent reflective tool and a great way to grow professionally.'

Angel, academic librarian, US (<http://gypsylibrarian.blogspot.com>)

'I am more up to date on current trends and tend to read things more thoroughly if I am going to write about them. I also have fabulous contacts developed from the blogging community who I can consult. My employer has been in awe of this development; moreover, they are very pleased that my higher profile has been good publicity for the firm, even though I never identify the firm itself in my blogs.'

Connie Crosby, library manager of a private law firm in Toronto, Canada (<http://conniecrosby.blogspot.com>)

'I feel like blogging has made me part of a community (some might say a club though I don't think it's an exclusive one) of many of the most talented and creative librarians in the English-speaking world...'

Laura Crossett (<http://www.new Rambler.net>)

'Being involved in the blogosphere has made me feel more in touch with the professional community, internationally. It's an excellent way of keeping up with current issues... rather like being able to drop in on the chatty bits of a conference for a few minutes every day.

...Basically it's all about communication, which I think is a good thing, although I have some sympathy for those who groan at the thought of yet *more* communication. Since I've been using Bloglines I've found it a lot easier to manage the growing number of blogs I like to keep an eye on, without it taking up too much time.'

Alison Williams (<http://ml107.blogspot.com/>)

The remaining responses were somewhat less-than-positive rather than being overwhelmingly negative.

One respondent (who has chosen to remain anonymous), said: 'In parts: yes, because I have been able to make contact with many people I would otherwise

not have been in contact with, discussing technology and practice with librarians from all over the world. Also no, because I have found it very difficult to write for publication since I started blogging. I have written the occasional article for a professional publication, but no peer-reviewed articles in some time.'

Phil Bradley (<http://www.phlib.com>) responded: Not sure what you mean about "professional practice". It's certainly improved my profile.' Blogging makes one more 'findable' by search engines such as Google (Scoble & Israel, 2006, pp.28-29).

Barbara Fister (<http://librariansatthegate.blogspot.com>) said: 'I feel better informed – but also more distracted!' The sheer amounts of information and ideas being shared can be overwhelming.

Isaak Kwok, librarian, Singapore (<http://erizen.net/>) replied that 'I'm not too sure about whether blogging has improved my professional practice. But it has definitely opened my eyes and mind to the many outstanding stuff [sic] being done around the world.'

(All quotes from email; used with the permission of the individual authors.)

Library blogs

While this paper argues that individual librarians or groups of librarians should be using blogging as a way of connecting with each other (and potentially with non-librarians), blogging can also be used by libraries. Within the library, the blog can play a role by facilitating the delivery of information. Email, bogged down as it is by viruses and spam, can be difficult to manage. Some ask if email is beginning to lose its value as a communication tool (Ojala, 2005), while others even go far as to suggest that 'email is dead' (Dvorak, 2004). As Tebbutt (2006) suggests, the blog is 'better than emails because the reader is in control of what they look at, and when'.

Increasing numbers of libraries are using blogs in interesting ways to supplement the material and resources available on their websites and to promote their services and collections. Reflecting on a blog he and colleagues set up on information literacy and online learning, a British librarian (Caldwell, 2005) commented:

'I think one of the most valuable aspects of a blog is that it can act as a content management system and provide a platform for disclosure of information relevant to e-learning contexts. One role which academic librarians can provide is to manage that content and take an active role in discovering and disclosing information relevant to academics, students and the university community in general. ...[the blog can be] used not just for transmission of information, but for critical commentary and for the creation and authoring of new ideas.

For academic librarians there is a real opportunity to engage more directly in e-learning activities.'

An interesting library blog can 'reflect not only your collections and services, but *you* as well' (Huwe, 2003, p.45). Given the increasingly virtual nature of our libraries, blogs can be used as another way for library users to communicate with the library and provide feedback, an online comments or feedback box.

Difficulties

As has been mentioned, it is not necessary to actually maintain a blog to be a part of the conversation. It is possible to participate by simply reading and considering the issues being discussed, and perhaps making the occasional comment. Keeping up with discussions within the blogosphere can, however, be a challenge. At last count there were some 37 million blogs, with a new blog being created every second, and 1.2 million new postings everyday (David Sifry, in Regan, 2006). Using an RSS reader to subscribe to the blogs you want to keep track of, simplifies the process greatly. The RSS reader detects any updates and displays new posts, making 'new content available not only in the website or blog where it originates, but on your desktop' (Curtin University Library and Information Service, 2006), so that the reader does not need to visit each blog individually.

Blogging does require a time commitment. 'The most successful bloggers invest *significant hours* of their lives to blogging' (Scoble & Israel, 2006, p.144; emphasis mine). While it is not necessary to spend hours on a daily basis to ensure a successful blog, it is important to post at least twice a week. Many blogs fail because it can be difficult to make or find the time to update a blog. Participating in the conversation, reading and thinking about issues posted and perhaps writing your own responses, can be time consuming. Scoble and Israel (2006) state that those they interviewed who had stopped blogging 'all cited time as the major reason they stopped' (p. 79).

Conclusion

In summary, the blog is worth investigating as a tool for fostering professional communication and collaboration. That interconnected group of librarians' blogs, the biblioblogosphere, is equally interesting and worthwhile as a medium in which a vibrant array of ideas and innovations are being discussed. If blogging is seen as another means of having a conversation, some of the inanities one observes in the blogosphere are perhaps more understandable, perhaps even forgivable. Conversations are enriched as more people participate and contribute to them. Perhaps Bechtel should have the last word: 'There is always a great deal more to do; there is much more to say and many more voices to be heard' (Bechtel, 1986, p.224).

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