

The Very Model of a Modern Major-Librarian: The Collaborators of Today's Blogging Libraries

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Abstract

Information professionals have long been accustomed to helping individuals to access reliable information upon request. Yet the arrival of the internet and social media has caused them to increasingly face the impact of non-professionals sharing views and information directly without engaging information professionals in the process. How then should informational professionals share information today? To begin addressing this question, this paper looks at the evolution of blogging and its use/impact on libraries.

This paper is divided into three parts. Part I describes the evolution of web logging (or blogging.) Part II discusses how libraries and librarians have incorporated blogging into their everyday offerings. Part III reflects on this history in order to offer some brief, initial discussion as to what role information professionals and non-professionals should play in blogging today. Finally, the paper concludes with a brief restatement of key points of Parts I, II, and III.

Article Type: Conceptual paper

Introduction

The rise of social media has had widespread ramifications throughout society. In particular, social media has made it relatively easier for users to create and host websites, which has made people feel freer to share and talk about a wider range of information than they have in the past. This ease of information sharing has meant people have started to use social media to spread personal views and information through personal websites or "blogs" without ever engaging librarians and information science (LIS) professionals in the process. This has consequently changed expectations of service and forced LIS professionals to find ways of answering patrons who now seek better, more accurate information at an almost on-demand rate.

Yet must LIS professionals do this? How should they share information in such an atmosphere? In order to begin addressing these questions, it is helpful to begin with a review of what blogging is exactly.

Part I: The Social Median

According to Dhiman (2008), there is no singular definition of what a blog is. Instead, a blog can be broadly defined as a page or website that contains information presented in the form of diary or journal entries, website links, media listings, etc. Such a broad definition demonstrates a recognized strength of the blog format, namely, its ability to allow users to present information in whatever frame those users wish to present it in.

However, the root of the term “blog” is more easily determined. John Barger coined the term “weblog” in December 1997, with the first weblog ever being created by Tim Berners-Lee at CERN (Dhiman, 2008, p. 437.) By 1999 the term had been shortened to “blog” by Peter Merholz, but this early community of blogs was very small: there were only twenty-three entries on the curated list belonging to Jesse James Garrett, the editor of Infosift, which accounted for all known blogs in existence at the time (Blood 2000). Furthermore, as Blood (2000) also notes, “a weblog editor had either taught herself to code HTML for fun, or, after working all day creating commercial websites, spent several off-work hours every day surfing the web and posting to her site. These were web enthusiasts.” This meant that early bloggers knew each other fairly well since, by default, the barrier of needing to develop programming fluency lessened the odds of an average user of the internet experimenting with the medium.

The world of blogging was not to remain so small for long. With the arrival of the World Wide Web, and publishing platforms such as Blogger, many of these barriers were removed and the blogging community soon exploded (Blood 2000). Within a decade there were approximately 63 million blogs (Dhiman, 2008, p. 438.) Today, twenty years later after the term “blog” came into existence, there is no official count for the total number of blogs in existence. Mediakix, a “media influencer” corporation, states that “the total number of blogs on Tumblr, Squarespace, and WordPress alone equals over 440 million. In actuality, the total number of blogs in the world likely greatly exceeds this number.” (Mediakix 2017). While very high, this is also an unsurprising number given how appealing the flexible framework is to users, the ubiquitous presence of the internet, and the removal of programming barriers due to the existence of easy publishing platforms like Tumblr, Wordpress, and Facebook.

Together, all of these changes have created a scenario wherein average internet users that want blogs to present ideas can find the means to make one easily at low cost, and just as easily discover what others have already blogged

about. “Blogger, Pitas, and all the rest have given people with little or no knowledge of HTML the ability to publish on the web: to pontificate, remember, dream, and argue in public, as easily as they send an instant message” (Blood 2000). Blogs, therefore, present a mass of free-flowing information that carries with it the reward of freely exchanging information and, consequently, the challenge of filtering information for authoritativeness and accuracy. How individuals interact with and exchange this information, as well as the individuals behind it, can drastically shape their views and ideas.

Yet what does this any of this have to do with information professionals?

Part II: The Librarians Write Back

As it turns out, the answer is “a lot.” Libraries—and the LIS professionals who work within them—are not an exception to this trend. In fact blogging has been well-researched, appearing “steadily since the mid-2000s” in academic literature (Jackson-Brown, 2017, p. 137). Professional literature has discussed using blogs to 1) deliver news and services; 2) help integrate self-reflection projects such as journals into academic work; and 3) develop collaborative work spaces and knowledge management resources for the library itself (Karami 2006). “Literature clearly identifies that two-way communication and the opportunity to build relationships make blogs effective for libraries . . . and that a tool which allows for timely information updates can provide a great addition to existing information sources” (Adams, 2013, p. 365).

This literature has corresponded with practice. Today, libraries and librarians use blogs to 1) create newsletters; 2) reference resources; 3) run book clubs; 4) announce library services and acquisitions, 5) build community engagement, and 6) foster greater awareness of librarians and libraries through fighting negative stereotypes (Karami 2006). Librarians at Purdue University Library, for example, have used blogs for internal trainings and to offer course subject guides, as well as helped faculty and students run blogs as part of their own coursework (Boon 2015). One

study of law libraries found that academic law libraries regularly used blogs as a means of informing law students about library operations and to help them find appropriate resources for research (Jackson-Brown 2017).

However, libraries have also had difficulties in utilizing the full potential of blogs. “The main issue with blogs is that they require, by their very nature, regular updates and maintenance and this can have a huge impact on library staff.” (Adams, 2013, p. 667). This need to be regularly communicating also has ramifications in terms of getting buy-in from librarian patrons. “Library blogs that are heavily promoted and then deliver bland content, or that are rarely updated, do reflect badly” (Tebo 2012). To date, ways of countering these issues can be summarized as means of better engaging patrons, including: 1) involving a range of staff to creating regular content; 2) contextualizing posts within library offerings; 3) increasing access through clear categorization; and 4) remaining visible to patrons and other bloggers (Adams 2013).

There are also issues in learning how to blog effectively. Beyond the general learning curve, first-time bloggers often need advice about ethical and legal issues involved in blogging, which has forced librarians to learn more about technology, communication trends, learning pedagogies, and community engagement (Boon 2015). Some of these concerns might be addressed by incoming information professionals that have grown up blogging in other contexts. Yet it would be unwise to rely on this as a solution since at least one study (Ak-Kindi 2017) has found LIS students— while open to blogging— have begun to blog less in the face of stronger emerging technologies and concerns over internet safety/privacy.

This review of literature and practice shows that librarians, and consequently LIS professionals more broadly, have adapted to blogging by becoming bloggers themselves. Much like the early community of bloggers, librarians utilize blogging platforms as way of creating areas for community engagement and information sharing. However, unlike such users though, they seem to do little in the way of actual “journaling” and

conversation, as informational professionals still face challenges in learning or implementing best blogging practices due to staff time/budget limits and ethical concerns.

Part III: Of LIS Professionals and Non-Professionals

This high adoption of blogging by LIS professionals clearly shows there is a role for them in the blogging world, if only because it would be strange for information professionals to be totally excluded from such a strong means of sharing and exchanging information. Nevertheless, there are also readily identifiable roles that non-LIS professionals could play that.

First, as noted in Part II, the regular content creation needed to effect community usage is a significant challenge for LIS professionals given time and budget constraints. Having non-professionals, such as members of their communities, involved in posting content could help solve these issues since it would free staff from overly burdensome time investments while ensuring community buy-in. Non-professional posting can also double as a form of community involvement because such posting enables LIS professionals to establish more overall contact and gain greater insight/feedback from members of the community. This contact and community involvement, in turn, can also increase raise overall awareness of the resources and services LIS professionals offer in terms of finding authoritative sources and conducting research, as well as increase the desire to fund and support such offerings.

Second, involving non-professionals might help the library engage with a more diverse pool of individuals. As Decker (2014) notes, “there is very little information about the ways in which a blog can be used to reach diverse and non-traditional groups,” going on to say that even posts about simple things like minority cultural holidays can greatly increase awareness and buy-in from such groups (pgs. 60, 63). Involving non-professionals from underrepresented groups can also help postings avoid issues of misrepresentation or implicit bias, as well as signal to those communities that there is interest

by LIS professionals in engaging with them. This can lead to increased usage of the library by members of those communities as they learn more about the LIS services and resources available to them, an act that has a host of positive indirect impacts such as helping members of diverse groups form stronger senses of self-identity.

Finally, non-professionals can help LIS professionals gain greater awareness of how to best use emerging technologies. Mazzocchi (2014) notes that LIS professionals tend to treat blogs and social networks as “one-way communication tools . . . to publish information . . . and to promote services and advertise events; all functions which among other things, should already be carried out by the institutional library website” (p. 1198). The review of literature suggests attempts at avoiding this, but the flat usage suggests non-professionals may be better equipped to help identify and develop individualized—yet complementary—social media identities. This can also lead to better engagement by LIS professionals since seeing what platform non-professionals choose to use could help them better identify the means of engagement their communities prefer (e.g. image vs text.)

These potential roles for non-professionals as content providers and as sources of community engagement also help to define the roles LIS professionals could play. In particular, they suggest that LIS professionals should frame themselves both as sources of authoritative information for such content generation (e.g. in highlighting particular content online) as well as a resource for the community (e.g. by offering services and information about offerings online.) Doing this would allow LIS professionals to keep their place a sources of authority in information sharing while allowing non-professionals to help in creating the frameworks and language needed to share this information, thereby allowing for general members of a community to feel engaged and find the information being shared with them to be relatable while still knowing that they can engage LIS professionals for greater resources and services.

Conclusion

This paper opened with a question that it sought to investigate through utilizing an analysis of blogging as a case study: how should informational professionals share information in today’s information world?

As discussed in Part I, blogging has come a long way from its hobbyist days to become one basic way that internet users have to present information and ideas to a broad audience. However, the high adoption of blogging has brought with it challenges regarding filtering and sourcing information as there are now simply too many blogs to track directly.

In a similar fashion, blogging has come a long way in the LIS world. As discussed in Part II, Librarians and information professionals quickly adopted the platform to engage patrons and to share resources. This has brought similar, though separate, challenges in terms of regular content production and effective utilization of the platforms communicative abilities given the ethical and practical constraints of the LIS field.

Combined, these two parts begin to address the opening question. LIS professionals should begin to shift their view and use of blogging from being a platform for static communications such as reference guides to a platform for dynamic communications such as event organizing, publicity, and professional advocacy. As discussed in Part III, this shift would ideally include collaboration with non-professionals as that can aid LIS professionals in 1) creating content, 2) raising awareness and community interest in potential offerings by LIS professionals, and 3) engage better with underserved members of the community. This collaboration would help LIS professionals further establish themselves in the blogging world both as sources of authority and as engaged members of the community, while granting non-professionals a role in shaping the overall framework that information from professionals are being communicated.

Therefore, this paper concludes that LIS professionals should continue to adopt blogging

methods and consider collaborating with non-professionals in order to be dynamic community engagers and sources of authoritative information for their communities, without being overburdened by time and monetary constraints.

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