Libraries, blogs and relevant information – an overview

by Helen Martin

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Five years ago, Helen Martin established her own firm, focusing mainly on Knowledge Management and Intellectual Property. Her keen interest in information flows, particularly the rapidly changing methods of disseminating information, has led to this brief overview of web-logs -'blogging'.

Having lived and worked in several countries in Africa, in England and in Denmark, Helen Martin is familiar with international customs, cultures and working methods.

This article takes a quick look at blogging – what the term means, what it is and how useful the massive amount of information generated by the various blogs actually is for librarians – both for finding and for disseminating information.

Everyone seems to be blogging these days. How useful are the contents for finding information in general, and for helping librarians find or disseminate information in particular? What impact do blogs have on information flows? In order to see if blogs do in fact serve a useful purpose by providing relevant and usable information, we need to delve into the nature of blogs and blogging. The topic of blogging, which is an example of social networking – second / third generation knowledge management, is too complex to cover in a brief article – this is therefore a superficial overview.

What is a blog?

To find a definition I looked in the Wikipedia[1] which is itself a super-blog cum forum:

> *"A blog is a website where entries are made in journal style and displayed in a reverse chronological order.*

> *Blogs often provide commentary or news on a particular subject, such as food, politics, or local news; some function as more personal online diaries. A typical blog combines text, images, and links to other blogs, web pages, and other media related to its topic. Most blogs are primarily textual although some focus on photographs (photoblog), videos (vlog), or audio (podcasting), and are part of a wider network of social media.*

> *The term "blog" is a portmanteau of "Web log." "Blog" can also be used as a verb, meaning to maintain or add content to a blog.*

I was surprised to find an article on FreePint[2] dated 2nd May 2002 where the author, Laurel A. Clyde, wrote "In just one month, January 2002, some 41,000 people created new weblogs using Blogger[3]". Surprised because I did not realise that weblogs had been so popular as long ago as 2002.

Clyde focused on the point that

> *"It is an interesting thought that more or less the same arguments were advanced for and against the Web itself not too long ago, as are now being advanced for and against weblogs. The Web made it possible for millions of people to develop Internet content and to communicate their ideas via a home page. Software developers produced tools that would enable them to do this more easily, and the result was an incremental increase in the number of Web pages. Despite the*

large number of questionable Web sites, the Web has become more and more important as a medium of publishing and communication, and search engines and directories have emerged that help people to find information amongst the billions of Web pages. Weblogs are very much a part of the Web, and likely to follow the development path that the Web itself has taken."

Quoting Laurel A. Clyde again:

A weblog can take the form of a diary, a news service (or summaries of and links to current news items on a topic), a collection of links to other Web sites, a series of book reviews, reports of activity on a project, the journal of an expedition, a diary of a family holiday written for the folks back home, a photographic record of life with a new puppy, or the random thoughts of a publicity-obsessed egomaniac.

The concept has really taken off – everyone seems to be blogging.

When did blogs begin?

According to *Blogstar*[4] (a site which lists a brief history of the blog) Jorn Barger was the first to coin the term web log; this was in December 1997. Web logs had existed before this time, but not defined by a name.

The Net is the home of blogs and forums. William Hahn[5] in 2005 wrote in his editorial about enterprise blogging:

"there's a very fine line between what are called 'blogs' and what are called 'forums' -- especially when blogs are contributed to by a number of different people. Either way, I'm a big fan of both, and think that the way blogs and forums promote 'community' online is invaluable, both commercially and otherwise."

The site http://www.blogtopsites.com/ provides a very good list of top blogs, it is truly amazing what can be found! Text, video, sound, pictures, definitely not recommended if you are on a tight time schedule!

Who are the bloggers – and why do they blog?

Bloggers form a virtual community who publish seemingly anything and everything Some blogs are interactive – that is, anyone can add their comments, opinions and quite often, strong disagreement. Many blogs are of no more than - this is my personal opinion – rather self-indulgent personal diaries, but many are full of most relevant, professional advice on an overwhelming number of subjects. Many independent firms – consultants in particular - give freely of their specialist knowledge, and more and more big organisations use blogs as a way of finding prevailing opinions. An example of this is Mariann Fischer Boel's blog on the European Commission's Agriculture section, or to pick another example, Brian Mikkelsen, The Danish Minister of Culture, blogging about a Safer Internet.

Blogging is time consuming, both contributing and keeping up with new content, and can be addictive. For many bloggers, the electronic daily information input dealing with their special interest is of great relevance, and an important method of keeping up with international developments and opinions in their field.

How does one blog?

There are many offerings of free blogging software and services on the Net, and many of the providers will include free server space so that the blog is freely available on the Net. One of these is WordPress (http://wordpress.com/), another is Blogger (http://www.blogger.com/start) to pick just 2 at random - there are too many to list in an article such as this.

Both are extremely easy to use, even for the casual IT user.

Impact on libraries and librarians

Librarians have always been innovative and blogging is an excellent way to gather and disseminate information. So there are naturally a great many library driven blogs. http://www.libdex.com/weblogs.html is a great resource where the article by *Why and How to Use Blogs to Promote Your Library's Services* gives a

much better account of blogging history and technology than this brief overview[6].

The site links to a mass of international libraries and individual librarian's blogs, giving an insight into the various activities the libraries and their staff become involved with. http://www.librarystuff.net/ is a blog run by Information Today Inc., and is less librarian orientated, but does provide a lot of good links to various events, relevant articles etc.

http://www.knowledgeboard.com is an example of a forum cum blog where a great deal of relevant material can be found, but my all time favourite for finding relevant and considered information remains Freepint – www.freepint.com - a fantastic resource for all sorts of information.

In Denmark we have http://www.biblog.blogspot.com which is a good source of information, providing information about both Danish and international library and blogging trends. I learned from this site that Copenhagen's libraries offer courses in setting up and maintaining blogs, so it is to be expected that more Danish libraries and their users will join the blogging trend.

A guess at developing trends

From the above I think it is safe to predict that blogs will continue to be popular, but that the time spent looking for blogs with a relevant content will discourage the general searcher for relevant information – they will go to the sites where they know they can find relevant and refereed information – like their local library. However, I recently found an interesting reference to Swickis[7].

Swickis are a

" new kind of search engine that allows anyone to create deep, focused searches on topics you care about. Unlike other search engines, you and your community have total control over the results and it uses the wisdom of crowds to improve search results. This search engine, or swicki, can be published on your site. Your swicki presents search results that you're interested in, pulls in new relevant information as it is indexed, and organizes everything for you in a neat little customizable widget you can put on your web site or blog, complete with its very own buzz cloud that constantly updates to show you what are hot search terms in your community."

Granted this is information provided by the developer and therefore probably optimistic, but when this tool is developed and if it delivers what it promises, librarians may find that blogs become a standard reference source for the more unusual questions to which they are asked to find answers.

So, yes - at present blogs can be a useful tool to both find and provide information, but many blogs are unstructured, biased and time consuming to find and read. Librarians and other professional information providers will need to both know the blog writer really well, and trust the professional contents, or else evaluate the information provided before using it.

Notes
[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog
[2] http://www.freepint.com/Weblogs and Blogging - Part 1" By Laurel A. Clyde
[3] http://www.freepint.com/issues/020502.htm#feature>
[4] http://www.blockstar.com/blog/blog_timeline.html
[5] http://www.freepint.com/issues/130105.htm
[6] Darlene Fichter , Marketing Library Services, 2003, 17 (. 6)
[7] http://swickihome.eurekster.com/faqs.htm