

“A comprehensive guide to blogging for libraries. From the why through the how, Michael Sauers covers it all!”

—Stephen Abram, President-Elect, SLA

Bl**o**g**g**i**n**g

and RSS

**A Librarian's
GUIDE**

Second Edition

Michael P. Sauers

An Introduction to Blogs

Welcome to the wonderful world of blogs, bloggers, and blogging! In this chapter, I'll essentially be answering the following questions:

- What are blogs?
- Why are blogs important in today's online world?
- What can blogs do for you and your library?

By the end of this chapter, you'll be ready to start using blogs, not only as an information consumer but also as an information provider.

What Is a Blog?

According to Wikipedia, a blog is “a type of website, usually maintained by an individual with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or video. Entries are commonly displayed in reverse-chronological order.”¹ Blogging is the act of creating posts for a blog, and the person who creates those posts is known as a blogger. The collective environment of all blogs and bloggers is commonly referred to as the blogosphere.

Blog is a shorthand form of the word *weblog*, which in this context is pronounced “we blog.”² The term weblog (pronounced “web log”) is older than the concept of blogs and refers to the computer files generated by web servers to log their activity. When blogging became popular, some technologists decided that, to prevent confusion between the two concepts, weblog would be pronounced as “we blog.” This, in turn, was shortened to *blog*, from which other blog-based terms arose.³

The first important part of the Wikipedia definition of blog is *website*. A blog is, most simply, just another website. However, a website comprised of your thoughts and interesting links isn't necessarily a blog. One of the key components of a blog is the automatic generation of a page comprised of

2 Blogging and RSS

individually created entries known as posts. Bloggers can use either a web-based service, such as Blogger.com (covered in detail in Chapter 4) or a server-based program, such as Movable Type. Posts are created using one of these methods, after which the software takes over and generates the code needed to display the posts to readers.

The other crucial part of the definition of blog is *reverse chronological order*. This means that the newest posts are presented at the top of the page, followed by older posts. When a new post is added to a blog, it appears as the first item to be read and shifts other posts down. As the definition notes, posts are “not necessarily” presented in reverse chronological order, but this is the prevailing practice by far.

Common practice has established some additional features of blogs not mentioned in the Wikipedia definition:

- Blog posts are marked with the date and time of publication. This is important both for conveying timeliness and for the functioning of aggregators. (Aggregators are covered in Chapter 6.)
- A blog is more than just a list of sites that someone thinks are cool. The original intent of blogging was to create online journals. In many cases, bloggers link to other sites of interest, but they usually add commentary as to *why* these sites are of interest.
- Unlike items on a standard webpage, which may be modified regularly, a blog entry typically remains unchanged once posted. A topic discussed in one post may be revisited in a new post or in updates appended to an existing post. Revising and deleting old posts often warrants, at a minimum, a harsh and public verbal flogging.
- Most blogs by individuals allow readers to post comments. These comments are automatically attached to the end of a post for all readers to view. Blogs from large organizations tend not to have this feature, as allowing public comment may be determined as more hassle than it's worth. An organization that needs to retain control of its public image may not want to host uncensored reader commentary on its blog.

Types of Blogs

From the user's perspective, there are three types of blogs: individual, subject, and organizational.

Individual blogs are created and maintained by individuals for their own reasons. This model is the original blog style. Typically resembling an online

journal, these blogs are commonly personal in nature, relating to the blogger's life experiences or professional life. Examples of individual blogs in the LIS (Library and Information Science) circle include my own blog *The Travelin' Librarian* (travelinlibrarian.info), Karen Coombs's *Library Web Chic* (www.librarywebchic.net/wordpress), and Michael Stephens's *Tame the Web* (tametheweb.com).

Subject blogs can be produced by one or more people and are focused on a particular topic: hobbies, politics, pets, or any other topic of interest to an online community. War blogs have become popular due to the recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. One notable LIS subject blog is *LISNews* (www.lisnews.org). Other subject blogs include *The Huffington Post* (www.huffingtonpost.com), which comments on the news and politics of the day, and *Gizmodo* (www.gizmodo.com), which reviews the latest gadgets, gizmos, and technology.

Organizational blogs represent the views, opinions, and events of an organization. For example, the home page of the Ann Arbor District Library (www.aadl.org) is in essence a blog designed to inform patrons about events at the library. (In fact, the home page comprises the most recent posts from several different blogs that the library has created.) Sun Microsystems encourages all its employees to blog and has developed a platform for them to do so at blogs.sun.com. (Many of these blogs reflect what employees are doing at Sun, although this is not a requirement.) The Microsoft Developer Network has a blog called *Channel 9* (named for the channel on which passengers can listen to tower communications while on an airplane), where Microsoft developers post details about current projects.

It is important to keep in mind that these three categories are generalizations to help you learn about blogging and are not meant as hard and fast rules. Many blogs may fall into more than one category or may not easily fit into any of them.

The Blog Effect

Merriam-Webster's 2004 word of the year was *blog* (www.m-w.com/info/04words.htm). *TIME* magazine's 2004 Person of the Year issue included an article titled, "Person of the Year 2004: 10 Things We Learned About Blogs" (www.time.com/time/personoftheyear/2004/poymoments.html). Why was 2004 a watershed year for blogs? Several events that year made it clear that blogs were a force to be reckoned with. Two such events impacted "traditional" media, while the influence of other events was felt in the world of search engines, specifically Google.

4 Blogging and RSS

The Impact of Blogs on Traditional Media

By the end of 2004, the traditional print, radio, and television media could no longer ignore the impact that bloggers were having on how people received their news. In that year alone, there were two significant cases in which blogs and bloggers either scooped major media or directly influenced how or if a story was reported:

- **John Kerry's Choice of Vice Presidential Running Mate:** On the morning of July 6, 2004, John Kerry announced that his choice for a vice presidential running mate was Senator John Edwards. Unfortunately for the Kerry campaign, the announcement was not the big surprise it was meant to be. On the previous evening, an airport technician in the hangar where new decals were being applied to Kerry's campaign plane saw the decals and posted the news to the USAviation.com message board. The information was quickly picked up by bloggers and posted on hundreds of sites within hours. The word was out, and the bloggers spread the word ahead of the traditional media.
- **60 Minutes and "Memogate":** In September 2004, Dan Rather anchored a report on CBS's *60 Minutes II* about a memo allegedly written by Lt. Col. Jerry Killian in 1973, which stated that President George W. Bush had not fulfilled his National Guard duties. The memo turned out to be a fake, a fact first reported by a blogger on the Free Republic blog (www.freerepublic.com). The post pointed out that the typeface used in the memo was generated by a computer rather than a typewriter—something not likely in 1973. In response to this post, many other bloggers took up the charge and continued the investigation. Traditional media picked up the story and eventually confirmed the suspicions. CBS offered an official retraction in October.

Bloggers have continued to gain greater attention in the mainstream media throughout the past six years, as shown by the media interest in blogs such as Fat Man Walking (www.thefatmanwalking.com), documenting Steve Vaught's walk across America to lose weight; Blogging Fifth Nail (fifthnail.blogspot.com), written by Joseph Duncan who was later convicted of kidnapping and murder; MLBlogs (www.mlb.com/blogs), the official blogging service of Major League Baseball; and the Mars Rover Blog (www.marsroverblog.com) documenting the travels of the Mars Rover in the first person. A further demonstration of the power of blogs came during the presidential candidacy of Barack Obama, which used many different types of social networking tools, including blogs, to help him get elected as President of the United States. On the down side, blogs have also been the cause of both military demotions⁴ and high-profile firings.⁵

The Effect of Blogs on Search Engines

Search engines started to feel the effects of blogging in 2003, but those effects grew in 2004 during the presidential election cycle and carried on through the 2008 election. Google became a victim of what is known as *Google bombing*. To understand how this works, here is a quick introduction to how Google ranks its search results.

Google's relevancy ranking algorithm (PageRank) is complex, but one of its main criteria is the number of other pages that link to a page. The more links found, the higher the ranking of the page in search results. Additionally, Google looks at how that linking occurs. If the linked text also contains the keywords searched, that page receives an even higher ranking. To influence Google's ranking system, all someone needs to do is pick a word or phrase and then convince a lot of people to link to the exact same page using the exact same text as the link. This might take tens of thousands of pages, all creating the same link to the same page, but that isn't as difficult as it may sound.

Two cases of Google bombing involving blogs received significant press in 2004. The first involved the phrase *miserable failure*. When this phrase was searched in Google, the first result was the official biography page of President George W. Bush on the White House website. Through January 2007, this remained the first result returned by Google for this search. Now, performing this same search retrieves mostly links to webpages about the story itself (Figure 1.1). For the most part, the effect of the prank on Google was considered minimal since most users viewed this as a humorous and essentially harmless manipulation of the system.⁶

In another case, a Google search on the word *Jew* resulted in the site for Jew Watch—which bills itself as “Keeping a Close Watch on Jewish Communities & Organizations Worldwide”—rising to first position. In this case, there was considerable public outcry, given the anti-Semitic nature of the site.⁷ In retaliation, bloggers banded together, creating thousands of links to the Wikipedia article on Judaism and bumping the Jew Watch site to the fifth or later position. Today, the first result for this search isn't an actual result—it's a link to a Google page explaining “offensive results” (Figure 1.2).

Both cases of Google bombing were the direct result of bloggers banding together to create the exact same link on their sites with the express purpose of influencing Google results (blogsearch.google.com). Google continues to adjust its ranking system constantly to combat the effect of these kinds of pranks. In fact, in 2009 Google launched Google Blogs, which allows you to search specifically for results from blogs. This doesn't necessarily mean that blogs will come up any more or less in a traditional Google search, but it does acknowledge that blogs are a significant resource and a large portion of online content being generated today.

6 Blogging and RSS

The screenshot shows a Google search interface with the search term "miserable failure" entered in the search box. The search results page displays several links, including "Google Kills Bush's Miserable Failure Search & Other Google Bombs", "Obama Is 'Failure' At Google & 'Miserable Failure' At Yahoo", "Miserable Failure - Funny Bush Picture", "Google bomb - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia", "Political Google bombs in the 2004 U.S. Presidential election ...", and "snopes.com: Miserable Failure". Each result includes a brief description and a "Cached" link.

Figure 1.1 Google search results for *miserable failure*

The screenshot shows a Google search interface with the search term "Jew" entered in the search box. The search results page displays several links, including "Offensive Search Results", "News results for Jew", "Jew - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia", "Judaism - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia", and "Google: An explanation of our search results". Each result includes a brief description and a "Cached" link.

Figure 1.2 Google search results for *Jew*

Why Blog?

What makes blogs an important information resource and tool for you and your library? There are two perspectives from which this question can be answered: from the perspective of an information user and from the perspective of an information provider.

All librarians are information users. We constantly retrieve, access, sort, and store information for our patrons. Blogs are just one more source of information. Blogs, however, are unique in several ways:

- *Blogs are timely.* They are typically updated more frequently than most websites—many times a day in some cases. Unlike newspapers and other traditional publications where reporting is fact-checked and edited as part of the publishing process, the information provided in blogs is likely to be raw and unfiltered (and in some cases, the lack of editorial review may be viewed as a downside). News and information can be posted with minimal delay, and if it is sufficiently interesting or important, it will be quickly picked up and spread by other bloggers.
- *Blogs are opinionated.* More often than not, a blogger has a personal point of view and expresses it in no uncertain terms in his or her postings. Of course, whether a particular blogger's opinions are valid is subjective.
- *Blogs are accessible.* While many websites are difficult to navigate or make users jump through hoops to read (or just to find) what they're looking for, blogs are designed for open access. A blog that *isn't* accessible won't be widely read or referenced and will eventually disappear.
- *Blogs are omnipresent.* In February 2002, *Wired* magazine reported that there were “more than 500,000 [blogs].”⁸ In April 2006, Technorati reported that it was monitoring more than 35.3 million blogs—doubling its numbers from the previous six months⁹—and in December 2007, it announced that it was indexing 112 million blogs.¹⁰ Finally, in 2008, Technorati—the one site considered to have a vaguely accurate count of blogs—decided to no longer report the number of blogs it monitored or indexed because accuracy just wasn't possible any more. Any information resource of this magnitude clearly has the potential to affect the results presented in search engines (as with the *miserable failure* and *Jew* episodes).

Blogs are an excellent means by which a library can fulfill its role as an information provider. Calendars of events along with news of recent acquisitions, upgrades, and staff changes can be efficiently disseminated through a

8 Blogging and RSS

library blog. As we'll see in Chapter 4, the level of technical know-how needed to begin a blog is minimal, and the cost is even less. Because blogs are so widely accessible, they can help to increase your library's website traffic. Once a blogger starts supplying his or her posts via RSS feeds (covered in Chapters 5–8), accessibility further increases.

Now that you have a basic understanding of how blogs have developed and what they can be used for, let's look at a number of excellent blogs that you can use both as resources and models.

Endnotes

1. "Blog," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog (accessed March 16, 2010).
2. Rebecca Blood, *We've Got Blog*, Perseus Publishing, 2002, p. 7.
3. Then again maybe not. According to Scott Rosenberg in *Say Everything: How Blogging Began, What It's Becoming, and Why it Matters*, "In May 1999, Peter Merholz ... posted a little note in the side margin of Peterme.com ... 'I've decided to pronounce the word weblog as wee'blog. Or blog for short.' ... It was a lark, a riff making fun of the term *weblog* which at that point was only just gaining currency among web insiders. The coinage didn't exactly spread like wildfire."
4. Joseph R. Chenelly, "Guardsmen punished after criticizing Iraq war," *Army Times* (AZCentral.com), July 30, 2005, www.azcentral.com/arizonarepublic/local/articles/0730blogger.html (accessed July 7, 2010).
5. Ellen Simonetti, "Perspective: I was fired for Blogging," CNET News, January 6, 2004, news.cnet.com/I-was-fired-for-blogging/2010-1030_3-5490836.html (accessed April 27, 2010), and Sewell Chan, "CNN Producer Says He Was Fired for Blogging," *New York Times*, February 14, 2008, cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/02/14/cnn-producer-says-he-was-fired-for-blogging/ (accessed April 27, 2010).
6. More information on *miserable failure* and Google can be found in "Google's (and Inktomi's) Miserable Failure" by Danny Sullivan (searchenginewatch.com/report/article.php/3296101).
7. More information on *Jew* and Google can be found in a discussion from the Association of Jewish Libraries' electronic mailing list (www.mail-archive.com/hasafran@lists.acs.ohio-state.edu/msg02143.html) and "Jew Watch, Google, and Search Engine Optimization" by Seth Finkelstein (www.sethf.com/anticensorware/google/jew-watch.php).
8. Farhad Manjoo, "Blah, Blah, Blah and Blog," *Wired News*, February 18, 2002, www.wired.com/news/culture/0,1284,50443,00.html (accessed April 27, 2010).
9. "State of the Blogosphere, April 2006, Part 1: On Blogosphere Growth," Technorati, April 17, 2006, www.sifry.com/alerts/archives/000432.html (accessed April 27, 2010).
10. "About Technorati," Technorati, technorati.com/about-technorati (accessed April 27, 2010).