

Born to Blog

By Terence K. Huwe

Last March, I moderated a day of lectures at the *Computers in Libraries* Conference in Washington, D.C. The offerings in my track were all very interesting and diverse, but I was especially impressed with a talk given by Steven Cohen and Jenny Levine, about Rich Site Summary (RSS). Steven and Jenny's presentation really zeroed in on RSS—syndicated news on the Web—rather than offering a comprehensive look at the world of Weblogs (see

<http://www.librarystuff.net/presentations/CIL3123003.ppt>)

But their presentation really got me thinking about the potential of Blogging for digital librarians. Whether reviewing RSS feeds for current awareness or posting opinions and networking opportunities for online communities, the basics of Blogging seemed tailor-made for digital librarianship.

A few short months later, my staff and I had become Bloggers and were establishing our library as a good site for labor news in Blogspace. Jumping on the bandwagon has helped us feel pretty darn hip. But more than just for the fun of it—and how could anything known as “Blogging” not be at least a little fun—we've come to see Blogging as a new technology of collaboration. We came to realize, during the late summer, that we were “born to Blog”.

The know-how required to start Blogging isn't too tough to get a handle on. Likewise, visitors who use our Blog are not required to learn anything new. Considering how swiftly we were up and running, I decided to use this end-of-year column to outline the key tasks and value points of Blogging, for the more jaundiced and cautious among us.

Why Blog?

Blogging's success comes from the simple and elegant way that it moves discussion from email-based, Usenet-style discussion lists, directly to the Web. Because there's so much inane Blogging underway, focusing on hobbies, politics and the arts to name a few topics, it's easy to miss how effectively the Blog can be used for information management. I can identify three important reasons why Blogging is of strategic value:

The "Attention Factor." The Attention Economy is a late-Nineties term that's gotten a little battered in the new millennium, but the basic premise holds true. It's really a very simple matter: Blogs will help people find your digital collections, and they can help you craft the image you wish to convey to the world. With its focus on frequent uploads, Blogging enables us to communicate with very large groups of people and weave a new awareness of our collections and services. It's one of the best, and cheapest new venues for promoting libraries that has appeared in recent years.

Interactivity. Users who are intrigued by news and resources found in Blogspace may find themselves more willing to be in contact with you. Consider the following example, which is pre-Blog and therefore demonstrative of how new technology creates enthusiasm. One of our faculty affiliates, a noted political scientist, expressed his appreciation to us for the email alerts we send out about new publications by the International Labor Organization in Geneva. We include URLs for easy linking, so it's a form of instant document delivery. He was completely unaware of important new publications, and delighted to hear about them. With Blogging, we can do all this and more, adding notes in a process as we find other documents. It's the perfect vehicle for getting into a dialogue with users and finding out what their real needs are.

Using RSS Sharpens Your instincts. Blogging is comprised (for the most part) of posting news and tidbits and tapping into RSS news feeds. RSS is pretty new, and there may not be a whole lot of news on obscure topics, like, say, Labor History or Plant Pathology. But there's a lot of *breaking news* that is captured in RSS, and I foretell that there will be a lot more coming soon. We subscribe to the RSS of LabourStart, an advocacy group that monitors world labor trends and publishes daily news. This new river of knowledge has served two purposes for us: first, it's pointed out how little we actually did know about what was happening in places like Indonesia or Chile. Second, it's given us another opportunity to be the agents who break news to our research community—thus advancing our profile as information activists.

High Tech and Non-Tech Know-How

Assuming that any of the above piques your interest, the next question you may have could be, "What do I have to know to run a good Blog?" First, the good news: you don't really need to learn a whole new set of skills. The second part is the fine print: you will want to get involved in site customization and page

design, in order to meet your specific needs. So, in considering whether to Blog or not to Blog, the two most important skills come once again in two parts: interpersonal, and technical.

- *Know Your User Population.* The Web is intuitive, and that means that everyone approaches it differently. Your Blog should make it much easier for people to learn about what they most want, and for that to happen, you need to know their needs. It's also critical to know how your community accepts new technology, and where they hit roadblocks. When it comes to content, it's vital to have a clear sense of where the value points lie—in the user's eyes, not yours. For some it's currency of data, and for others it may be the imprimatur of the author.
- *Be Prepared To Be A Developer.* While you can learn most Blogging programs pretty quickly, HTML and XML lurk below the surface of Blogs, and you'll want to customize your site at the code level. For the Dreamweaver users among us, this can feel like a step backwards, but it's not. It's always good to know the plumbing, and Blogs are a great platform for re-experiencing HTML, not to mention XML, which is rewriting the rules on the Internet. The better products offer easy-to-use WYSIWIG editors that allow you to copy and paste HTML and XML code directly into a document. They also make it easy to recycle the underlying code for commonly used page elements (like buttons, side navigation bar, etc) when you build a Blog template.

Understand the Strengths and Limits of RSS

RSS feeds come from many sources, and the list of providers is also growing fast. It's true that a lot of feeds have to do with pretty generic topics, like sports or headline news, and that can be a little disappointing. However, a new class of RSS producer is emerging. Non-profits, political organizations, advocacy groups, think tanks and public interest groups are getting involved in RSS, and they contribute a great deal of primary material and topically-driven information. Using RSS feeds to advantage is arguably the most important feature of Blogging, because it's a way to demonstrate that you are on top of developments in your field. However, it's important to recognize the limits of RSS, too. While many fields of knowledge are covered by RSS, not all are, and the gaps are significant. We have found here at the Institute of Industrial Relations Library that it's important to balance our use of RSS with searching performed in the

databases we have access to, via the California Digital Library and the University of California, Berkeley campus. I've been impressed with how complimentary the combination is: RSS for breaking news and reference tips, and database searching for verification and fleshing out a topic.

Best Practices for Library Bloggers

Obviously, I haven't tried to hide my own enthusiasm for Blogging, nor do I think I should in this case. From my perspective, leading my staff into the Blogging world has been a big plus. Our new labor has been minimal, if you compare it with other recent technology rollouts, like database-driven Web sites, digital repositories, or Javascripting. At the same time, we have been able to use Blogging to market our services and make them better known. Blogging isn't for everybody, but if you've become more interested after reading this column, I have three recommendations to shape a robust Blogging strategy.

Become A RSS Feed. Every time you set up a Blog, you have an opportunity to become your own unique RSS news feed. In our case, using Radio Userland software, we have a total of three new RSS feeds, each authored by a different staff person. Two funnel news internally to the third, which is registered with RSS directories, and open for subscription. Who says the library can't be a publisher—or a newscaster?

Stay On Point. If you're creating a Library Blog, it should reflect the professional standards you apply to every other publishing venue. Moreover, the content you track should be distinctive, the sort of material that no one else could present more effectively than you. Draw a line between the personal and the professional on your Blog.

Don't Be A Dull. "Professional" doesn't have to mean dry or dull. A lively dialogue and presentation helps Internet users gain a sense of community and identity. Library Blogs should reflect not only your collections and services, but *you* as well.

Ultimately, Blogging isn't a momentous leap forward for digital librarians, but it does pose an opportunity more interactivity and dialogue with user communities. Not everyone is "born to Blog", but Blogging deserves a close look, not only because of its simplicity, but also because of its potential to open a new zone for professional practice.