Encouraging interaction online:
the emerging roles of blogs/wikis/RSS in fostering and encouraging user participation

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Abstract:
This paper provides an overview of three technologies: blogs, RSS and wikis. It gives an introduction to each and explores how they are being used within the library community. RSS is of particular interest to libraries; it provides opportunities for interacting with library users and is already being incorporated into library catalogues and websites. Wikis too show promise for future development.

Introduction

The problem with new technologies is working out which ones are going to hang around and which are merely a flash-in-the-pan. As librarians we particularly need to evaluate new developments[1] as they come to light, assess which are likely to be useful in the library environment and which are likely to be around for a bit longer than the next few months. There are three technologies, somewhat interrelated, that have been around for several years now, and are beginning to achieve critical mass within the library community. The first of these, blogs (or Weblogs), are probably the most well known, although they have not had a great deal of mention on the Australian library scene, with only a handful of Australian Library bloggers currently. The second technology is one that has been picking up a lot of steam internationally, and that is the idea of syndicated feeds, more commonly known as RSS. Thirdly, there is the wiki, a framework for developing and contributing to a collaborative website online. All three have been discussed at great length on some of the tech librarian mailing lists, most notably Web4Lib.[2]

What are blogs?

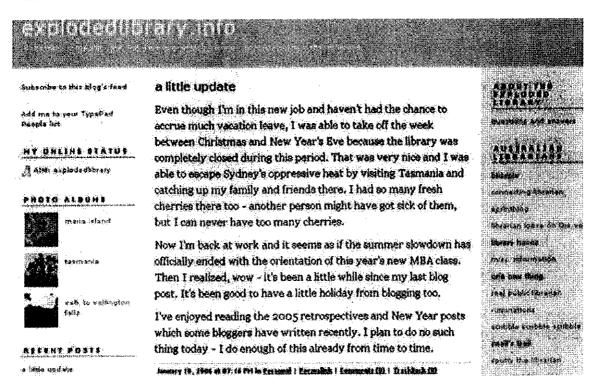For years and years, this thing that we point at and say "that

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1. Gartner puts out regular press releases on technology trends including a substantial piece on Aug 23 that referenced blogs, RSS and wikis. <http://www.gartner.com/press_releases/asset_134460_11.html>
2. Web4Lib mailing list <http://lists.webjunction.org/web4lib/>

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is a blog" was the domain of the geek, the techie, the nerd. Starting out as little more than annotated lists of links, they moved into commentary, discussion and so forth to become blogs. According to Rainie (2005), in a survey of Americans online, 8 million Americans (7%) have started a blog, and 32 million Americans (27%) read them; however, 62% do not even know what a blog is. These days a blog is a form of public diary, usually run by a single person, although there are also collaborative blogs, guest bloggers and so forth. A blog has become a list of thoughts, opinions and links appearing in reverse chronological order. Below is an example from Australian blogger, explodedlibrary (aka Morgan Wilson)[3], and includes the title at the top, blog entries in the middle with links to related areas on the sides.

this was "a" top 50, not "the" top 50. It was an informal study and tended to focus on English language blogs in North America, although two Australian blogs were included in the initial sample. A second study, Farkas (2005), run by Meredith Farkas[4] was done as a survey over a few weeks to which anyone could respond. While the majority of the responses were US based, there was a smattering of responses from several regions including Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Australia, and Asia. One hundred and sixty five people (96 female, 69 male) responded to most of the 19 questions asked covering demographics, attitudes, qualifications, libraries, and blogging experience. Of those surveyed: 78% had a library degree (with most gaining their degree aged 25-40), a broad range of

In 2005, there were a couple of attempts to measure what some have coined the "biblioblogosphere", that is library/librarian related blogging. The first of these was by Crawford (2005) and examined the issue of which blogs had the best reach and proposed a top 50 of library related blogs. He was quite keen to point out that

libraries and librarians were represented, about half the library blogs have been around for a 'year or less (with 23.9% in the 13 months to 2 years category), Blogger is the most-used blogging software (44.5%) followed by Wordpress (20.7%) and Moveable Type (11.6%).

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3. <http://www.explodedlibrary.com/>a

4. Blog: Information Wants To Be Free http://meredith. wolfwater.com/wordpress/

Some blogs provide a mechanism for interested parties to add comments, although this has become less popular due to the ever-increasing tide of spam. On blogs, you can read everything from current political commentary (eg talking points memo[5]) to a day in the life of the author (eg dooce[6]). Finding the right blog to read is rather akin to finding the right book. To paraphrase Ranganathan, to every blog its reader and every reader their blog. Coming into play are issues of provenance, writing style, mode of commentary, as they would for any activity.

Finding a single list of Australian library blogs has been difficult, however Libdex[7] maintains a list of library-related blogs that can be updated upon request. Currently there are ten library related blogs listed for Australia, 14 for England, one for New Zealand and 206 for the USA. Morgan Wilson (of explodedlibrary. info[8]) is maintaining a list of Australian based blogs by libraries and librarians. He currently lists 13 blogs by librarians (not including himself) and four blogs by libraries. Of those blogs listed on Libdex, there are some that are currently inactive; of those, some may become active again, but it is something of a chore to keep checking sites to see if they have been updated. Can a blog ever be declared dead? Following active blogs can also be tiresome, particularly when your list of preferred sites hits double or triple figures. That is a lot of sites to check on a regular basis. This is where RSS feeds come into their own; they do the work for you. Set them and forget them as it were.

What is RSS?

RSS is more commonly translated these days as "Really Simple Syndication", although it is often referred to as "RDF Site Summary" or "Rich Site Summary". In not too dissimilar a way to that of the television show that is made in one place and syndicated to many locations, so too RSS is a single feed that lots of people can subscribe to in order to keep track of a single source of information. Unlike TV, however, the end user has a lot more control over what feeds (or channels) they choose, how they are displayed, and what types of programming are accessible. To use another analogy, RSS provides the data in order to construct a personalised newspaper containing only those bits that interest the reader. A sports fan could construct a site full of nothing but sporting feeds from around the world.

A typical RSS feed, or channel, being the content that is provided via RSS, is usually a formatted XML file that requires a tailor made RSS reader to parse or interpret it. Some of the newer web browsers such as Firefox and Opera can include RSS reading as part of the browsing experience. You can choose to install an RSS reader (or aggregator), of which there are many[9], or use a web based service.[10] RSS comes in a range of versions including 0.9, 0.91, 0.92, 1.0, 2.0 and Atom. As Hammond (2004) comments,

"RSS goes by many names and sports multiple version numbers that do not reflect any true lineage or patronage so much as a branding (and it must be confessed, afervoured and sometimes fevered politics)."

Most aggregators are able to read most, if not all, types of feeds. Displayed is a typical view of an RSS reader in action. It has a 3-panel layout, not dissimilar to email software with a list of blogs down the left-hand side, divided into various categories as preferred by the user. On the right hand side, the top panel displays a list of subject lines (taken from the RSS feed) while the

5 .Blog: Talking Points Memo <http://talkingpointsmemo.com/>
6. Blog: Dooce <http://www.dooce.com/>
7. LibDex. A list of library related blogs <http://www.libdex.com/weblogs.html>
8. <http://www.explodedlibrary.com/>

9. A list of RSS readers <http://www.rssfeeds.com/readers.php>
10. The most well known of the web based services is Bloglines: <http://www.bloglines.com/>

bottom panel displays the content of that item.

when the list is accidentally deleted, email addresses expire, or, more simply, the,

If you are providing a feed, find the format that suits and stick with it. There does not seem to be a big need to support all types of feeds on your site. Similarly when selecting a reader or aggregator, choose one that supports everything, which should be fairly straightforward with the current crop. Then it won't matter what feed a site has, you will be able to subscribe to it. The emphasis is on making it as easy possible for the user; users should not be required to jump through hoops in order to keep up to date.

The simplest way to describe the significance of RSS feeds is to begin with a comparison with email alerts. Some websites offer an alert service whereby you would register your email address and receive an email when the site changes, or has been updated, or new announcements made. This required you supplying your email address, the hosting site keeping track of that address, or list of addresses, and ensuring that content changes were sent to the list. This process breaks down

alert email is discarded by the user's email software as spam.

For RSS, you simply visit the site once, subscribe to the site's feed (adding it to your RSS reader, whether it be on your machine or the web) and forget about it. The RSS reader software takes care of polling the RSS feed origin for updates; some readers do this automatically, although most have settings whereby you control how often sites are polled. It is usually not a good idea to poll a site too often (once an hour or every few hours is a good minimum to work with), as that can affect performance if too many readers poll too often. Do not assume everyone is running the best server with the best access.

Many journal publishers (eg OUP, Nature) now provide RSS feeds for the table of contents (TOC) for each edition of their journals. For example, OUP provide two links for each journal (eg Applied Linguistics[11]) one covering the current

11. Applied Linguistics, Oxford University Press <http://

issue and the second providing the three latest issues (including the current one). Also included are links to resources on RSS and RSS readers. Some database aggregators are starting to provide some feeds, although these seem primarily to be basic news services and updates. While they are interested in delivering content in a way that satisfies their users, at the same time they want to ensure that access is restricted to just their subscribers.

For aggregators, authentication can be a thorny issue; ie guaranteeing that the person receiving the feed is also a subscriber. Factiva, for example, has an exclusive agreement with Newsgator that requires Factiva users to use only Newsgator to access Factiva's RSS feeds.[12] By working with Newsgator exclusively, Factiva have come up with a model that satisfies their authentication requirements; the disadvantage for the user is that they are unable to use their preferred aggregator and are locked into a particular brand.

The presence of RSS is making an impact on Library Management Systems, with several catalogue vendors announcing RSS support including Innovative, Dynix and Sirsi (the last two have recently merged). According to Levine (2005), Sirsi was the first to introduce RSS and its inclusion in catalogues seems to be gaining in popularity.

One of the more useful applications for RSS, courtesy of the library catalogue, is the humble new books list. This list is an indication of new arrivals within the library, and while books have often been its focus, it should not be restricted to a particular type of material. Production of a new books list has long been a combination of tech and non-tech, depending on the capability of the library, and remains one of the better ways of informing patrons of what is available. If an RSS feed can be

generated automatically at the catalogue level, either as a general feed, or a subject specific feed, then a lot of the grunt work of producing the new books list can be eased. Library patrons can subscribe to the RSS feed of their choice, perhaps travel books for France, and receive a feed update every time a new item becomes available on their topic. The Australian National University Library is one such example,[13] currently providing nine feeds covering some of their collection including: Asia, Science, Social Science as well as a single feed for new serial titles. This is via their Innopac system, and titles in the feed link back to the relevant catalogue entry.

Even better are moves to incorporate search strategies as part of the feed, such that the user is effectively subscribing to an RSS version of an email alert. XMLhub[14] provides the facility to generate a custom RSS feed for searching the Open Directory Project (DMOZ).[15] There are two options, the first by which you can generate a feed based on search terms; searching on "librarian" and "blogging" produces this feed URL:
http://www.xmlhub.com/odo_rss_feed2. php?search =librarian+blogging&cat=&all =no&t=

Alternatively you can specify a specific directory within DMOZ and generate a feed for that directory. HubMed[16] provides a similar service for feeds based on searches on PubMed. You enter a search term and it produces RSS and Atom based feeds:

http://www.hubmed.org/feeds. cgi?g=cancer

Nor is RSS restricted to text-based content, as RSS feeds are available for photos (eg Flickr)[17] podcasting[18] and music files. A

applij.oxfordjournals.org/rss/>

12. Factiva's information page on their RSS implementation <http://fce.factiva.com/rss/marketing.htm>

13. <http://anulib.anu.edu.au/epubs/innopacnewbooksrss. html>

14. XMLhub <http://www.xmlhub.com/odp_feed.php>

15. Open Directory Project <http://dmoz.org/>

16. HubMed <http://www.hubmed.org/>

17. Flickr photo archive <http://www.flickr.com/>

18. Wikipedia entry on podcaseing <gtto://en.wikipedia.

good example of RSS in action is the VCU Libraries news service:[19]

The entire page is constructed of RSS feeds from several sources including: American Medical News, The Scientist, VCU Libraries News, lii.org, LISNews.com. The page is refreshed hourly and contains current headlines from each site and the occasional full entry (eg lii.org items).

campaign for the 2004 US Presidential election. As discussed in Rand (2004):

"In the run-up to the recent US presidential election, both George W. Bush's and John Kerry's Wikipedia entries were frozen due to a continuous flow of biased edits ranging from the mildly partisan to the complete defacement of a page."

Librarians' Internet Index: New This Week

New and newly-discovered Web sites for librarians and everyone else, updated every Thursday morning. See more resources on our site, http://lii.org/.

Significant Terrorist Incidents, 1961-2003: A Brief Chronology Brief summaries of assassinations, kidnappings, hostage abductions, hijackings, bombings, and other terrorist events around the world from 1961-2003. "This document ... is not intended to be a complete or comprehensive account of all terrorist incidents during these years, and it is not an official expression of U.S. policy." From the U.S. Department of the State, Office of the Historian.

News from The Scientist

The latest biological and medical news from The Scientist, in association with BioMed Central

Hwang faked results, says panel Korean investigation committee concludes researcher manipulated data on 9 out of 11 stem cell lines; Hwang resigns 23-Dec-05

Why do Christmas trees survive? A new report shows conifers circumvent their circulation handicap using highly efficient valves 23-Dec-05

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VCU Libraries Offers Training Workshops for Electronic Theses and Dissertations Electronic Theses and Dissertation workshops begin February 2, 2006.

VCU Libraries Launches Public Awareness Campaign Cell phone use and Food and Drink regulations in the VCU Libraries.

Scholarly Communications News

New Copyright Booklet A new booklet on copyright issues for colleges and universities is now available at no charge – Campus Copyright Rights and Responsibilities: A Basic Guide to Policy Considerations (PDF format)...

Updated Version of Scholarly Electronic Publishing Bibliography Available

Video and Materials from Intellectual Property Symposium Available Streamed video and other materials are now online from the recent UCLA Symposium on "Managing Intellectual Property: What Faculty Need to Know to Publish and Teach in the Digital Age."...

What are wikis?

A wiki is a collaborative website. Think of a website, any website, where you notice an error and think "gee, I wish I could fix that" A wiki gives you that freedom. Wiki-based sites allow anyone to sign on and modify the pages. For a wiki, modification can be anything from correcting a spelling error through to writing and contributing pages yourself . Of course, there is nothing to stop someone else from coming along and modifying your pages. Nor is there a problem with you deleting their modifications and restoring your original text.

One of the better-known examples of editing wars, whereby entries change back and forth rapidly, occurred during the

Fortunately, this does not seem to occur nearly as often as one might expect and is usually caught and dealt with.

"Wikipedia is an encyclopedia written collaboratively by many of its readers. Lots of people are constantly improving Wikipedia, making thousands of changes an hour, all of which are recorded on the page history and the Recent Changes page. Nonsense and vandalism are usually removed quickly, and their creators banned".[20]

Wikipedia is perhaps the most well known example; on a lesser scale we find projects like Automata,[21] which is the web site of a print magazine devoted to covering aspects of the underground music scene.

orf/wiki/Wikipedia:Introduction>
19. VCU trial RSS demonstration page <http://www.library. vcu.edu/cfapps/rss/>

20. Wikipedia introduction <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ Wikipedia:Introduction>
21. Automata magazine's wiki <http://www.flamingfish. com/automata/index.php/Main_Page>

As of 18 Sept 2005, it had 841 articles submitted by interested parties covering band biographies, songs, interviews, albums, etc with 319 artists represented. A subsequent check, on 23 Sept 2005, found that a further 47 articles had been added, giving a total of 888 articles on the wiki. Wikis are dynamic; they are regularly being added to, deleted and updated.

In the lead up to the American Library Association's annual conference in 2005, ALA 2005 in Chicago, a blogger, Meredith Farkas, proposed and provided server space for an unofficial conference wiki:[22]

A total of 34 bloggers added themselves to the list of conference bloggers, most hoping to either blog during the conference or upon returning home afterward. One interesting page that popped up was a space for newbies (or new conference attendees) to ask questions[23] and seven questions were raised. Of those seven, one was not responded to and a few had multiple answers as different folk added information as it was discovered; not dissimilar to an online forum although a bit more readable and without a clunky web interface slowing things down. This is not to say that some wikis cannot be clunky

                                                      Create an account or log in

| article | discussion | edit | history |

ALA Chicago 2005 Main Page

(Redirected from Main Page)

[edit]

Welcome to the unofficial wiki for the 2005 ALA Annual Conference in Chicago!

navigation
- Main Page
- Community portal
- Current events
- Recent changes
- Random page
- Help

search

| Go | Search |

With your help, we can create a great guide to the conference and the Chicagoland area.

The conference will take place from June 23-29, 2005.

Click here ⟨ for the official ALA page for the Annual Conference.

Anyone who wants to add to or edit topics on the wiki can do it. You don't need to ask before making a change -- this wiki belongs to all of us. If you know something about Chicago or have some ALA Conference tips, please contribute to the wiki. I went to my first ALA Annual Conference in 2004, and I know it would have been great to have had advice and suggestions on what to do in Orlando and at the Conference

Bloggers and other interested parties were invited to add entries, conference reports, blog references and other ephemera, leading up to the conference, during the conference and after it was all over. What emerged was a comprehensive site covering tips, for new folk, conference details, who is blogging what, what sessions folk were attending (via their blog entries), things' to do for librarians at large in Chicago, links to the official site, and of course reports of the various sessions.

nor that all online forums are.

Concluding remarks

As can be seen, there is much to interest libraries with some of the newer technologies although implementation remains an ongoing problem. Blogging leans more toward individual activities; however, wikis provide a solid platform for collaboration, particularly where there

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22. Unofficial ALA 2005 Wiki <http://meredith.wolfwater.com/wiki/>

23. Questions for New Attendees at ALA 2005 on the unofficial wiki
<http://meredith.wolfwater.com/wiki/index.php?title=Questions_from_Newbies>

is a specific focus in mind. RSS can be likened to a thread that binds everything together. Blogs and wikis require human interaction to supply the content, whereas the strength of RSS is that once the feed has been set up and subscribed to, the computer does all the work of keeping up to date, freeing the user for other tasks. Blogging itself does not yet seem to have an obvious benefit to libraries although blogs themselves are a useful way for keeping in touch and networking with fellow librarians. RSS within the library community has reached critical mass in the last year or two, particularly,with its incorporation into library catalogues, journal databases and news resources.

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