

"A helpful guide on not only starting your own blog but finding blogs that will help you stay current in this field."

—Nicole C. Engard, blogger, *What I Learned Today*

Bloggging

and RSS

**A Librarian's
GUIDE**

Second Edition

Michael P. Sauers

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Blogging and RSS: A Librarian's Guide, Second Edition

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For my wife

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Introduction

To those of you who are picking up this book for the first time, welcome. To those of you who read the first edition and are now reading this second edition, welcome back. Chances are you're a librarian, but even if you're not, you're someone who wants to know more about blogging and RSS. Even if you're not ready to dive in head first, I'm assuming you are interested enough to take a closer look. Blogs and RSS have received a lot of press in recent years: 2004 was widely hailed in the press as "The Year of the Blog," and blogging has proliferated at a remarkable pace since then. I realized blogs had gone mainstream while watching an episode of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* in 2004. Stewart was listening to a report from one of his "correspondents" about what was going to happen in Iraq the next day, as though it had already occurred. When Stewart questioned the fact that the correspondent had written his report in advance and asked what he'd do if something different and significant happened, the correspondent responded, "Jon, that's what the bloggers are for."

Now that it's 2010, some have declared that both blogging and RSS are dead, while others claim that they're at least on life support. These doubters claim that with newer services such as Facebook and Twitter (on which I've written an entire chapter), no one wants to read long-form blog-based content any more. I strongly disagree.

I think what has happened is that both blogging and RSS are now so mainstream that it's not just the cool kids who are doing it, so it must no longer be interesting. Cool or not, blogging is still an amazing platform you can use to get information out to your patrons and get them to participate in a discussion about your library and the services you offer.

Blogs and RSS continue to receive a significant amount of attention in the library world. Today, librarians use blogs to share their experiences with their peers, and libraries as institutions use blogs to get information out to patrons. In some cases, blogs are the core of a library's website. Go to any major library conference, especially Computers in Libraries or Internet Librarian, and you'll find entire tracks devoted to these topics. The movers and shakers

among next generation librarians are blogging, and if you're not reading what they're saying, you're falling behind.

This book is designed to give you a baseline from which to start taking advantage of blogging and RSS technologies. As readers of my previous books will know, my style is practical and straightforward. Yes, the book will discuss history and theory, but its central purpose is to give you practical advice on how to get started at little or no cost. There may be other more advanced ways to accomplish some of the tasks I'll be discussing, but typically, such options involve significant financial investment or technological know-how, or both. There are plenty of other places you can go for that information. This book is for those of you who want to be able to read blogs and RSS feeds tomorrow, and to have your own blog up and running the next day. With these two goals accomplished, you can always move on (if you like) to mastering some of the more advanced and complex options that are available.

So, what exactly will I be covering in this book?

In Chapter 1, we'll be taking a look at just what blogs are, where they came from, and the significance of the blogging phenomenon. In Chapter 2, we'll learn about some of the most significant blogs in the library world today and about dozens of other blogs of potential interest to library professionals. In Chapter 3, we'll meet the people behind some of these blogs.

Chapter 4 discusses creating your first blog and various blog-creation services and software packages, but in the interest of cost and ease of use, the focus will be on Blogger.com. This free web service will allow you to have your own blog up and running in less than five minutes. Once your blog is live, I'll walk you through the options available for customizing it.

In Chapter 5, we'll move on to RSS. Here, we'll start with an introduction to RSS, explaining what it is, where it came from, and what it's good for. This chapter will also demonstrate XML code, but don't let that scare you. I'm a firm believer in showing the "back-end" once—in this case, if you feel like forgetting it after that, that's okay. In Chapter 6, we'll take our knowledge of what RSS is and apply it to life as a librarian. Here we'll explore the world of RSS aggregators—specifically Google Reader. Aggregators are websites or software solutions that let you take advantage of RSS feeds in order to get all your information in one location.

Chapter 7 is a directory of RSS feeds you might consider subscribing to, although not all of them are directly LIS-related. Some might be useful in reference situations while others simply illustrate the possibilities of the technology. Chapter 8 will show you how to create your own RSS feeds. There are several options and, depending on the source of your original material, setting up your first RSS feed can take as little as two minutes and typically no more than 20.

Lastly, and new to this edition, Chapter 9 is an introduction to microblogging, using a service you've probably heard of by now: Twitter. If you haven't used Twitter already, this chapter will get you up and running quickly and give you a great overview of how to use it to both gather and distribute information.

Although I wrote *Blogging and RSS* to be read from cover to cover, you may prefer to browse only the topics that are of greatest interest to you. If you are just looking for a basic background in these technologies, you can read Chapters 1 and 5 for now. If you already have some background and are interested in starting places and resources as an information consumer, look to Chapters 2, 3, 6, and 7. If you're already using blogs and RSS and are planning to become an information supplier, Chapters 4 and 8 are for you. Those interested in both sending and receiving information with a minimum of fuss and muss, head over to Chapter 9.

Regardless of how you approach the book initially, I recommend that you eventually read it in its entirety. As a trainer for the past 15 years, I've discovered that there's always something new you can learn about a topic, even if you already know "everything." You never know where and when a gem might turn up.

Welcome to the blogosphere!

Author's Note: Late in the editing process of this book, Blogger decided to make a significant change to one of its publishing features that would affect only ".05% of their users." Of course, my personal blog, travelinlibrarian.info, was one of those affected. Because of this, I was forced to move my blog from Blogger and onto the WordPress platform; therefore, some of the examples shown in this book will no longer match my live website. I still continue to recommend Blogger as a great starting point for anyone looking to blog, and my move away from it personally does not imply that I no longer recommend it to others.

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

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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.

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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.