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Telling our Story: A Case Study of a Collaborative Departmental Blog at Syracuse

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Abstract

This case study will take readers through the planning and publication process of a collaborative departmental library blog at Syracuse University, which is a large private, non-profit research intensive university located in central New York State. It will provide an overview of the history of the project and the mission of the blog. It will describe the technical aspects, developing a publication schedule, and the editorial responsibilities of maintaining the blog. The impact of the blog is documented. The blog has raised awareness of the librarians' expertise and this is explored alongside how posts have contributed to a number of wider conversations in librarianship.

Keywords: blog, communication, collaborative blog, case study, multi-authored blog

Introduction

Blogs, which first appeared in the 1990s, reached a peak in the mid-2000s, with millions of blogs in existence (Blog, 2015). The following basic definition of “blog” is broad enough to encompass a variety of blog types, including those maintained by academic libraries:

A shortened form of weblog. A website that displays the posts of one or more individuals and usually has links to comments on specific posts. Blogs list posts in reverse chronological order, with the most recent post appearing first. (Blog, 2006)

By 2010, blog use had declined as social networking sites (such as Facebook) and microblogging services (such as Twitter) gained in popularity (Blog, 2015; Farkas, 2007; Grant, 2008; Mazzocchi, 2014; Pederson, 2011). Blog use in libraries reflected this downward trend. In “Blogs and Social Networks in Libraries,” Mazzocchi (2014) reported that between 2008 and 2012, libraries’ use of “social networks (mainly Facebook) grew dramatically while blogs dropped conspicuously,” although blogs were still widely used (p. 6). Mahmood and Richardson’s 2010 survey of 67 ARL libraries (2013) and Boateng and Liu’s 2013 survey of 100 top U.S. academic library websites (2014) both showed blogs to be the second most frequently used Web 2.0 tools. According to the surveys, offering RSS feeds, which allow users to subscribe to content, was the top tool in 2010 (Mahmood & Richardson, 2013), but by 2013 social networking sites had taken the lead in academic libraries (Boateng & Liu, 2014). Although engaging users directly in conversation through blog comments is often the goal of blogs, Adams (2013) found that “many academic library blogs struggle to attract user interaction through comments” (p. 669). This finding appears to be consistent throughout the literature (Chatfield, Ratajeski, Wang & Bardyn, 2010; Mazzocchi, 2014; Toth, 2010; Vucovich, 2013) with the effect that “most library blogs inform instead of inviting discussion” (Farkas, 2007, Chapter 3, Blogs to Build Community, para. 1).

Boateng and Liu (2014) found that most of the academic libraries they surveyed maintained at least one blog. The majority of the blogs surveyed focused on one or more of the following content types: general information, book reviews/discussions, or research tips. Nearly half of the surveyed libraries had blogs about information literacy or lists of new books. To a lesser extent, blogs were used to list new ejournals and databases or provide information about library hours and holidays (Boateng & Liu, 2014).

According to the literature, the authors of one library blog aimed to produce more substantive content than the types identified by the Boateng & Liu survey. The Biddleblog was a law library, multi-author blog that aimed to “provide substantive and thoughtful commentary” in order to “‘add value’ to the resources and information” offered by the law library (Steele & Greenlee, 2011, p. 4).

Background

Syracuse University is a private, non-profit R1 university (Carnegie classification for United States doctoral universities with the highest level of research activity) with an FTE of 21,492 undergraduate and graduate students and an FTE of 1,058 instructional faculty, located in central New York State. Syracuse University Libraries has a staff FTE of 166 (59 professional staff, 87 support staff, and 21 student assistants) (Syracuse University Libraries Program Management Center, personal communication, February 16, 2016). The Department of Research and Scholarship is currently one of 12 Libraries’ departments and is comprised of an associate dean, 14 subject liaison librarians, and one office supervisor (Syracuse University Libraries, 2016).

In May 2013, one of the authors of this article was approached by Research and Scholarship departmental leadership to lead a collaborative blogging initiative, which would replace the former department newsletter. Previous experiments with individual librarian blogs and department blogs had quickly fizzled out due to individual author workload and lack of follow through after initial excitement about the idea of blogging.

The overview of the project stated that, “The department for Research and Scholarship will create a blog in order to provide an effective and strategic venue to communicate and market its services and collections” (K.M. Dames, personal communication, May 8, 2013). The mission

was to inform the Syracuse University community about collections, resources, and services offered by the department, as well as highlight the expertise and achievements of department librarians. It was also to be a forum to publicly explain and document policies that affect the Libraries' collections and services. Perhaps most importantly, the blog was intended to, through substantive and thoughtful posts, connect the librarians' scholarly work, and the Libraries' collections, with wider issues in publishing and library and information science. The intended audience for the blog is Syracuse University faculty and other library professionals.

This emphasis on highlighting the expertise and accomplishments of the department's subject librarians, providing substantive posts on the greater information landscape, along with the fact that the blog is multi-author, distinguish the Research and Scholarship blog (<http://library-blog.syr.edu/drs/blog/>) from most other library blogs. The authors have not found references to a departmental, multi-author library blog in the literature and have encountered very few examples of such blogs in the blogosphere. One blog identified in the literature as being similar to the Research and Scholarship blog was the Biddleblog. The Biddleblog also emphasized substantive posts and was multi-author. However, the key difference between the blogs was their scope; the Biddleblog was a library-wide initiative, whereas the Research and Scholarship blog is the output of a single department.

Although Syracuse University was included in Boateng & Liu's survey of 100 top U.S. academic library websites and the Research and Scholarship blog had just debuted within the survey timeframe (2014), it is likely that (based on the first few posts) the blog was categorized as providing general information and information about new databases. The survey did not capture (nor was it intended to capture) the unique nature of the Research and Scholarship blog.

When the project began, the departmental administration and the editors developed short-term, medium-term, and long-term goals for the blog. In the short-term, the editor was expected to set up the blog infrastructure, develop a workflow that ensured consistent posting, develop an editorial voice that allowed for a consistent tone from multiple authors, and to support larger communication campaigns. In the medium-term, posts were intended to raise the profile of department librarians and their work. The long-term goal is to aid the professional career development of contributing librarians.

Publishing Schedule

The regular publication schedule for blog posts has contributed greatly to the blog's sustainability. A librarian contributes a substantial post to the blog every other week. Collection development and analysis librarians write posts outlining new resources, changes to resources, and the decision making process behind those changes. Subject librarians contribute articles on topics of their choosing. The editors, who are the authors of this article, expect the blog posts to be more than merely lists of new resources or instructions on how to use a database. They are intended to connect resources available on campus to larger initiatives or occurrences within higher education or librarianship.

Additional posts are published as needed. These include short posts on the professional involvement and achievements of department members, upcoming events, and photos after such events. Posts are also written as needed to discuss policy issues, collections decisions, and other timely topics, such as open access policies, court rulings, and changes to the publishing landscape.

All department librarians contribute posts on a rotating schedule. There are currently fourteen librarian authors, although at one time twenty librarians contributed to the schedule. Each author contributes one regularly scheduled post before going through the cycle again. Current staffing levels determine that each librarian writes a substantial post twice per year. Authors choose, via an online poll, the months when they would like to publish. Editors assign due dates based on the poll results. Reminders are sent to authors one week prior to the due date.

Editorial Responsibilities

The editors are responsible for copy editing posts and formatting them into the blogging software, WordPress. Editors also link to subscribed content or websites when appropriate and add tags to the post. The editors also try to add images to the posts to increase visual appeal, though some authors include images in their drafts.

Editors were originally tasked with creating a singular voice, or writing style for posts that were to appear on the blog, no matter the author. After the first posts went through the revision process, it became evident to the editors that their own voices and writing styles were not inherently better than those of the other department members and attempts to assimilate the styles took away valuable individual perspective from the posts. The editors decided that posts would receive less editing than originally intended and would remain a single author's work, not a work of the department.

During the first year, there was one acting blog editor at a time. While the librarian who started the blog was on leave, another librarian in the department acted as editor. Once the librarian returned, the two librarians decided that sharing editorial responsibilities would significantly reduce the editorial workload. The editors decided that the original blog editor would continue to manage the blog contribution schedule, while the other editor would be

responsible for publishing posts highlighting the department subject librarians' professional involvement and achievements.

The editors also established a simple system of alternating individual blog post editorial responsibilities each month. Under this system, department subject librarians email their blog posts to both editors, with the understanding that only the editor responsible for that particular month will reply. The editor responsible for editing posts that month drafts the post in WordPress (which is blogging software managed by the Libraries' Information Technology department and branded with the Libraries' logo) and then completes the editorial process of editing the draft, adding and testing links, proofreading, and assigning appropriate tags and subject categories.

After the editor publishes the blog post, she drafts a corresponding Facebook post and tweet, which include links to the blog post, in order to promote the post. The editor who (because she is also on the Libraries' social media team) has access to the Libraries' social media scheduling software (Sprout Social) schedules the social media content. The editor who does not have access to the social media scheduling software, emails a draft Facebook post and tweet, along with the blog post link, to the other editor so that the other editor may easily schedule the social media content.

For the first two years of the blog's existence, the editors submitted all substantial posts to departmental leadership for approval before publishing. After that period, the editors requested that this step be removed because it was impeding the editorial workflow. Departmental leadership readily granted the request to remove the approval requirement, which greatly improved the editors' workflow and reduced the time from author submission to posting. Now editors can edit, publish posts, and schedule social media content in quick succession.

Discussion

The largest challenge that this project faces is librarian workload. All of the librarians in the department provide reference and instruction to their many constituents, in addition to performing collection development. Like most academic librarians, they are also expected to contribute at the campus and national level. Although Syracuse University librarians do not hold faculty status, they are governed by a system of ranks and a promotion process that has been modeled on the faculty tenure system. The policies and procedures governing librarian appointment and promotion are outlined in the Librarians' Manual (Syracuse University Libraries, 2012). Included in these procedures is an annual review of individual librarian performance in which librarians are evaluated in the areas of professional performance, professional development, and professional service.

When this initiative was introduced, it was received as one more thing to add to an already overloaded schedule. To help offset this perception, departmental administration made it clear that, since publishing professionally is one way in which librarians can demonstrate their service to the profession, substantive blog posts would, during the annual review process, carry the same weight as more traditionally published articles. Additionally, as the substantive posts have generated impact, and the librarians have gone through the semiannual writing process a few times, it has become easier to demonstrate the value of this work to the blog authors. However, due primarily to time constraints imposed by the competing priorities listed above, regularly scheduled blog posts periodically veer towards simple news items or short updates about a resource, without any analysis or connection to larger issues.

Constraints on librarians' time also makes it difficult to produce posts that connect to larger issues in librarianship, higher education, and publishing in a timely manner. As demonstrated in the next section, posts that are published during a period of controversy, or

immediately following the release of a noteworthy publication, receive the most attention. Yet, getting librarians to write posts that quickly respond to such issues is difficult. Due to the busy schedules of the department members, it is difficult to produce posts outside of the regular submission schedule. When an author volunteers to create a timely post, the blog editors accept that post in lieu of the librarian's regularly scheduled post. This encourages authors to submit timely content without the penalty of additional work.

The issue of adding yet another responsibility on librarians is not something that should be ignored when considering implementing a collaborative blog. Despite evidence of impact, counting blog posts as articles in the librarians' annual reviews, and department leadership making it clear to authors that they are expected to produce semiannual posts as part of their job duties, it is still difficult for every author to find time to write substantial blog posts. After more than two years of collaboratively writing a blog, the level of resistance from department members has decreased, but not entirely gone away. When the new requirement of contributing to the blog was first implemented, department members frequently had difficulty determining topics for posts and complained about the additional work. Now when topical discussions occur within the department, staff members note that these discussions are good blog content and some even claim these topics as their own for future posts.

Impact

Although, like most library blogs, the Research and Scholarship blog receives few comments, the authors have found that the blog is being read and having a positive impact. The blog editors periodically receive Google analytics reports from the Libraries' information technology department, which show a number of different metrics. One metric that reflects the readership of the blog and the relative popularity of blog posts is the number of unique

pageviews the blog and blog posts receive. “A unique pageview aggregates pageviews ... that are generated by the same user during the same session” and so “represents the number of sessions during which that page was viewed one or more times” (“The difference between, 2016).

While the majority of blog readers are in the general Syracuse area (67% of unique pageviews from those whose cities can be identified via Google analytics are local), the blog audience is international, with readers spanning the United States and the world. Cities represented in the analytics report include Ann Arbor, Amsterdam, Bangkok, Beijing, Beirut, Berlin, Birmingham, Budapest, Cambridge, Capetown, Chicago, Dublin, Hanoi, Hanover, Helsinki, Hong Kong, Houston, Jerusalem, Lagos, London, Melbourne, Mexico City, Montreal, Mumbai, Nairobi, New Delhi, New York, Oakland, Paris, Seattle, Seoul, Singapore, Sydney, Tel Aviv, Toronto, Vienna, and Washington.

Unique pageviews, regardless of city of origin, have increased each year. During 2014, the blog received 6,678 unique pageviews and by the end of the next year, that number had increased by 37%, with a total of 9,161 unique pageviews in 2015. (Since the blog debuted mid-year 2013, annual statistics for that year are not comparable with the following two calendar years.)

Monthly unique pageviews have increased from a low number of 15 during the month the blog began (June 2013) to a high number of 1,274, representing the blog’s busiest month (September 2015). Monthly averages for 2014 and 2015 show that January and February are the lowest traffic months, with unique pageviews averaging around 478 for each month. The next two low traffic months are December and July, with unique pageviews in the 519 to 592 range. The months of March, April, May, June, and October show fairly steady traffic ranging from 698

to 727 unique pageviews on average each month. September is the busiest month, with an average of 1,011 unique pageviews, followed by August (834 unique pageviews) and November (781 unique pageviews).

The blog editors do not have a set goal for the number of unique pageviews the blog or blog posts should receive and have found that unique pageviews for posts vary widely, ranging from just a couple unique pageviews to over 2,000 total unique pageviews. Generally, the most popular posts connect to larger issues in publishing and librarianship, highlight a truly unique part of the Libraries' collection, or focus on an individual. For instance, the following top three most popular blog posts (each receiving over 2,000 unique pageviews over the lifetime of the blog) connected to a larger issue going on in the world of libraries or academic publishing:

A post about Harvard Business Publishing restricting access to 500 of the most popular *Harvard Business Review* articles in the EBSCO database Business Source Elite (McReynolds, 2013) has been viewed 2,184 times and cited in a presentation given at a copyright conference (Crews, 2014) as well as linked to as background information in a technical blog post offering a workaround for a problem related to the restricted access (Samieske, 2014).

A synopsis and key points from a recently published report on trends in academic libraries (Wasylenko, 2014) has now received 2,148 unique pageviews and was included in a report for architects at the University of Maryland to help them better understand library spaces ("Information," n.d.).

An in-depth post about predatory publishers (Hanson, 2014), an issue that had been in the news a great deal, included tips for spotting predatory journals and has been viewed 2,435 times.

Many less prominent posts also have a positive impact and serve a key function by keeping readers informed of important database and collections updates, as well as providing

insight into the scholarly and collaborative work of the department. For example, a post about the history of United States Geological Survey (USGS) topographic maps (Olson, 2015) was viewed 477 times and cited in a USGS publication (United States Geological Survey, 2015). The author of the post was also contacted by librarians at other institutions who were interested in learning more about the cleaning and care of the topographic copperplates. Through this blog post, the author has been identified as an expert on this subject of care for these plates.

A post about Elsevier issuing takedown notices for articles posted on Academia.edu (Rauh, 2014) received just 210 unique pageviews, but brought attention to an important issue in a timely manner and provided faculty with tips on how to share their work more widely while also protecting their rights as authors.

In addition to quantitative measurements used to assess impact of blog posts, the editors have also noted anecdotal evidence of impact. A post entitled, “Syracuse University Libraries Points of Pride” (Wasylenko, 2015), has been referenced during many staff meetings as a model for highlighting the unique collections and services of Syracuse University Libraries.

While continuing to inform the Syracuse University community about the department librarians’ scholarly work and wider issues in publishing and librarianship, the editors wanted to give readers a chance to get to know more about each subject librarian. Inspired by an interview of a librarian at Drexel University (Lee, 2015), the editors sent out a few basic questions for each department librarian to answer. Based on the responses, the editors created and posted “librarian spotlights” on the blog and (as part of the usual editorial workflow) scheduled social media posts linking to the spotlights for the Libraries’ Facebook and Twitter accounts.

Some of these spotlights far exceeded the Libraries’ average number of Facebook post views by garnering hundreds of Facebook views and, in the case of one spotlight, well over 900

views. The spotlights were batch published in July 2015, but were not featured on social media until the beginning of the fall semester. The popularity of the spotlights on social media (accounting for the blog's busiest months, with August bringing in 1,174 unique pageviews and September 1,274) demonstrated the importance of pushing blog content out via social media and confirmed the editors' sense that blog and social media posts that feature people are generally more compelling than more topical content.

Future

The Research and Scholarship blog has undergone periodic assessment throughout the life of the project. Each time this has occurred, it has been determined by departmental leadership that the blog will continue as the impact outweighs the time that it takes to maintain such a project. The benefits of publishing a departmental blog include giving librarians a venue to highlight their expertise and publish with fewer barriers than exist in the traditional journal publishing model. It has also brought the librarians' expertise to the faculty audience that would not be reached without this blog. It has been suggested to combine the blog with the Libraries' website news section, which is also run on the WordPress blog platform, but it was determined that the substantive content of the Research and Scholarship blog posts is different enough from news that an independent platform is preferred. This independent platform will continue to highlight the work of the contributing librarians.

When the blog was first envisioned, the editor was tasked with determining whether this model would be something that other departments within the Libraries could replicate. While no other departments have started their own blogs, the model is replicable. The editors encourage anyone looking to establish a collaborative library blog to consider this model, which has been

sustained by dividing the labor across two editors and multiple authors. The editors strongly recommend a strict publication schedule which allows for new content.

To generate additional blog posts and broaden the authorship of the blog, guest authors have been invited to write pieces for the blog from time to time. This experience has given early career and staff members outside of the Research and Scholarship department a valuable opportunity to publish. The editors continually welcome additional voices and are enthusiastic about highlighting expertise outside of the department.

This case study describes one library department's experience of publishing a collaborative blog in a sustainable manner. This blog has provided a venue for Research and Scholarship librarians at Syracuse University to demonstrate their expertise and promote their collections thus telling their story. Hopefully this experience will inspire others to use this communication method to tell the story of their libraries.

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