

Weblogs and libraries: the potential and the reality



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Introduction

'Weblogs and libraries: a natural alliance?' A number of recent articles in professional journals and newsletters (see e.g. Alcock, 2003; Balas, 2003) have suggested that libraries and information organizations could be using weblogs for a range of purposes, including contact with clients or users, information provision, marketing of services, and for knowledge management applications. A review of the professional literature suggests that weblogs are generally regarded as a 'Good Thing' for libraries, whether it is the library providing a weblog for its clients or its staff, or the library using weblogs as sources of information.

However, it is one thing for a tool like weblogs to be recognized as potentially useful; it is another for that tool to be used. An international survey of weblogs created by libraries, carried out in September and October 2003 (Clyde, 2004a), suggested that, despite the positive coverage of weblogs in the professional literature, relatively few libraries had created weblogs and the quality of those weblogs was on the whole mixed. This research has been updated in 2004 to identify changes since September/October 2003 and to gain a better understanding of the current situation.

While analysis of the new data was proceeding as this paper was being written, it was already clear in August 2004 that the number of libraries with weblogs had increased, though perhaps not to the extent that might have been expected given the popularity of blogs in other contexts. In addition, it appears that many of the library weblogs are relatively unsophisticated, and a considerable number are updated infrequently. Issues related to library weblogs include management issues associated with creating and maintaining a blog and issues associated with the evaluation of weblogs.

Literature on weblogs

At the time of writing (August 2004), there was almost no research literature related specifically to weblogs in library and information science, or to weblogs in business, though research projects investigating weblogs as a medium of communication were known to be in progress. It is certainly true that much of the research related to the web in general (and to the web in library and information science) will also be applicable to weblogs, since weblogs represent a particular kind of web page or web site. Nevertheless, weblogs do have their own distinct advantages, limitations, and problems, which suggests that research focusing specifically on weblogs in the field of library and information science is needed; further, such research would be useful to libraries and to the library and information professions.

However, there is an emerging *professional* (as distinct from research) literature related to weblogs in the library and information science context (Clyde, 2003). Often written by early adopters or enthusiasts, these articles in the professional journals and newsletters (and published conference papers) are generally positive about the applications of weblogs and indeed may be written in an upbeat style to encourage library and information professionals to investigate this new phenomenon.

Michele Alcock (2003) says: 'this tool can be used to inform clients of changes, additions and news'. Further, it can enable the library's clients to comment on the library's service. She is supported by Belinda Weaver (2003) who has said, in the Australian Library and Information Association's magazine *InCite*, that: 'it is surprising that more libraries don't use [weblogs] to keep customers informed as the format is perfect for that job'. Hazel D'Aguiar (2003) has written about library weblogs for the United Kingdom journal *CILIP Update*, as have Geoffrey Harder and Randy Reichardt (2003) for the Canadian journal *Felicitier*, and Janet Balas (2003) for *Computers in Libraries* in the United States.

The potential of weblogs in school libraries has been discussed by, among others, myself (Clyde, 2002) and Theresa Ross Embrey (2002). Doug Goans and Teri Vogel (2003) have described a weblog project in an academic library, while at the 2003 Online Information conference, Paul Squires (2003) discussed the development of the Opportunity Wales weblog. The use of weblogs in knowledge management applications has been advocated by Martin Roell (2003), among others.

The 'state of the art' of library weblogs, 2003-4

While Paula Hane (2001) contends that 'blogs are a natural for librarians', a contention that is backed up by directories such as that of Peter Scott (2004), which point to a large number of useful and well-regarded weblogs that are maintained by librarians, weblogs do not appear to be so natural for libraries.

An exhaustive search in September/October 2003 revealed only around 50 libraries with weblogs, at a time when estimates of the total number of publicly-available weblogs ranged from 1.5 million to 3.4 million (Wolff, 2003; Greenspan, 2003). By July 2004, the number had grown significantly, to 198. However, this is still a relatively small number when one considers the number of libraries that have web sites. Given the enthusiasm for blogs in the professional literature, as against the reality of library blogging as suggested by these numbers, it seemed worthwhile to investigate the library weblogs (that is, weblogs created and maintained by libraries) to assess the 'state of the art' and to identify any issues associated with library weblogs.

The methodology used to study library weblogs was based on my earlier studies of library web sites (Clyde, 1996, 1999). For a study of library web sites, carried out in 1996 when library web sites were relatively new and the professional and research literature related to them was sparse, descriptive research techniques seemed to offer an appropriate means for gaining an overview of this then new phenomenon; thus content analysis was selected as the basic research methodology.

Researchers looking at web pages in other fields such as tourism and education came to similar conclusions (see, for example, Cano & Prentice, 1998; Gray, Romano & Clark, 1998), conclusions that were confirmed through McMillan's (2000) meta-analysis of studies of web sites. Since weblogs are very much a part of the world wide web, and library weblogs were as new in 2003 as library web sites had been in 1996, it was decided to use content analysis again 'to establish a baseline describing the state of current practice' (Gray, Romano & Clark, 1998). A detailed discussion of the methodology is available elsewhere (see Clyde, 2004b).

The initial content analysis for this project was based on library weblogs that had been identified in September 2003 by using weblog directories and search engines. The same strategies were used again in July 2004 to identify library weblogs around the world. Table I is based on analyses undertaken in October 2003 and July 2004; the other tables are based on analyses undertaken in September 2003. When the weblogs were checked, the current page of each was printed out. A record was kept of the date and time of printing of each (through the date and time stamp of the printer). In addition, features of each weblog (such as archives and a search engine) were explored online.

Some of the analyses were simple quantitative counts; others were qualitative and/or more complex. The various features of the different weblogs were not evaluated; to a certain extent this was due to the absence of any generally-accepted criteria for the evaluation of weblogs or their features. In addition, so little has been known about library weblogs that it seemed useful to find out what is actually happening, regardless of the quality issues. At the time this paper was being prepared, only some basic analyses of the July 2004 data had been performed; thus the paper is based mainly on the analyses of the 2003 data. However, it is anticipated that the conference presentation will incorporate more analyses of the 2004 data.

In all, in September/October 2003 I was able to find only 57 library weblogs created by just 52 libraries. More than four of every five of these weblogs were created by libraries in the United States (83.6%); others were in Canada (10.9%) and the United Kingdom (5.5%). Given the popularity of blogging in countries like Australia, New Zealand, France, and Iceland (see e.g. Greenspan, 2003), it is surprising that more countries are not represented in the list. However, checks of local search engines and professional web sites in these and other countries at the end of 2003 failed to find any evidence of library blogs.

This does not necessarily mean that there are no library weblogs in other countries; rather that any library weblogs that may exist were inaccessible through the available search engines and directories at that time. In the United States, one public library system had three weblogs and another had two, while one university library had two weblogs. Thus the number of United States libraries with weblogs was 44. In Canada, three of the weblogs had been created by three different libraries at the University of Saskatchewan. Overall, then, the number of institutions represented in the 2003 list is 51.

The number of weblogs found in July 2004 (198) suggested a more optimistic picture in that the number of library weblogs located had more than trebled. To a certain extent these results may reflect improvements in the search tools and directories, but nevertheless, it is good to see the increase in numbers. However, as Table I shows, there had been no real change in the *distribution* of library weblogs. Public libraries maintained more than 40% of the blogs, as did university and college libraries. Special or research libraries accounted for less than 9% of the weblogs. While no school library weblog was found in 2003, by 2004 the six school library weblogs accounted for just 3% of those found, not a significant figure.

Table I: Library weblogs by type of library, 2003 and 2004

Type of Library	2003* Number (%)	2004** Number (%)
Public library / public library system	25 (43.9%)	82 (41.4%)
Academic library (university or college)	23 (40.3%)	83 (41.9%)
Special / research library	5 (8.7%)	17 (8.6%)
Multi-type library network/consortium	2 (3.5%)	6 (3.0%)
National/state library	1 (1.7%)	3 (1.5%)
School board library	1 (1.7%)	1 (0.5%)
School library	-	6 (3.0%)
TOTAL	57 (100%)	198 (100%)

* Survey in September/October 2003 ** Survey in July 2004

The September 2003 analyses revealed that the most common use of the library weblogs was for providing news and updates for library users, particularly about print and internet resources; 44% provided information about functions, activities and events in the library (story time, internet courses, author visits, and so on). Around half of the library weblogs (49.1%) had some kind of statement of aims or purposes for the weblog, and/or something about the intended audience. Sometimes this was just a few words; sometimes a formal statement or short paragraph. See Table II for a summary.

Some examples will help here. The Science News weblog of Georgia State University 'delivers library news and information of interest to the science faculty and students at GSU'. The Whittaker Live! weblog of the Whittaker Library at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama 'provides links to useful performing arts resources on the web from the RSAMD', illustrating the common application of weblogs as a means of providing users with links to recommended internet resources. A number of the weblogs had more than one aim: for example, 'The St Joseph County Public Library Web Blogs will keep out patrons informed and amused with information about upcoming releases in the worlds of publishing and entertainment' or 'News, links and book reviews from the Kennebunk Free Library'.

Table II: Stated aims or purposes of library weblogs, 2003 (n=27)*

Aim or Purpose	Number
Provide news or information for users	18
Provide links to recommended internet resources	9
Book reviews, information about new books	5
Provide entertainment or amusement for users	2
Provide news or information for librarians	2
Book discussions	1
Provide news or information for trustees	1
Provide research tips	1
Communication among librarians (in a library system)	1

* Based on analyses undertaken in September 2003.

Some other examples of attractive library weblogs (taken from Clyde, 2004a) will serve to illustrate the variety of aims and audiences. The well-designed, colourful and cheerful Blogger Book Club weblog of Roselle Public Library (USA) provides a secure forum for 'book discussions for 4th through 6th grade patrons', with book reviews, information about authors, and a page for parents; a password is required for access to most sections of the blog. The Wide Window, a weblog from SLS (Suburban Library System, USA), provides information for professionals who are involved in library services for young people; another weblog from SLS has professional information for librarians in general, covering a variety of professional issues and with information about conferences and resources.

One of the most unusual library weblogs was Library Construction News from the Urbana Free Library (USA); this provided updates on a new library building project, with photographs and information about access for the handicapped, changes to parking facilities (and information about public transport so library users could avoid parking problems), among other things.

To a certain extent, the content of the library weblogs (as found in the content analysis carried out in September 2003) reflected the aims and purposes of the library weblogs as discussed above. Given the emphasis on providing news and updates for library users, it was not surprising, for example, that 70.9% of the weblogs provided short articles and news items, with links to the original internet source where appropriate. Links to recommended internet resources were provided on 63.6% of the library weblogs. Some 43.6% of the library weblogs provided information about functions, activities and events in the library (exhibitions and displays, story time, internet courses, author visits, and so on), while 32.7% provided information about new books in the library collection and/or new DVDs or access to new online databases. Approximately one weblog in five (21.8%) provided news about the library, such as information about new staff members or new facilities and services. More than three weblogs in five (61.8%) had browsable archives and almost a quarter (23.6%) of the weblogs had their own search engine to assist users to find posts in the weblog's archive.

However, the content analysis also revealed a real problem, related not to the content of the library weblogs, but to what is missing from them. This was particularly so if it is assumed that one of the aims of providing a library weblog (whether that aim was articulated or not) is to promote the library, its resources and services. Only half the weblogs (50.9%) had a link back to the library's web site. Such a link is always necessary. When a weblog is housed on a remote weblog hosting service such as Blogger's Blogspot rather than on the library's own web server, it becomes especially important.

In these cases, the library web site and the library weblog will have different base URLs and it will be almost impossible for a library weblog user to locate information about the library if there is no link on the blog's main page. Only 29.1% of the weblogs had the street or mail address of the library. Only 21.8% linked to the library catalogue, and only 10.9% had information about the library's opening hours or links to other services provided by the library (such as reference services).

In early September 2003, just over a quarter (29.1%) of the weblogs provided interactive facilities designed to encourage user involvement. At the most basic level, users were able to comment on current items posted by the

library staff; this was possible on 11 weblogs. However, on only three of these weblogs was there any evidence that users were indeed posting comments. On six of the weblogs, an online discussion forum was available, and on a few of these, users were able to initiate new discussion topics or discussion threads.

Because online discussion areas were usually password protected, it was impossible to assess the level of user participation in discussions. It was clear that the majority of the library weblogs (56.4%) had been established as a one-way medium of communication between library staff and library users or other readers of the weblog, without any possibility for interactivity.

Table III shows the software used to develop and maintain the library weblogs as of September 2003. More than two in five were using Blogger, and most of those were using the free version; in fact, only one seemed to be using the commercial (paid) BloggerPro version. Movable Type (used by 18.2%) was the next most popular. The only other software with more than one library user was Radio UserLand (9.1%). Some of the weblogs for which software information was not available, were almost certainly developed and maintained with software written in-house or to the library's own specifications. No libraries seemed to be using moblogging technology (Cowen, 2003), that is, blogging via a mobile phone or handheld device, to maintain their weblogs.

Table III: Library weblogs by weblog development software used, 2003*

weblog Software	Number (%)
Blogger	24 (43.6%)
Movable Type	10 (18.2%)
Radio UserLand	5 (9.1%)
Iblog	1 (1.8%)
Weblogger	1 (1.8%)
Blog-City (Blue Dragon)	1 (1.8%)
Moveable Manila: Blue	1 (1.8%)
Information not available	12 (21.8%)
TOTAL	55 (100%)

* Based on analyses undertaken in September 2003

The basic format of weblogs highlights their function as a medium for the provision of current information: the first view the user has is of the most recent posting. Date and time (sometimes down to the second) are added automatically to each new post by the weblog software. Some weblog sites, such as that of Blogger, provide a window on weblogs that have been updated within the last few minutes or even the last few seconds. Weblog search engines (such as Technorati) often use recent posts as a way of tracking and indexing weblog content. Given this focus on currency, the frequency of updating of a weblog can be seen as an indicator of the institution's understanding of the medium and its commitment to the weblog.

In September 2003, the date and time of the most recent posting to each library weblog was compared to the date and time stamp on the printout of the weblog's current page to get an indication of the time elapsed since the most recent update. The results are shown in Table IV. Within the previous 24 hours, only one in five of the library weblogs had been updated. A little over half (54.5%) had been updated within the previous week, but even this is outside what is usually acceptable in weblog terms. It would be difficult, if not impossible, for example, to maintain any level of user comment or discussion on a weblog that was not updated daily. A quarter of the library weblogs (25.5%) had not been updated for more than a month, some for considerably longer.

Table IV: Updating of library weblogs, 2003*

Within the day	11 (20%)
Within the last 2 days	7 (12.7%)
Within the last 3 days	4 (7.3%)
Within the last week	8 (15.5%)
Within the last 2 weeks	7 (12.7%)
Within the last month	2 (3.6%)
Within the last 3 months	6 (10.9%)
Within the last 6 months	4 (7.3%)
Within the last year	1 (1.8%)
Within the last 2 years	3 (5.5%)
Time of last posting not available	2 (3.6%)
TOTAL	55 (100%)

* Based on analyses undertaken in September 2003.

Only 45.5% of the weblogs studied in September 2003 provided an RSS feed. RSS stands for either 'Rich Site Summary' or 'Real Simple Syndication' (or other things), depending on the commentator and the software used (information about RSS will be provided by other speakers during this conference). When a site (such as a weblog) provides an RSS feed, users can have content updates from the site delivered to a 'news aggregator' on their own computer or to their space on a public news aggregator. The RSS feeds are also picked up by weblog search engines and by some directories.

It is increasingly the case that quality weblogs are being developed with RSS capabilities, just as the current news sites are. One reason for this is that the aggregators are a way of bringing new readers to a web site and ensuring coverage for the weblog on the directory and search sites. Apart from the benefit to the provider of the weblog (in terms of greater exposure), RSS makes possible the delivery of current information to the computer desktops of users, without the users having to take any step other than installing and configuring a news aggregator. Provision of an RSS feed (often noted in directory listings) is often considered to be an indicator of intent to provide a serious service via a weblog.

Issues associated with weblogs in libraries and information organizations

It appears that there is a discrepancy between the potential of weblogs, as advocated in the professional literature of library and information science, and the reality of the 'state of the art' of library weblogs (weblogs created and maintained by libraries), as identified in the analyses described in this paper.

Despite published articles and papers that outline the ways in which weblogs might benefit libraries and information agencies, and some case studies of apparently well-received library and information service weblogs, the number of library weblogs located in September/October 2003 was very small. While it is clear that the number had increased significantly by July 2004, in the international context the base of library weblogs remained small. Further, the great majority of the library weblogs were in the United States and most had been created by public or academic libraries; they neither represented an international phenomenon nor did they reflect the variety of libraries.

If Balas (2003) and Alcock (2003), among others, are right when they point to the potential of weblogs in libraries, then why do so few libraries (in so few countries) seem to have them? It cannot be the cost of the weblog development software: the majority of the library weblogs studied were based on free or cheap services, and a few showed that these services can be used to develop effective and attractive weblogs. It cannot be the level of skills required: while creating a weblog may not be as simple a process as some of the weblog development software packages claim, nevertheless many librarians and some libraries have created attractive weblogs.

It could be that Weaver, Balas, Alcock, and others are wrong, though if they are, there is no evidence of this in the professional literature. On the other hand, it could be that there are institutional or other barriers to the establishment of library weblogs. Are librarians and library administrators really comfortable with informal sources of information, particularly sources they may not be able to control at all levels? Are they willing to give priority to them or to commit resources to them?

If a weblog really is a library priority (for whatever reason) then it needs an allocation of personnel time beyond the time actually required to update the weblog. The people who work on it need time to create content and time to become acquainted with the needs of the users and potential users. In addition, there are public relations tasks and user education issues to be addressed so that library users know about the weblog and how to take advantage of its features.

The majority of the weblogs had been created to provide news and information for library users, and/or to provide links to recommended internet resources; this generally reflects the suggestions made in the professional literature (except that none of the library weblogs seemed to have been created for knowledge management applications). Some appeared to be performing these functions very well. Nevertheless, it was disturbing that a large number of weblogs failed even to provide a link to the web site or home page of their library, much less the library catalogue or reference services. Most library weblogs were designed for one-way communication between library staff and users, but a quarter provided interactive features. The level of usage of the latter was at best unclear but seemed to be very low.

Most libraries were not updating their weblogs daily, giving users little reason to make frequent visits to the site. Some weblogs were updated on a very irregular basis and at the time of the studies some had not been updated for many months. This is a medium whose strength lies in its ability to draw attention to current information; not only is there no point in having a weblog that is not up to date, but the consequences might be negative in public relations terms. Without an RSS feed (and fewer than half the weblogs had one), any weblog is at a disadvantage, unless it already has a tight-knit user community and no aspirations to expand that community.

For those libraries that have weblogs, how many have been evaluated to measure the extent to which they are meeting user needs? In the review of the literature, no formal evaluations of library weblogs were identified, though some articles and papers did mention the need for evaluation. The general absence of user comments on the library weblogs that provided a comment facility (as evident in the September 2003 analyses) suggests that users are not particularly involved with their library weblogs except as passive readers.

We don't know what proportion of library users (or, for that matter, how many non-users of a library) actually read a library's weblog. We don't know if the proportion varies by type of library or depending on the aims and content of the weblogs. We don't know if users of library weblogs *want* to comment on or discuss posts; the results of the analyses described in this paper suggest that these things are at least open to question.

What do users want in a library weblog? We really don't know. Do users even want a library weblog? Again, we really don't know. On the other hand, it is possible that as library users become more familiar with weblogs and their applications, usage of weblogs will rise and users may be more willing to take part in online discussions or use other interactive features of weblogs. It is expected that the 2004 analyses will supply further evidence to address these questions.

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