

Blogs and Wikis



By Richard W. Boss

Blogs (short for Weblogs) and wikis (Polynesian for “quick”) are proliferating everywhere, including in the library community. By early 2007, there were hundreds of library blogs and scores of library wikis.

The Differences Between Blogs and Wikis

Despite the fact that blogs and wikis have become commonplace, they are often confused with one another. A blog is an electronic broadcast by the owner of the blog. If the owner of the blog permits it, others can respond by adding comments, but they cannot edit the content. Instead, the comments are displayed in a separate area. A wiki is a collaborative content development tool. It is a Web site that allows anyone, without knowing HTML, to post content to it. Each section of a wiki has an “edit” button that makes it possible for anyone to add to or edit what is there unless some limitations are imposed. A history is maintained so that it is possible to determine what additions and changes have been made since the initial article was posted, and who was responsible. A blog typically is a single page; a wiki can consist of thousands of pages.

Libraries have been involved much more with blogs than with wikis. The author’s searches using Google and several directories suggest that library blogs outnumber library wikis more than seven to one. One factor may be the degree of control over content that a library has over a blog. Others may be that wikis tend to have a much greater amount of content, more participants, and more need to monitor for possible misuse.

Blogs

The blog developed from the online journal, a way for people to keep a running account of their personal lives. In 1994, software was introduced that made it possible to create content for the Web without knowing HTML, easily update an online journal in reverse chronological order so that the latest information came first, to make it accessible with a Web browser, and to make linking to other pages much easier. The use of the term “blog” dates back only to 1999. It replaced the term “Weblog,” which had been in use only since 1997. There were only a few hundred blogs before 1999, but by 2005 the number had

grown to more than 400 million.

The reverse chronological order of a blog makes it easy to add information because it is posted to the top. On a wiki, it is necessary to find a place to put the post.

A blog can be personal, as it is in most cases, or for a business or organization. It can focus on a subject, product, or event. In the past few years, blogs have become increasingly more noticed for their role in breaking, shaping, and spinning news. They have become particularly important in election campaigns.

A blog is usually updated on a regular basis, but the frequency can be anything from several times a day to once a month.

MySpace

MySpace (<http://blog.myspace.com/index>) is the largest blogging site in the world. As of early 2007, there were more than 130 million blogs on the site grouped into more than 30 categories. More than 500,000 postings were being made each day. Initially the blogs were almost exclusively those of individuals, primarily teenagers, but many businesses and organizations are now using the site to announce events, products, services, and job openings. A number of libraries regularly blog on MySpace. The software to create and maintain a blog is available on the MySpace Web site.

Other popular blogging sites with millions of participants are Live Journal (<http://www.livejournal.com>) and Xanga (www.xanga.com).

There is a way to keep track of blogs without bookmarking each of them. Bloglines (<http://www.bloglines.com>) offers a free service that makes it possible to keep up with news feeds and blogs that have RSS feeds, special files containing the content of the site formatted for easy parsing. Bloglines offers subscriptions to the feeds and periodically checks them for changes or additions. When a blog has been updated, an alert is posted in a notification window.

Library Blogs

There are hundreds of library blogs. The most basic is a listing of library events by date, with the latest date at the top. When a page is filled, the old posts can be saved in an archive or deleted. A good example is the blog of the Adams County Library System of Pennsylvania (<http://adamslibrary1.blogspot.com>).

A library blog about books is somewhat more time-consuming to create and maintain. A good example is that of the Waterboro Public Library of Maine (<http://www.waterborolibrary.org/blog.htm>). It not only discusses specific books, but has commentaries on publishing. An appealing feature of this blog is images of authors and book jackets. There are also links to reviewing media.

Some of the most successful library blogs are aimed at teenagers, the group that is most familiar with blogging because of their exposure to MySpace and similar social Web sites. A good example of a library blog for teens is "Stuff for Teens" by the Bartlesville

Public Library of Oklahoma (<http://library.booksite.com/6952/nl/?list=NLTS>). The writing style and vocabulary are designed to appeal to teens and the illustrations are colorful and appropriate.

Blog Directories

The available blog directories list a very small percentage of the existing library blogs. One of the most useful is the Blogging Libraries Wiki (google “welcome to blogging libraries wiki” as the URL is nearly 50 characters long). The list is categorized by library type. There are more than 200 public library blogs identified as well as many academic, special, and school library blogs. There also are categories for library associations and library directors. As of early 2007, the year-old directory had already had 20,000 hits.

Blogging Software

Blogging software is required to create a blog, but only a Web browser is required to read a blog.

There are many open source blogging software products available for downloading and installation. The proprietary products are available only for a fee, and are most popular with customers who want to take advantage of the hosting service that is usually made available as an option. Most of the software has features that facilitate authoring and editing of blog posts, various linking features, and the ability to publish the blog to the Web. The software usually provides many options. One critical feature for some bloggers is the ability to turn the comments feature on or off. Another option is post moderation, a feature that requires people who want to comment on a blog to be approved before the comments are posted. or that require an actual review of the comment before it is posted. A very useful option for active bloggers is the automatic archiving of older posts at specific intervals.

Among the open source blogging software available are Apache Roller (www.rollerweblogger.org), Geeklog (www.geeklog.net), and LifeType (www.lifetype.net). Community Server (<http://communityserver.org>) is a popular proprietary product, as is Movable Type (www.movabletype.org).

The best-known hosted service is MySpace (www.myspace.com). A number of libraries have used it to promote their services because it has a membership of tens of millions of young people. Two other sites, both fee-based, target small businesses and organizations, and professionals. They are Blog.com (<http://blog.com>) and TypePad (www.typepad.com).

Blogging Hardware

A library choosing a hosted blogging service needs no hardware. If it chosen to use an in-house server, it's size will depend on the amount of traffic that is anticipated. In most cases, a low-end server costing just a few thousand dollars is sufficient.

Wikis

The community of collaborators in the development and maintenance of a wiki may be everyone in a business or organization, everyone in a profession, everyone participating in a conference, or everyone in a geographic area, or everyone anywhere.

Allowing a large number of people to add to or edit a wiki means that it is more easily vandalized or susceptible to misinformation. However, the more an article is viewed, the more likely that the effects of vandalism will be ameliorated and misinformation corrected. As a wiki matures and increases in size, editorial administration becomes important. Typically, a substantial majority of editors have to support the designation of a limited number of people as editorial administrators, editors who have the authority to remove articles, additions, and edits that violate the agreed upon guidelines of the wiki.

Not everything called a wiki is a wiki. A number of businesses and organizations, including libraries, have used the wiki format to create and maintain online content. When there is no collaborative content development and maintenance, the result is not a wiki. Instead, it is a Web site.

Wikipedia

The most popular wiki, and the one most emulated, is Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org). Wikipedia is a registered trademark of the non-profit Wikimedia Foundation. The wiki was created in 2001 and has rapidly grown into the largest reference Web site on the Internet with more than 5.3 million articles, 1.64 million of them in English. The content in Wikipedia is intended to be factual, notable, verifiable with external sources, and neutrally presented, with external sources cited. There are over 75,000 active contributors. While the contributions remain the property of their creators, all of the text, and most of the images, is covered by the GNU Free Documentation License to ensure that the content remains freely distributable and reproducible.

Library Wikis

The best-known library wiki is the LISWiki (<http://liswiki.org>). It was launched on June 30, 2005 by John Hubbard of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. It had grown to more than 1,300 articles by early 2007. Many of the articles are stubs that require considerable additional information in order to be useful, but there are several hundred useful articles that deal with such topics as cell phones in libraries, laptop checkout, and dates of upcoming conferences. While the article on wikis offers a very limited discussion of wikis, it identifies several score library wikis, including conference wikis and wikis that are library-sponsored. In its first 18 months, there were nearly 60,000 hits against the wiki.

A potentially useful library wiki is Library Success, a best practices wiki (www.libsuccess.org). It was launched in 2005 by Meredith Farkas of Norwich University. She laid out the format and identified broad categories of coverage: community, management and leadership, materials selection and collection maintenance, professional, programming, readers' advisory, reference services and information

literacy, selling your library, services to specific groups, and training. Librarians who feel that they have done something at their libraries that they consider a success are invited to write about it in the wiki. Others are invited to add to or edit any article provided they have registered as editors. Many of the articles were still stubs as of early 2007, but there appeared to be active participation.

Conference wikis have become quite popular. A good example is the “Official Wiki of the 2007 ALA Midwinter Meeting” (<http://wikis.ala.org/midwinter2007>). Any attendee or exhibitor was able to exchange information about Midwinter events, the exhibits, committee work, or the city of Seattle. Of particular value are the recaps of meetings. Many other library associations also have conference wikis.

As of early 2007, the Public Library Association was investigating the feasibility of creating a wiki for the organization.

A good example of a library wiki is the Butler University Libraries’ Reference Wiki (http://www.seedwiki.com/wiki/butler_wikiref). It is a collaborative review of books, databases, Web sites, etc., that are part of the Butler University Libraries’ resources. Librarians, faculty, staff, and students are encouraged to add their comments about any reference resource, change text that is factually incorrect or unprofessional in department, or add additional reference resources.

Wiki Directories

A listing of wikis dealing with libraries and librarianship can be found at <http://liswiki.org/wiki/Wikis>. However, not all of the sites listed are true wikis because only one or a very few staff members are involved in content creation and maintenance. While they are organized in a format very similar to that of Wikipedia, they are not wikis because there is no opportunity for collaboration in the development of the content.

Wiki Software

Wiki software and a Web browser are necessary to create and maintain a wiki, but only a Web browser is needed to read one.

Wiki software typically allows Web pages to be created and edited using a Web browser. The principal difference between wiki software and content management software is that wiki software tends to focus on the content while content management software emphasis on control over layout.

The first wiki software was created in 1995. There are now more than a score of products, a majority available as open source software under the GNU General Public License (GPL). The most widely used open source products are MediaWiki (www.mediawiki.org) and TWiki. (<http://twiki.org>). The former, which was introduced in 2002, is used by Wikipedia. Twiki has been available since 1998 and has been regularly updated since that time. There a number of proprietary wiki software programs, but they have been infrequently used by libraries except those that want not only access to the software, but also a hosting service. A comparison of a number of wiki software products

is available at <http://www.wikimatrix.org/>

Most wiki software, whether free or for a fee, is available for download. A few products are also available on CD.

Wiki Hardware

Unless a hosted service is used, a library will need a server to accommodate the wiki. The number of participants and the amount of activity will need to be estimated in order to size the server. In most cases, a low-end server costing just a few thousand dollars will be enough, but it is a good idea to purchase a modular server that can be expanded, without replacing components, to at least quadruple the initial capacity.

Wiki Style Guide

The most widely used style guide for creating and maintaining a wiki is that of Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Help:Editing#Basic_text_formatting).

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