

Developing and Maintaining Successful Special Collections and Archives Blogs

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Abstract: Many archives, special collections and rare book libraries use blogs as part of their outreach strategy. What are the characteristics of a successful blog, and how is success defined and measured? This paper reports on an exploratory study conducted in 2021. The data, collected through a qualitative online survey, represent a diverse group of institutions in the United States of America and other countries. This paper reports on how respondents defined success and discusses other themes that emerged from the study. The study findings are relevant to archivists and special collections and rare book librarians who want to reflect on their existing blogs, or who plan on starting a new blog and are in the process of deciding if they want to embark in the effort and make a case for resources to their administrators.

Introduction, Problem Statement and Research Questions

In 2020 and 2021, institutions across the world were forced to interrupt or limit in-person interactions with the public, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Archives and libraries explored ways to connect with audiences remotely; in outreach work, having an online presence became even more important than in the past, and blogs were one of the avenues used to maintain visibility and communication with the public. In the special collections, rare books, and archives unit I work in (as programming and outreach librarian), we launched a blog in late August 2020, joining the many other institutions that manage blogs in these fields. This paper reports on an exploratory study that I conducted in 2021, focusing on blogs as one of the outreach strategies used in archives, special collections, and rare book libraries. The study aimed at identifying the characteristics of a successful blog, as well as definitions and measures of success; the study also aimed at describing the type of work required by blogs, and at understanding what audiences the blogs try to reach. The primary research question was: “How can we develop a successful special collections and archives blog?” The secondary research questions were: “What kind of work is required to develop and manage a blog?” and “Are blogs effective and how is their success measured?” Blogs require carefully planning and it takes effort to maintain them: the study results are relevant to archivists and special collections and rare book librarians who want to reflect on their existing blogs, or who plan on starting a new blog and are deciding if they want to embark in the effort and make a case for resources to their administrators. The research conducted through this study is significant because blogs are widely used by archives, special collections, and rare book libraries around the world, but there is a limited amount of research and literature specifically about blogs in these fields; more resources will help us better understand what we do and why.

Literature Review

Professional and scholarly literature discusses blogs in general, as well as library and archives blogs. The publications focusing on libraries and archives that I have identified to date were written in the 2000s and 2010s, in the United States of America and in the United Kingdom. Examples of literature include a 2011 Master’s paper on archivists’ blogs (Merron 2011) and a 2013 article on special collections’ social media



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outreach (Heyliger, McLoone, and Thomas 2013). Blogs are discussed in the 2011 book *A Different Kind of Web*, edited by Kate Theimer (Theimer 2011b), specifically in two chapters addressing an archival processing blog (Fletcher 2011) and an archival reference tracking blog (Triller 2011). Theimer is the author of the popular archival blog ArchivesNext, which ran from 2007 through 2017, and has written about the shift in archival thinking and practices toward more open archives, in relation to the dynamic and interactive Web 2.0 (for example, Theimer 2011a). There are also articles that focus on the broad library field, such as a 2007 survey of the “library blogosphere” (Farkas 2007) and a 2013 content analysis study of librarian blogs (Jackson-Brown 2013).

WordPress Editorial Staff states that “Blogs evolved from online diaries and journals in the mid-90s. At that time, internet users were already running personal web pages where they published regular updates about their personal lives, thoughts, and social commentary” (WordPress 2021, paragraph 7). In his 2011 Master’s paper, Jeffrey L. Merron points out that weblogs (later referred to as “blogs”) appeared in the 1990s and became very common by 1999 (Merron 2011, 2). Over time, they were adopted by libraries and archives; Sean Heyliger, Juli McLoone, and Nikki Lynn Thomas state that “2009 was the watershed year for adoption” in special collections repositories (Heyliger, McLoone, and Thomas 2013, 379). Blogs are considered part of the social web in Web 2.0. Some authors consider blogs a type of social media, while others disagree and see blogs as a separate entity. For example, Heyliger, McLoone, and Thomas cite “blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube, and Pinterest” as examples of specific social media platforms in 2012-13 (Heyliger, McLoone, and Thomas 2013, 375). A 2021 article by a commercial company that provides blog services makes this distinction instead: “Blogs and social media posts are not the same. Blogs focus on **long-form content** while social media is more of a short, concise way to connect with your audience” (Damien/Creative Edge Media Group 2021, paragraph 1). The study presented in this paper focused primarily on blogs, although some broader discussion of social media was addressed.

The survey was conducted in 2021, but the publications focusing on libraries and archives that I have identified to date were written in the 2000s and 2010s. The data analysis to date has not identified any major discrepancies between the literature and the responses from current bloggers, but further review of the literature will take place in the future.

Methods and Limitations

This exploratory study employed qualitative-research survey methods and used an open-ended online questionnaire; findings were not meant to be generalized. The sample was purposeful, and the criteria identified study participants as: “Individuals who work with, or focus on, special collections, rare books and archival materials, and manage a blog dedicated to these topics, without commercial gain (for example, booksellers are excluded). The focus is on the blog and related processes, and not on the experience of individuals.” The number of survey participants was expected to be between twenty and two hundred, comprising individuals and institutions located in the United States of America and abroad.

In February 2021, my university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed my proposed study and determined that it was “not research involving human subjects;” the outcome letter also stated that “further IRB review and approval by this organization is not required because this is not human research” (Texas A&M University IRB Outcome Letter to the author, February 24, 2021). Once I received the determination from the IRB, I tested the survey validity by sending the questionnaire to two archivists, whom I did not priorly know, and who work in two separate academic special collections and archives units in the United States. In March 2021, the two archivists answered all the questions and provided me with feedback; no changes to the questionnaire were needed, based on this test. Throughout April 2021, I

sent the survey information and survey link to several professional listservs (see Appendix 1). I also sent reminders at later dates, and I extended the original thirty-day deadline, to promote a higher number of responses. The listservs included the main international librarians' listserv (IFLA/International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions), and prominent listservs focused on special collections, rare books and archives, based in the United States and Canada: ExLibris, SAA E2/Society of American Archivists Exhibits and Events Standing Committee (part of the SAA Reference, Access and Outreach Section/RAO), and ARCAN-L, as well as two listservs specifically aimed at performing arts librarians and scholars (TLA/Theatre Library Association, and ASTR/American Society for Theatre Research), two groups I have been working with throughout my career. I also sent the survey directly to some individuals who run well-established blogs or who could help me further distribute the questionnaire.

The open-ended online questionnaire was divided into seven sections and contained a total of twenty-seven questions (see Appendix 2). The sections covered: Contact Information and Permissions (six questions); Blog Information (three questions); Vision, Scope and Audience (three questions); Marketing and Communication Strategy (two questions); Blog Development and Structure (eight questions); Metrics and Success (four questions); Other Comments (one question).

The online survey received a total of ninety-six "hits," but the number of actual responses was very limited. Most of the hits led to no actual answers; three respondents only filled out section 1 and stopped after the question that inquired about obtaining institutional permission to fill out the survey ("Have you obtained permission to participate in this study from your unit/institution?"). Three respondents only filled out sections 1 and 2; and one respondent filled out sections 1 through 3. In the end, there were only seventeen complete responses, and these are the ones I analyzed. At the beginning of the study, I expected to have between twenty and two-hundred participants; seventeen is close to the lower limit, but is a low response and represents a limitation to this study. A few reasons may have determined this low response: the survey was sent out at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic was still raging, and work situations were complicated: most people were under a lot of pressure and experienced a high-level of stress. At this time, there was also a very high number of surveys shared through listservs and it was hard to prioritize which surveys to answer. Because of lack of time, I personally bypassed many requests, even when I was interested in the topic. Notwithstanding the limitations of the study, the data collected is very informative and the participants were very engaged and provided a wealth of information. Different types of institutions and several countries (five) were represented, although I hope to expand representation in future studies; most respondents (fourteen) were part of academic special collections, rare books and archives units.

All respondents agreed to participate in the study and allowed data use. Thirteen respondents indicated that their names and the names of their institutions could be used in disseminating the study results; two respondents said no to the use of names; and two said that they would want to confirm prior to use. In this paper, I will not identify participants or institutions by name.

Results

The data collected represented a diverse group of institutions in five different countries. Survey answers conveyed a clear picture of how blogs are planned, developed, managed, and assessed. Goals, audiences, technical aspects, and marketing strategies were discussed. The amount of time dedicated to each blog differed, but respondents generally indicated that their blogs required a good degree of planning and effort. All respondents indicated that blogs are worth the effort. Goals and intended audiences varied, from very generic to very specific. A Canadian respondent stated that themed issues of their blog are

bilingual (English and French); it is important to point out that the use of more than one language helps reach multiple audiences.

The five countries represented were: United States of America (10 responses), Canada (3 responses), Republic of Ireland (2 responses), United Kingdom (1 response), and Hungary (1 response). The respondents worked in private and public institutions, of different sizes:

- The library and archives of two not-for-profit organizations in the United States: a scientific institute and a health policy and advocacy organization.
- The archives of a heritage museum in Canada.
- Academic special collections, rare books, and archives units: eight in the United States, two in Canada, two in Ireland, one in the United Kingdom, and one in Hungary.

The blogs described in the study were launched in different years: two in 2009; one in 2010; two in 2011; three in 2012; two in 2013; another five started, one per year, in 2014, 2015, 2016, 2018, and 2019; and two started in 2020.

I identified several themes through data analysis. This short paper is based on the presentation that I gave at the Society of American Archivists 2021 Research Forum. Because of time limitations, in the presentation I only focused on three of the themes that emerged:

- Success: a way to create connections, as well as support and validate our work as archivists and librarians.
- Blog management as a reflection of institutional structure and work styles.
- Assessing effort in a holistic way.

I chose these themes because they provide direct insight into core topics that are often raised by administrators and by those directly involved in running blogs: defining how success is measured, how the blog fits into the existing structure, and how effort is assessed. These topics generally come up at the blog proposal and planning stages, and periodically resurface throughout the life of a blog. Since this paper captures my presentation, I am only discussing these three themes, and not the other important themes that emerged from the study; I plan on extending my discussion in future papers.

Success

In discussing success, the respondents showed that numerical parameters, such as the size of blog readership, are important, but they are not the only, or the main, measure of success. One respondent noted that they tried to establish numerical parameters, but never settled on specific ones, because success to their team mostly means sharing with the public. Based on their experiences, the respondents defined success in different ways, which may be grouped as follows: fostering engagement and communication, having the freedom to tell your story, supporting representation, inspiring others, creating content that helps the unit in its work, increasing traffic and use, and maintaining an efficient and effective blog. Some examples are listed below.

Fostering engagement and communication through:

- Engagement with the community.
- Establishing new social connections.
- Strengthening connections within the unit.
- Amount of feedback received, including mentions in social media posts and number of likes and comments.

Freedom to tell your story:

- Having the freedom to tell your story, without constraints, using your voice.
- Sharing what you do.

Representation:

- Representing everyone in the organization.
- Including multiple voices.

Inspiring and educating others:

- Inspiring new teaching and research ideas.
- Educating the public.

Creating content that helps the unit in its work:

- Having the ability to re-use content; for example, in reference interactions and in student worker training.
- Educating the people who work in the unit; the authors of the posts also gain knowledge through the research they conduct to write the post.

Increasing traffic and use:

- Attracting new in-person visits.
- Increasing traffic (website traffic, reference and scanning requests).
- Having a high readership and number of blog visits.

Maintaining an efficient and effective blog:

- Supporting the number, frequency of publication, and quality of blog posts.
- Sharing and coordinating across social media platforms.

The responses showed that success is largely seen as a way to create connections, as well as a way to support and validate our work as archivists and librarians. This is an important takeaway, which appears to reflect the dynamic nature of blogs and the commitment to doing meaningful work that has a broad and positive impact, taking “an approach...that promotes openness and flexibility” (Theimer 2011a, 60).

Blog Management

The way blogs were developed and how they are managed reflect institutional structures and individual work styles. All respondents work in teams, although the degree of collaboration and individual engagement vary. Nine units have full control over the blog, while the other ones depend on other units or on centralized services for all or some aspects, including posting blog articles, managing technical aspects, and obtaining statistics (one respondent indicated they have no access to statistics at all). One respondent indicated that they do not know what platform is used, twelve respondents use existing commercial platforms (Tumblr in one case and WordPress in eleven cases), and four others created their own, often complex, platforms. One of the respondents said that they developed their own platform to have more control, especially since the commercial platform they were using had poor search functionality and a change in its content policy even caused the loss of several posts. Four respondents discussed their desire to move away from administrative and technical constraints, which hamper outreach efforts, including not being able to post directly to the blog or across social media platforms, and not being able to access their statistics directly. Similar barriers are presented in the literature: for example, Sarah Hammond, in her review of public libraries blogs in the United Kingdom, talks about “technological barriers presented by IT departments” and “barriers presented by prevailing organisational

culture” (Hammond 2010, paragraph 10); Merron also discusses how the organizational foundation may negatively affect blogs (Merron 2011, 29-30).

Ten respondents indicated that their blogs required careful planning at the development stage; two could not comment on this aspect, as they were not part of the institution when the blog started, other two respondents said they took over the blog when it was already well established, and another one said they could not answer because the blog had been planned by the main library. All the blogs run based on the coordinated efforts of multiple people, and the time commitment ranges between five and sixty hours per month, with a lot of variation. Nine respondents have a regular publication schedule and they indicated that they post between one and forty times a month; posting four times a month is common, but numbers vary greatly. Nine respondents said that they would like to change some aspects of their process, but the other eight respondents are happy with what they have in place.

Assessing Effort

When asked if blogs are worth the effort, all respondents said yes. A respondent said that the blog is a good way of disseminating information in a format longer than tweets and it allows for different content than the one posted to the institution’s website. One respondent commented on how the blog is giving great visibility to their unit, another said that the positive comments received make the blog worth the effort, and one specifically commented on how rewarding it is to see new users in their unit as a result of blog posts. Respondents assessed effort in a holistic way, and, parallel to their definition of success, they looked at broad advantages: for example, one respondent pointed out that the blog captures the knowledge of those working in the unit, which might otherwise be lost. Respondents commented on the importance of the research process itself, which increases their awareness of the collections, and discussed how enjoyable the research and “detective work” are. There was also a comment on how contributing to the blog improves writing and presentation skills, and one respondent positively commented on the fact that guest authors can be invited to contribute. Another respondent commented on how the blog establishes a sense of play that supports job satisfaction and greater productivity. It is interesting to see how many purposes the blogs can serve and how layered they are in their content and applications.

Findings and Possible Applications

This paper focuses on just three of the themes that emerged from the study and discusses only some of the data; more analysis and more responses will be required to fully answer the research questions posed by this study and I plan on covering all themes and presenting more analysis in future venues. Based on the data and analysis to date we can say that a successful blog requires serious planning and focus, as well as awareness of what other similar institutions do. Blogs might seem like an easy option to communicate with the public, but the study and the literature indicated that blogs require considerable and coordinated efforts to plan, set up and run on a regular schedule; several individuals or units are generally involved, and complex technical requirements may be present. The way blogs were developed and how they are managed reflect institutional structures and individual work styles, and each institution defined effectiveness and success for itself and developed the best ways to measure them. Institutional and technical barriers were discussed, pointing out that ownership of the blog is not a given and may need to be negotiated at different times. Processes, audiences, frequency of posting, marketing strategy and the amount of effort required varied, but all respondents indicated that blogs are worth the effort and demonstrated a strong commitment to creating new connections and fostering education and communication. Respondents looked at success and at the advantages of blogs in a holistic way, and there was a discussion of blogs as self-improvement for archivists and librarians, a topic that also emerged in the literature (for example, Farkas 2007).

The findings to date may be used in different ways. For example, those starting a new blog should plan carefully and be ready to commit their time. Often, blogs are looked at as an easy way to connect with the public, but they are not. Those who are part of a larger organization should carefully assess the technical needs and the expertise required, establish who will have primary ownership of the blog and investigate what they are allowed to do. Those who need approval for time and resources from their organizations and administrators will benefit from having a clear plan and being aware of potential issues and pitfalls when setting up a new blog.

Future Research

I plan on continuing this study in the future, once the situations caused by the pandemic improve for everyone and institutions fully settle. I will continue to analyze the existing data, and I also hope to increase the sample size and the number of responses, as well as represent additional types of institutions and more countries. The data analysis to date has not identified any major discrepancies between the literature written in the 2000s and 2010s and the responses from current bloggers, but further review of the literature is needed.

Specific topics and themes warrant further inquiry: for example, one respondent commented on how their blog establishes a sense of play that supports job satisfaction and greater productivity, and this statement would be interesting to further investigate. I would also be interested in reflecting on the use of more than one language to reach multiple audiences; for example, a Canadian respondent stated that themed issues of their blog are bilingual (English and French), and the respondent from Hungary indicated that they would like to start writing in English, in addition to Hungarian.

Besides expanding the existing study, I would also be interested in connecting with the other scholars who have investigated similar topics and possibly work together on new studies, both about blogs in particular, and social media in general, in our fields.

Conclusion

Conducting this exploratory study and reviewing the literature has given me new insight, and I hope that readers will find applications for this paper in their own work. An intentional and structured investigation of blogs in our fields is helpful to show that blogs are effective but complex and multilayered, and therefore need to be approached in an informed way.

Resources

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Appendixes

Appendix 1: Text of Message to ExLibris Listserv, April 1, 2021

Research Study: Developing a Successful Special Collections and Archives Blog

(survey link: https://tamu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_cXYwB6IMSuixTCu)

Many institutions and individuals who work with special collections, rare books and archival materials manage blogs dedicated to these topics. This study examines the following main research question: **How can we develop a successful special collections and archives blog?**

The secondary research questions are:

1. What kind of work is required to develop and manage a blog? 2. Are blogs effective and how is their success measured?

Please participate in this study if you work with, or focus on, special collections, rare books and archival materials, and manage a blog dedicated to these topics, **without commercial gain (for example, booksellers are excluded)**. The focus is on the blog and related processes, and not on the experience of individuals. Please obtain any required permissions from your institution before answering the survey questions. Your name and the name of your institution will be used in the dissemination of study results (articles, conference presentations, etc.), but only if you and your institution agree.

The survey will require between 20 and 60 minutes to fill out, depending on the length of your responses. If you do not wish to answer a question, please enter "N/A" in the text response box. You have the option to take a break and return to the survey later, using the same link (you will be returned to the page where you left off). **Please submit your survey responses by April 30, 2021.**

Benefits of the study: the study results will help understand the kind of work that goes into developing and managing a successful blog, and will provide examples of best practices that can be applied in the fields of special collections, rare books and archives.

Raw data will only be accessed by the study author and will not be shared with others. There is no anticipated destruction date for the data.

By taking this survey, you agree to participate in the study. Thank you for your participation!

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Appendix 2: Survey Questions

Section 1. Contact Information and Permissions

1. Your name and job title.
2. Name of your institution and unit.
3. Can your name and the name of your institution be used in the dissemination of study results (for example, in articles and conference presentations)?
4. Your email address or phone number (preferred way to contact you; this information will only be used by the study author, to contact you for the purpose of this study).
5. Have you obtained permission to participate in this study from your unit/institution?
6. Who granted you permission to participate? For example, the Head of your special collections or archives unit authorized your participation in this study.

Section 2. Blog Information

7. What is the name of your blog?
8. What is the URL of your blog?
9. When was the blog launched?

Section 3. Vision, Scope and Audience

10. Please discuss the blog vision and scope. For example, what do you want to accomplish with the blog?
11. Do you focus on specific areas and topics? Please explain.
12. Who is your target audience?

Section 4. Marketing and Communication Strategy

13. Is your blog part of a larger marketing and communication strategy for your unit? For example, coordination of blog entries and social media posts, etc.
14. How do you advertise your blog?

Section 5. Blog Development and Structure

15. What process did you follow when developing the blog? For example, did you look at other blogs, did you develop a plan, did you create documentation, etc.?
16. How is your blog structured? For example, who are the main people in charge of the process?
17. Who writes for your blog, and how many people are involved in editing and writing?
18. What software or platform do you use?
19. Who is in charge of the technical aspects of the blog, including posting the blog entries?
20. Do you have a regular publication schedule? How many blog entries do you post every month?
21. How much work time per month is dedicated to the blog?
22. Would you change anything in your current process and structure?

Section 6. Metrics and Success

23. How do you track visits to your blog? For example, using Google Analytics.
24. How many people visit your blog each month (an approximate count is sufficient)?
25. What is success to you and how do you measure it? For example, number of blog visits, number of people contacting you with comments about blog entries, mentions on social media, increased number of in-person visits, increased number of monetary or collection donations to your institution, etc.
26. Do you believe the blog is worth the effort you put into it?

Section 7. Other Comments

27. Other Comments