

Librariesinteract.info: collaboration and community in the Australian Library blogosphere

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Abstract:

Since July 2006, a group of Australian Librarians have co-ordinated the group blog librariesinteract.info (LINT). This blog was created as a forum for professional communication and discussion of change in the Australian library sector. Communication and planning is conducted using a variety of web tools including an email list, instant messaging, collaborative bookmarking and a wiki. This paper compares the experience of the LINT authors with that of other authors of collaborative library blogs, as reported in a survey of the library blogosphere in September 2007.

Introduction

Librariesinteract.info, also known as LINT, is a collaborative group blog focusing on librarianship. It has two major differences to other library group blogs. It focuses on Australian content and it allows anyone at all to contribute - subject to editorial approval. The tagline is "blog central for Australian libraries", and the "about" page states that: "this is a collaborative blog for **Australian** libraryland. You do not have to be Australian, a librarian or a blogger to contribute, but your posts do need to be non-commercial and relevant to the scope of the blog".

This paper outlines the evolution of LINT, the communication tools used and the supportive community of practice that has developed among the group of librarians coordinating it. It places this in the context of the experience of other authors of group library blogs, reporting on the results of a survey conducted in September 2007.

Evolution of LINT

The first post to LINT was published on 8 July 2006 after about a month of discussion among a group of library bloggers. Initially an email list and a planning wiki were set up, and names were tentatively suggested. Two Western Australian librarians in the group decided to "just do it" and spent a weekend registering a domain name, buying hosting, installing a Wordpress database and tweaking a template. Although they had experience with blogging at the free blog-hosting site, Blogger, and had some experience with authoring websites, most of the process was learned as they went. Had they realised the technical demands of running a self hosted group blog, they may not have expected to get it up and running in one weekend. The initial setup was conducted in the same spirit that LINT continues to be managed - done partly for the end result and partly for self-education and sheer enjoyment by the librarians doing it.

The initial group of librarian bloggers was invited to form the group by Constance Wiebrands (Western Australia) and Morgan Wilson (New South Wales). The library blogging community was very small in Australia in June 2006, so people were asked on the basis of visibility. One of the first test posts was a picture of a thali plate loaded with food, and somehow the name stuck to describe the group administering the blog. It describes well the mix of opinions and tastes that make up the group, plus the initials could stand for "This Helps All Libraries Interact".

LINT was initially conceived as a site for discussion about issues in the profession, and where library folk new to blogging could give it a try. On the blog, interested individuals were invited to register and then write about any topics of interest or relevance to the Australian Library sector. By September 2007, there were 276 posts, with 32 posts from

authors outside of the Thali. After the first six months, however, postings came almost exclusively from the Thali. As Shirky (2003) notes, this is not uncommon in online communities, as it is often the core of the community that feels the greatest commitment to a project. The core of Thali membership has stayed relatively stable in the first year.

Another idea at the beginning was that the blog would be an ideal forum for job postings. To encourage this, job postings found in other sources were republished. After the initial two months, however, this ceased, and no job postings have been made since. It obviously was not the right forum, although job postings are still welcome. LINT started as a site with some speculative, original content, for example a short essay on what “format agnostic” meant or a short essay outlining the different uses made of blogging software. These types of posts are now more likely found on the Thali members' personal blogs.

Postings to LINT are now mainly links to other sources, for example useful resources (e.g. how to paste a Libraries Australia search box on the sidebar of a blog) or upcoming library events (e.g. the Library 2.0 on the Loose unconference in Western Australia). There is even the occasional piece of gossip (who was that librarian on Australian Idol last night?). There is little discussion about which member of the Thali will take responsibility for which post. Some posts are made after prior consultation among the group - particularly if one of the group is thinking of writing a post that may be contentious or offensive. There will then be quite a bit of discussion about the most diplomatic way to word things. This has happened on a few occasions.

The main original content currently on LINT is a series of interviews (“interviews”). These are interviews with “people in libraries that we find interesting”. A set of fifteen questions is sent to individuals who interest or intrigue us, and they select a subset of five to answer. Another series of posts happened in May 2007 when several librarians creatively outlined their visions of their library in 2011 during our competition held during Australian Library Week. Posts included text only, photographs, sketches and even a short movie, which was the winning entry. In 2006 and 2007 the group worked on a series of posts for International Blog Day, which falls on 31 August. (The 2007 Blog Day posts are at <http://librariesinteract.info/category/blogday2007/>)

Tools and resources for the Australian library blogosphere

One of the unplanned developments of the LINT blog was a set of useful tools and resources for the Australian Library blogosphere. The tagline of LINT, “blog central for Australian libraries”, was just a filler that was typed in spontaneously during the blog setup, but does describe well the resources which subsequently developed.

Often these tools are created because the group thinks that other librarians will find them useful. The second reason is simply because the group likes playing with new tools and tweaking them, and LINT provides a perfect outlet.

Most of the hands on development and maintenance is done by one or two of us for each tool or resource. From the first idea to the final launch, the progress is discussed by the entire Thali, with feedback sought, suggestions made and encouragement given.

In this way, all Thali members gain useful skills and knowledge. Some of the tools the Thali has worked on include:

Searchable Australian library blogs list

A separate page on LINT lists Australian blogs - both personal and organisationally based. In late 2006, a search box was added to this page, allowing the user to search the content of the personal blogs. The tool used was a Google custom search engine that allowed us to easily add web pages to a list that is then interrogated via a Google search.

Web browser search box

When a user retrieves the library blogs list page in Firefox 2.x or Internet Explorer 7, the search box in the browser autodiscovers the library blog search. The user can then install the search in their browser via a single click, allowing them to search Australian library blogs from their browser toolbar, regardless of which page their browser is displaying at the time.

Lint survey

During July 2007 we embedded a survey created using Poll Daddy in the LINT sidebar requesting feedback from readers about what features they would like to see in LINT.

Vlint – Virtual librariesintereact.info

When Kathryn Greenhill, a Thali member, was offered a building in Second Life for Australian libraries, we set up a sister blog – vlint – tagged as “blog central for Australian libraries in other worlds”. Some of the Thali were involved in the initial development of the Second Life library building and we wanted somewhere to communicate what was happening without flooding LINT. With the Australian Libraries building now standing more as a proof of concept than an active project, activity on vlint has decreased.

Frappr map

A Frappr map is usually embedded in the blog sidebar where readers can place themselves on a world map to show their location.

Thali tags

The most recent project is the Thali tags project. This was created by Thali member Corey Wallis, based on an idea from Dave Pattern at the University of Huddersfield. It takes the XML feed of some of the personal blogs of Thali members, then analyses them for significant keywords and displays them in a tag cloud that can be clicked on to show the original post.

The first step of this is a Yahoo! Pipe, which gathers the feeds, performs content analysis, reformats them and outputs them. A specially written PHP script

creates the tag cloud using SimplePie, an open source RSS parser that simplifies the process of extracting information from RSS feeds. This project has room for further expansion.

Professional reading room

This involves Thali members using social bookmarking and social citation sites such as del.icio.us, Connotea and Cite-U-Like for sharing notes and links to journal articles and websites of professional interest. The planning stage of this involved a lot of discussion and learning by the group. It is an example of a project that is still in its infancy and may not become a public project, however the Thali members have benefited professionally from each other's knowledge about bookmark sharing as we talked about the project.

Survey of other group library blogs

When writing this paper in September 2007, the authors wondered whether the experience of the Thali was similar to that of other librarians who write group blogs. An online survey was conducted, using surveymonkey.com to ask members of group blogs about their experiences in starting or joining the group blog, group work practices, motivation and career impact. The questionnaire was publicised on several blogs and sent to identifiable group blog authors. It is not possible to determine the number of group blogs that currently exist; however, the largest survey to date of the biblioblogosphere received 190 responses from bloggers who contribute to a professional blog with more than one author (Farkas 2007). Sixty-two responses were received to the questionnaire designed for this paper.

There are many topical and group blogs within the biblioblogosphere (blogs about or written by members of the librarianship and information science profession). Group blogs are loosely defined as blogs with more than one author. They may be focused on a particular topic, constituency, or be free form. Many have been created under the auspices of existing associations, organisations or groups. Group blogs are written by professionals in many industries, researchers, companies and in higher education. LINT is an example of an independent blog whose membership was formed based on interest.

Responses to the questionnaire came from several countries. The number of respondents for Australia is perhaps higher than anticipated as the survey was publicised widely on Australian blogs (Table 1).

Table 1**Geographic location of respondents**

	Count	Percent
Australia	14	24.1%
Canada	2	3.4%
Germany	1	1.7%
Netherlands	4	6.9%
New Zealand	1	1.7%
Sweden	1	1.7%
United Kingdom	3	5.2%
United States	32	55.2%

N=58

The results of the questionnaire indicated that topic-based group blogs are most prevalent type of blogs amongst respondents. The high number of responses for member communication indicates that many group blogs are linked to existing associations or groups. (Here LINT differs from many group blogs, in that its members are independent individuals.) Other respondents indicated that the blog is designed to share information with colleagues or clients, or to respond to a perceived gap (Table 2).

Table 2**Why was the group blog created?**

	Count	Percent
To discuss a particular issue	31	67.4%
To communicate with members	20	43.5%
To learn about blogging	11	23.9%
Other	19	
Did not respond	16	

n=46

Note: more than one response permitted

Most respondents had experience of blogging before starting or joining the group blog, with more than half having their own blog prior to the group blog. Very few had no experience with blogging (Table 3). This matches the experience of LINT, as all members of the core group, the Thali, have participated in blogging prior to the initiation of the group blog.

Table 3

What was your experience of blogging before participating in the group blog?

	Count	Percent
I had never read blogs, or blogged before	3	5.8%
I had read blogs	17	32.7%
I had my own blog	32	61.5%
Other	4	
Did not respond	10	

n=52

Note: more than one response permitted

Responses to the question of how bloggers became involved with their group blogs fell into a small number of categories. Respondents did one of the following:

- Initiated the blog, and invited members
- Volunteered to join the blog
- Were invited to join based on knowing other participants, topic expertise or blogging experience
- Created it at their workplace as part of their role
- Started it as an individual blog, but invited contributors to share the workload.

The high number of group blogs, and the high number of bloggers who contribute to more than one blog (Farkas, 2007), can be partially attributed to the fact that blogs are inexpensive to establish and maintain, and can be hosted freely at sites such as Wordpress.com and Blogger.com. Low barriers to entry ensure that blogs can be created, and deleted, as necessary (Ojala, 2005).

One tip from Library Garden is to comment regularly on posts by other authors on the group blog (Library Garden, 2007). The response to this question revealed that a higher than anticipated number of group blog authors do not regularly comment on the blog (Table 4).

Table 4

Do you make comments on posts by other authors on your group blog on a regular basis?

	Count	Percent
Yes	32	60.4%
No	21	39.6%
Other	3	
Did not respond	9	

n=53

Note: more than one response permitted

Respondents also indicated that most group blog participants work independently. Again, this result was different than anticipated, however it points to the popularity of association-related group blogs, which may not require as much collaboration about content as topic-based blogs (Table 5).

Table 5

How does the group develop new articles for the blog?

	Count	Percent
Contributors work independently	51	98.1%
We discuss topics	17	32.7%
We have assigned topics for different authors	5	9.6%
Other	10	
Did not respond	10	

n=52

Note: more than one response permitted

As discussed earlier, contributors to LINT both work independently, and discuss topics. Topics most often discussed amongst members are those which form part of a series or parts of a topic.

Community of Practice

The group of librarians maintaining LINT, from different library backgrounds and interest areas, have formed a community of practice: a group of “people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise” (Wenger & Snyder 2000, p.139), with shared “understandings concerning... what that means in their [professional] lives and for their communities.” (Lave & Wenger 1991, p.98). LINT’s experience is mirrored in how other communities are now created online:

“At first, these communities grew out of existing professional networks and solidarities, but they eventually surpassed these origins to offer a new social space for people, strangers, and almost-strangers, with diverse backgrounds to come together as equals, as generators of ideas, to deliberate and act collectively, and in some cases to remain together in long-term association” (Feenberg & Bakardjieva, 2004, p 38)

The meaning of community online, apart from communities of practice, is being defined by its participants, and can take an infinite number of forms, which can be summed up by this statement: “We enact community the way we’ve conceived of it” (Fernback, 2007, pp. 66). Emerging as a more important measure is commitment, to understand the role of online professional networks and communities – how and why do people participate, and how does it interact with their offline life, social and professional (Fernback, 2007).

Despite the lower than anticipated number of respondents indicating that they work collaboratively, respondents to the questionnaire did indicate that they benefited from working together with others on the group blog:

“I am always at my best as a collaborator. We all bounce ideas off of each other, and I feel inspired to be more creative and free in my writing when I read my fellow contributors' posts.”

“It's been a very rewarding experience as it has allowed me to meet (virtually and in real life) many very interesting people.”

“I also enjoy the built in group of the group blog; we communicate, share stories, offer advice, and have a real community despite being in multiple locations.”

One respondent noted that working together can be difficult:

“It's HARD to find people to do group blogs. Bloggers don't cooperate well.”

Nineteen of the fifty-eight respondents noted that group blog members had left since the inception of the blog, mostly due to time constraints.

Team guidelines and communication methods

When group blogs were first created, the first step for many was to create detailed guidelines governing conduct and content, particularly since many were created in higher education for student discussion, or by companies ("IBM Blogging Policy and Guidelines," 2005). The creation of such detailed guidelines has abated somewhat in the past two years, with many preferring to work in an environment of radical trust – trusting the community. Members of the Library Garden group blog have created a list of tips for group bloggers (Library Garden, 2007), but formal guidelines are rare except for some association-related blogs. Group blogs can be easier to maintain and sustain than individual blogs, as the responsibility of keeping discussions current is distributed amongst many contributors (Hulbert, 2006).

Administrative decisions about LINT are based on a few informal principles. They are so informal that before this paper was written, they had not been listed:

1. LINT is an evolving, growing project.
2. No matter how good an idea is, it will only work if someone has time to do it.
3. The rest of the group is available to bounce ideas off.
4. No one is in charge or the leader.
5. We don't have a formal decision making mechanism. So far informal negotiation and discussion has worked.
6. We don't make rules or procedures about the blog just in case something happens. If a problem arises, we deal with it on a case by case basis.
7. Many decisions are based on the highest return for the lowest effort.

The members of LINT use a Google Groups email list, a wiki and Instant Messaging amongst other methods to communicate. Respondents to the survey noted a variety of methods that they use to communicate, with email the most commonly cited. Instant Messaging and wikis are also used, and Facebook was mentioned by several respondents. Surprisingly, a high number of respondents said they do not communicate using social software with other group blog members, but most indicated that they do use social software such as Flickr, Facebook and other networking sites generally (83%).

Bloggng as professional development

The role of blogs and other social communication methods are becoming recognised as valuable contributors to organisational learning (Ojala, 2005) and professional development (Wiebrands, 2006). ALIA permits members of their PD scheme to count time spent blogging towards accreditation ("Keep on blogging," 2005). Communities of practice are established contributors to professional development (Wenger & Snyder, 2000).

Respondents to the survey noted mixed career impact from group blogging: some indicated that it was too soon to tell if there had been any impact, but others noted a

bigger impact in terms of keeping up with changes and trends, engagement with the profession, and improving their profile.

“...I feel more engaged and a part of my profession. It may also help to raise my profile a bit (but that's not one of my main motivations).”

“It has raised my profile. I'm hoping it generates speaking opportunities now that our blog has over 500 subscribers.”

“Might be too soon to tell, though we've had a really positive response to the blog and I plan on including it in my tenure dossier.”

“It's also been a great career-builder; I've met wonderful colleagues through my blog, been invited to present at conferences and write articles for publications like Library Journal, and have even gotten a book deal out of it!”

Social software, learning and motivation

The work of Lave and Wenger (1991) on the concept of situated peripheral learning can be applied to the learning and engagement that collaborative group blogs foster and develop for those who participate in them. Lave and Wenger describe situated peripheral learning as “a descriptor of engagement in social practice that entails learning as an integral constituent” (p.35). This mode of learning is conceptualised as “peripheral,” not because it lacks legitimacy, but because Lave and Wenger conceive learning as occurring in many different locations, and being composed of a whole range of different activities, by individuals with identities that are constantly changing, depending on how much they engage with any community of practice.

In the current environment, where new technologies are developing and evolving rapidly, professionals are faced with the need to understand and master the skills and concepts these technologies engender. Professionals need to develop “active knowledge”, defined as knowledge that is “owned by individuals” (Lave & Wenger 1991, p. 100). Furthermore, in an environment where standards are changing and where organisations providing traditional education and training are themselves having to re-examine their curricula, individuals cannot rely solely on traditional “understood knowledge”, knowledge that is “provided by instruction” (Lave & Wenger 1991, p. 100) to ensure that their knowledge and skills sets are adequate and current. Group blogs constitute and enable communities of practice for their participants and can provide the support and the environment conducive to the sort of learning activities necessary to explore and master these skills.

LINT, and other group blogs, thrive because they are a productive, creative and innovative way of learning new technologies and communicating with peers. Participants in LINT learn from each other, through the group email list, and from commenters and other bloggers and authors. As Ojala notes, “...blogging is fun, partly because it's not technically challenging and partly because the process invigorates people. [...] Blogs are an extraordinarily efficient means of communicating knowledge.” (Ojala 2005, pp. 273-274) Several respondents to the survey noted the benefits of

working and learning in groups. Learning, community and readership were noted by respondents as motivators to keep the blog going:

“I'm motivated partly by knowing people are returning to the blog to read it regularly, partly by the enthusiasm of the group, and partly because this is an important trial project for me and I am keen to see it succeed.”

“We are living in times of fundamental changes to librarianship. Therefore, I couldn't think of something more worthwhile than discussing and exchanging with the members of our community. As young people, we have to explore and develop our tasks and roles as future librarians on our own. Blogs play an important role as a medium in this process.”

A responsibility to readers was mentioned by several respondents as a motivator:

“The consistent quality of the other posts. The good reputation the blog has gained - the others on the blog - a sense of "responsibility" to the others and the blog. Great feedback from others and the readers, and the need and desire to share and help the field.”

Apart from learning about new technologies and tools, group bloggers also discuss and debate professional issues. Many respondents are working on projects and writing together as a result of their group blogs, including books, conference presentations, and articles. Respondents' experiences are similar to those of the LINT Thali, many of whom have worked, and continue to work on conference papers, book chapters, presentations and other projects as a result of having been a part of the group.

Successful group blogs

The experiences of the survey's respondents and of LINT is that trust, flexibility, and a loosely structured and evolving structure provide a foundation to ensure the blog's success, and to maintain the group's motivation. Group blogs can form a community of practice, although the nature of this community may be different from more familiar communities. For group blogs, trust among group members is valued over rules or guidelines.

Wenger & Snyder (2000, p.142) suggest that communities of practice have the following characteristics:

- They exist “to develop members' capabilities; to build and exchange knowledge.”
- They have “members who select themselves.”
- Members have “passion, commitment, and identification with the group's expertise.”
- They exist “as long as there is interest in maintaining the group” or “as long as people have a reason to connect.”
- They “deliver a product or service” or “accomplish specified tasks”.

- They “collect and pass on... information.”

It would appear that successful group blogs also have many of these characteristics.

Conclusion

The experience of LINT and other group blogs shows that group blogs can be valuable forums and provide both the tools and the environment for ongoing learning. Twenty-five out of the fifty-eight survey respondents indicated that participation in group blogs has been positive and useful as a professional activity. Participation in group blogs provides individuals with the support and encouragement to engage further in other professional activities, even if the group blog itself is not formal or associated with an organisation.

“As an aspect of social practice, learning involves the whole person; it implies not only a relation to specific activities, but a relation to social communities – it implies becoming a full participant, a member, a kind of person. In this view, learning only partly – and often incidentally – implies becoming able to be involved in new activities, to perform new tasks and functions, to master new understandings. Activities, tasks, functions and understandings do not exist in isolation; they are part of the broader system of relations in which they have meaning.” (Lave & Wenger 1991, p.53)

Group blogs, and blogs in general, will no doubt evolve as the medium matures. In the meantime, the individuals who are brought together by group blogs will continue to use these blogs for learning and communicating.

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