

A Pilot Study of Blog Use for Internal Knowledge Sharing in Academic Libraries

Abstract: While Library 2.0 has brought attention to the value of social media for service delivery, the use of such tools for internal knowledge sharing remains largely unexplored. Through semi-structured interviews with five librarians, this pilot study examines the current use of blogs by academic librarians for internal communication.

Résumé: Alors que la bibliothèque 2.0 a attiré l'attention sur la valeur des médias sociaux pour la prestation de service, l'utilisation de ces outils aux fins de partage des connaissances à l'interne demeure largement inexplorée. Au moyen d'entrevues semi structurées avec cinq bibliothécaires, cette étude pilote porte sur l'utilisation actuelle des blogues par les bibliothécaires universitaires aux fins de communication interne.

1. Introduction

In the years since Tim O'Reilly introduced the term 'Web 2.0', libraries have coalesced around the notion of an "architecture of participation" (O'Reilly, 2005), a framework for developing user-driven services on the Web. This movement has become known as 'Library 2.0', and emphasizes the empowerment of the library user by giving the user the opportunity to assist in the creation and management of services (Casey & Savastinuk, 2007, 6; Chad & Miller, 2005). Since the popularization of 'Library 2.0', the literature on the subject has grown rich and varied. Noticeably lacking, however, is research about using the same collaborative and user-oriented tools for *internal* communication and knowledge sharing; by focusing on the library user we have, in effect, forgotten the librarian. As a remedy, this pilot study represents the initial phase of a multi-phase study examining the use of social media for internal communication in academic libraries, using knowledge management (KM) as a framework. Focusing on the implementation of an internal blog at Grant MacEwan University Library, this paper reports the results of research which explores the social media practices of academic librarians.

In any organization, the creation and transfer of knowledge is an essential process that dictates the establishment of internal communication and training practices (Davenport & Prusak, 1998, 5; Nonaka, 1994). Such practices are often facilitated or made possible by communication and IT tools, such as email, chat, video conference, and other social software. The primary preoccupation of knowledge management (KM) is the study of these organizational knowledge practices (Baskerville & Dulipovici, 2006, 83).

It thus serves as an ideal lens for studying the use of social media—such as the blog—for the purposes of internal communication and knowledge sharing.

2. Literature Review

The blog is by far the most popular tool mentioned in Library 2.0 literature since it aggregates a number of key functions related to communicating with library users. These include sharing news and information for particular user groups, promoting events or resources, marketing, and outreach (Costello & Del Bosque, 2010, 146; Stephens, 2006, 15-35). In his book *Web 2.0 and Libraries*, Michael Stephens (2006) provides a comprehensive survey of blogs and their uses in the library context. In terms of internal communication and knowledge sharing, Stephens indicates that "internal blogging can replace e-mail in many instances, bulletin-board postings, and even some meetings!" (21) Michael Casey and Laura Savastinuk (2007), authors of *Library 2.0: A Guide to Participatory Library Service*, corroborate Stephens' enthusiastic endorsement by succinctly offering the following list of advantages for using internal blogs in libraries (79-81):

- Blog communication is asynchronous
- It facilitates both "horizontal" communication (staff member to staff member) and "vertical" communication (management to staff member) among staff.
- It can support a local community of librarians or staff (at the branch or department-level), or be implemented system-wide.
- It can address local issues and interactions (on a branch or department-level blog) as easily as it can host big-picture discussions (on a system-wide blog).

Casey and Savastinuk observe that "efficiency has displaced the sense of team." (79) Library staff and management are provided less time to engage in the social interactions that foster a sense of camaraderie and community in an increasingly fast-paced work environment. Blogs, they state, are exceptionally well-suited to facilitating this vital form of communication in the library work environment (79-80). Costello and Del Bosque (2010) provide a current and detailed review of the literature with examples of cases where blogs have succeeded in this task, as well as examples where they have not. None of the respondents in their survey of UNLV libraries' internal wiki and blog users thought that the blogs had "greatly improved staff communication" (154-155); as a result, their findings about the efficacy of blogs in academic libraries remain inconclusive. A similar study by Julia Rodriguez (2010) compared two internal blog implementations using Rogers' diffusion of innovations theory. Her findings indicate that, while the value of the blog for internal communication is difficult to dispute, and even when the blog is successfully adopted, this does not guarantee that it will be used in innovative or beneficial ways (122-123). In order to achieve the "transformative uses" implied by Stephens, they must be "encouraged and nurtured" (Rodriguez, 2010, 123).

3. Methodology and Case Profile

The study used a purposive sampling model to select five academic librarians (N=5) at Grant MacEwan University Library in Edmonton, Canada. Data collection has been achieved through the use of in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Ranging from 40-90 minutes, these interviews explored participants' preferred modes of communication, impressions of how the organizational community is facilitated by the use of an internal blog, how they personally make use of the blog, and how their use of it compares to the ways in which they use other social media professionally and recreationally.

The 'Library Intranet Portal' (LIP) was implemented in January 2009 as a tool that would (1) create a web-based space for staff communication, (2) provide easy, one-stop access to web-based tools and resources used by Reference staff, and (3) would organize and provide easy access to internal documentation. LIP is designed using the open-source content management system Drupal, and its key feature is a blog module that permits users to post on and reply to a community blog that is shared by 18 full-time and part-time Reference librarians across four campuses.

Due to a strategy of maximum variation sampling, participants ranged widely in their experience, providing a rich dataset for qualitative analysis. All participants were employed full-time when interviewed, and as members of the Reference staff represent LIP's target user-base. Participants 003 and 004 worked primarily in libraries at two satellite campuses, while 001, 002, and 005 worked at the larger, central campus library.

Interview results indicate that blog posts consist of four types of communication:

- 1) Library event announcements
- 2) Reference information (assignments, student projects)
- 3) Technical issues (printing, issues with IL lab technologies)
- 4) General interest to LIS professionals (not related to the library or institution)

4. Findings

The most provocative finding of this study was that, while all participants admitted that they accessed LIP on a daily basis for updates on processes revolving around the reference desk or for information about instruction or collections development practice, only one participant identified it as a "preferred form" of communication over email. Email, on the other hand, was identified as the primary and most essential communication tool within the work environment. This finding problematizes the claim Stephens (2006) and Casey and Savastinuk (2007) make regarding the value of internal blogs as a replacement for email and other communicative media. That being said, 3/5 participants agreed that the blog served to replace *some* emails by providing a "central location for fast, quick, need-to-know information" (Participant 003).

All participants regularly consulted LIP, and 4/5 participants said that it facilitated dialogue. Despite these results, only 3/5 participants had ever replied to a post on LIP, and of those three, two indicated that this was only in order to "add information" rather than as a direct response to the initial post. Four of the participants, however, noted that blog posts had sparked face-to-face dialogue with their colleagues in the past, indicating

that LIP does serve a facilitative role in cases of multi-modal communication. Overall, this suggests that the blog is used primarily for one-way asynchronous communication and as a way to initiate dialogue taking place outside the medium of the blog. When asked if they considered LIP a "collaborative tool", only two participants answered affirmatively. On the other hand, all participants agreed that it was an effective "information management" tool.

Additional findings include, but are not limited to:

- LIP is less effective as a system-wide tool, and serves primarily the communication needs of a single campus.
- It is valued more as an information repository than as social or collaborative software used to engage with colleagues.
- While open to the implementation of LIP, participants were skeptical of any of the social or team-building benefits ascribed to the blog in the literature.

5. Implications

From a KM perspective, these findings indicate that blogs are only being used in a limited capacity for internal communication and knowledge sharing, at best merely supplementing more traditional forms of knowledge transfer that occur synchronously in meetings or asynchronously via email. Participants, four of whom actively read and comment on blogs or use social media outside the organizational or professional contexts, agreed that LIP could be more effective as a social tool, but that this would require an ongoing commitment from management to encourage and nurture. This corroborates the findings discussed in Rodriguez (2010) and Costello and Del Bosque (2010). One common underlying use of LIP, however, best manifested in the example of Participant 003, has implications for how KM is currently practiced in academic libraries: as a campus supervisor, this librarian encouraged her Reference staff to use LIP as a *learning* tool; while assistants and new librarians may not have anything to contribute to the blog, they could find information there that could be applied to their work at the reference desk. Training, while not directly addressed in the benefits commonly associated with internal blogs, could prove the most valuable use for this technology.

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