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## **It all started with blogs: Developing new roles for librarians in collaborating with faculty on teaching, learning and research**

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# **It all started with blogs: developing new roles for librarians in collaborating with faculty on teaching, learning and research**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Many years ago, the focus of libraries was on organizing library materials so that users could find and use them effectively and efficiently in a physical space. When increasing amounts of library resources developed into digital forms, libraries continued to play their information provision roles, focusing on access rather than ownership. In the last 2 decades, easy access and availability of information on the Internet has further diminished the library's role as a provider of information. The Internet has also created a pervasive social media space which is now part and parcel of everyday life.

Many people, apart from librarians, view libraries mainly as a storehouse and provider of information. For example, 75% of respondents in the 2010 OCLC survey equate the library brand with books, up from 69% in the 2005 study (Rosa, 2010, p28). Libraries of course play many other roles in the past and the present, though with different degrees of emphasis, such as in improving information literacy skills, helping people to be independent and life-long learners, building a strong learning community and supporting the conduct of research. The Internet, being a powerful and ubiquitous conduit for disseminating information, has helped to lessen our burden in the information provision role. It has given us more space and opportunities to focus on other important goals in helping people succeed in their learning and knowledge discovery activities.

## **USING SOCIAL MEDIA**

Librarians have always been responsive and adaptive to changes in the environment, particularly in making full use of prevailing technology. Libraries now operate in 3 main spaces – the physical space, online space and social media space. Creating attractive physical spaces to facilitate and inspire learning and building a sense of community is no less important today, particularly for students. Online space is the main conduit to deliver and make accessible digital information. It is responsible for drastically changing the way libraries play their information provision role. Here information moves one way, from the Library to the users.

Social media space, on the other hand, is characterized by interactivity and high levels of participation among people. It is an important space for libraries to work in as many people, including our users, are in social media space for work as well as their social life. Academics are also increasingly using social media to collaborate, promote and communicate their research work. For libraries to make headway in supporting users in the use and not just the delivery of information, this would be a critical space for us to engage in. Therefore, we need to develop appropriate knowledge, skills and tools to operate in the social media environment.

As with many libraries, our Library at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) uses common social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter in our outreach and engagement with users. We also use blogs extensively. In this paper, we would like to focus on just our blogs and blogging work which many libraries and librarians are exploring and developing. However, unlike much of the mainstream blogging work that libraries do, our Library focuses on blogs as a service and not just for communication and outreach. We will describe some of these activities, provide

the rationale of using blogs and then discuss why and how this area of work could be part of the expertise and arsenal of skills and tools of librarians today.

## BLOGS

Around 2006, our Library started to explore the use of social media in our work. We looked at blogs as the prime anchor to feed other social media activities. For example, the mobile application that we developed then used blogs to provide regular content to users. We created the first blog for one subject library which was then quickly extended to the other 6 subject libraries. Around 2009, a funding opportunity called the “Cool Campus Initiative” enabled us to lead a cross departmental teams comprising of 2 other partners, the Centre for IT Services (CITS) and the Centre of Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT), to establish a campus-wide blog development service. This service called blogs@NTU provides NTU staff and students with assistance on setting up blogs. Since then, our experience in helping users to develop blogs led to our greater involvement with faculty in teaching, learning and research activities. We shall describe some of the representative work but before that, a brief word on the blogging platform we use and its key features.

## KEY FEATURES IN BLOGGING PLATFORM

A blog is simply an online communication tool for a person or a group to post messages regularly for others to read and comment on. There are many types of bloggers, from the teenager who posts about his daily life to the giant news aggregator, Huffington Post.

The obvious advantage of blogs is that it is an interactive medium where user feedback and engagement such as comments provide a level of dynamism hitherto not available. However libraries that engage in blogging generally have not been very successful in capitalizing on this feature. For example, Adam in her literature review noted that “it appears that on the whole library blogs do not receive significant input from their user population in the form of comments” and content analysis of sample UK-based blogs (Adams, 2012). Nevertheless, blogs offer librarians several distinct advantages. For example, blogs do not require a high level of technical know-how to set up and maintain and they are free or not costly. An important advantage is that blog content can be updated easily and quickly as compared to websites, a necessary feature for responsive communication with users.

Since the early days, blogging platforms have developed many features which not only made blogging easier but also enabled new applications beyond simple messaging and communication. Taking Wordpress (the blogging platform used by our Library) as an example, it offers a number of useful features that we have incorporated in our blog projects over the last few years. These features mostly come in the form of themes, widgets and plugins.

Wordpress has a very active user community providing thousands of free themes and plugins. It is easy to change the look-and-feel and extend the core functionality of blogs without the need to do any coding. For instance, the site layout and appearance can simply be changed by clicking on a new theme. A search bar and a monthly listing of old posts can be created by dragging-and-dropping widgets to the sidebar or footer. As of 2 Jun 2015, the community portal [www.wordpress.org](http://www.wordpress.org) lists 38,115 plugins with 940,740,606 total downloads for building feature-rich blogs! The plugins provide a gamut of services ranging from strengthening security (Wordfence), reducing spam comments (Akismet) and managing editorial workflow (Edit Flow) to adding a photo gallery (NextGen Gallery), promoting blogs on various social media platforms (Shareaholic) and automatically adjusting the layout of blogs for smartphones and tablets (WP Touch).

## APPROACH TO BLOGS IN LIBRARY WORK

Most libraries use blogs as a communication medium for outreach activities. Though our Library uses blogs in a similar way, we also focus on a different approach; that of providing a service that helps our users in their work, particularly faculty in using blogs in their teaching and research activities. Just as librarians find blogs attractive as an easy and quick medium in our communication work with users, faculty, researchers and students are also interested in using blogs in their own sphere of activities.

Although there is a very low entry barrier for an individual in starting and sustaining a blog, there are advantages for them to get support from the Library. Obviously for novices to blogging, a library blogging service could help them to cut down learning time in building their blogs so that they can focus on what they want to achieve through a blog. As blogging platform continues to develop, librarians can advise bloggers on the latest relevant feature that can support and enhance their blogs. Furthermore, librarians have skills in organizing information which can help bloggers to structure their content better or even provide links to connect to content provided by the Library.

One persistent concern of users is the accessibility of their blog content should they leave the university. Here, we allay their concern by offering to archive their blog content in blogs@NTU and also to assist with the migration of their work to an external host. Equally important, we also share about optimising the blog to enhance the SEO ranking so that it can be easily retrieved by search engines and thereby generate more traffic to the site.

## BLOGGING SERVICES IN NTU LIBRARIES

The Library blogging service is available to all faculty, researchers, administrators and students either through request via the blogs@NTU service as mentioned earlier or by approaching subject librarians. Blogs are also initiated by subject librarians themselves in the course of their contact and advisory work with faculty and researchers.

The blogging service is managed by the Library's New Media Group (NMG) formed in 2013 to spearhead and coordinate social media, e-learning and mobile strategies. Besides maintaining the blog platform, NMG plays a strong advocacy role to help users leverage on social media and mobile technologies effectively. This would include providing blog consultancy, conducting tutorials and workshops for students and blog creators and evaluating new technologies regularly. We have helped users develop blogs to support different needs such as:

- Course & teaching blogs
- Research blogs
- Administrative blogs (including marketing and community engagement)
- Library blogs

The following section will provide examples.

## COURSE & TEACHING BLOGS

Course blogs are used in classroom teaching and engagement with students. We have collaborated with faculty in developing blogs that supplement course instruction, managing student discussion and class contributions and also in providing a platform for an academic school to collect, store and showcase students' works.

1. An example of how the interactive features of blogs help to create a more dynamic class engagement can be seen in the Contemporary Sociology blog created for a Year 3

- HS301 class of 19 students. This was a simple blog setup by the Sociology Librarian. Each week, the professor posted readings for his students to discuss online before class. Students were asked to contribute their views and comments after reading the paper. This is different from the traditional school assignment system as every member of the class could access and read the work of their classmates. It is also different from a normal in-class discussion as the comments were “frozen” in time. Though the blog was a simple implementation, it was highly effective in terms of usage and positive feedback received from the faculty and students. More than 1,043 comments were generated during the semester. They have found this flipped classroom approach to learning useful as more time was spent in class to discuss topics which were more “tricky”.
2. In a Conservation Psychology course, the professor had instructed his students to present their research findings by creating blogs, using a rich mix of text, images, videos and useful links instead of submitting term papers. A total of 124 blogs was created. Librarians were on hand to help with the course blogs and to train students on the use of Wordpress and popular digital tools to complete their projects. In addition, the students’ works are open to the public and they have received valuable feedback. Compared to the traditional course management system, blogs@NTU offers the professor a lot more flexibility in designing his course with librarians being an active partner in supporting the new learning pedagogies and teaching digital skills such as choosing an appropriate content publishing platform, using digital tools to create information in various formats (such as audio and video clips) and organizing online content effectively with taxonomy and navigation cues.
  3. Another interesting project is creating a wiki-like e-book on Second Language Acquisition using a customized blog theme. Students worked collaboratively in groups to research on the different aspects of learning a second language. Their work was collated and presented as chapters of an e-book hosted in blogs@NTU. Besides spurring students to produce good work, this project empowers the students to create and share the e-book freely, contributing to the growing global initiative of open-access educational materials.
  4. In the Portfolio blog project for the School of Art, Design and Media (ADM), the Library proposed and created a unified platform for art students to maintain and update their portfolio of art works created as part of their learning journey. This blog project fulfilled a number of purposes. For students, the blog provides an archive of their work. For the school, the blog showcases the outcome of teaching, and for employers, the blog provides a platform to view the works of potential employees. In fact, this blog project was very successful as it has engaged all the stakeholders – students, student clubs, alumni, faculty and the school academic management.

## ACADEMIC AND RESEARCH BLOGS

An important part of academic work is the communication and sharing of research ideas and interests. Besides scholarly publications, faculty’s research output may include photographs, artwork, scholarly bibliographies, teaching videos and conference presentations. They may also be involved in organizing exhibitions, performances and conferences. This is particularly prevalent with scholars in media, art and humanities fields. Some faculty have created personal websites to capture and showcase their work for wider exposure and dissemination. Others set up websites proactively to crowdsource participants for their research.

Instead of spending a lot of time and effort to set up websites personally, faculty could rely on our librarians to help them so that they can focus on their content. As such platforms add new features and capabilities regularly, our librarians who keep pace with such developments are able to provide better solutions, advice and alternatives to meet faculty needs. Collaborations with

faculty in this area have been fruitful and are increasing as the completed projects showed the value of the library's contributions. Some examples are given below.

1. The Teach 311 blog is a multi-language collaborative resource that helps teachers, students and scholars locate and share educational resources about the historical contexts of scientific and technical issues related to the triple earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disasters in Japan. Led by a History professor, this is an international project involving seven researchers from around the world. She commented that the blog service "is an invaluable resource for teaching and research project work ... The value of working with NTU's library staff on this project include the much appreciated technical support, the ability to improve the look and design of the blog presentation, and ongoing conversations about how to support and manage research content for archiving, sharing and public outreach, to name a few."
2. The Bagan project is a repository of digital images of temples constructed between 11<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in Myanmar, including decorations on exterior facades and mural paintings on the interior walls. These images were mainly photographs taken by a History professor on her field trips. Our librarians created a blog platform to organize the images and make them accessible. An interactive Google Map indicating the location of the various temples and an image gallery were also created by librarians to enhance the usefulness and aesthetics of the blog.
3. Some libraries are hosting open access journals as part of their scholarly communication function. Instead of using a journal hosting platform, we collaborated with a faculty from the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information to host a library science journal of which he is the current editor. As the editor prefers to rely on email for the peer review workflow, this project focuses on digital publishing with the judicious integration of social media buttons to allow visitors to share the articles conveniently. Going forward, there are plans to explore the use of popular social media tools to help disseminate the articles more widely and increase readership such as tweeting an open access article. As an ongoing collaboration, librarians assume the official roles of associate editor (social media), digital content manager and web developer for the e-journal.

## ADMINISTRATIVE BLOGS

As the preferred communication channels for young people are social media tools, it is not surprising that schools and departments have been setting up blogs and Facebook sites to market their programmes and activities to potential students. In the case of blogs, schools and departments have to budget for the initial setup and yearly maintenance costs. Very often, these externally hosted blogs may not be easily identified as originating from NTU because their URLs do not have any direct association with the university. These issues are conveniently taken care of by blogs@NTU as the cost is absorbed by the Library and the blog URLs take the form <http://blogs.ntu.edu.sg/name-of-blog>. Together with the design and technical support offered by the Library, the blogs@NTU service has become popular with school managers and programme directors.

Some departments have a more "internal focus" to engage with our 34,000 student population and create a vibrant campus. Sharing of campus news, videos and events through blogs@NTU, departmental websites and LCD display screens placed around the campus are excellent ways to engage with the students. Some examples are given below.

1. NTU Corporate Communications Office launched a new blog "HEY! Thoughts" in December 2012 to complement its award winning NTU magazine. The Library's New Media Group worked closely with the office to create a unique blog for the NTU community to share personal musings, ideas, opinions and thoughts on university

happenings, campus life and more. The provision of social sharing buttons and tight integration with NTU's Facebook helps to foster a sense of community among students.

2. On the drawing board is a departmental project to curate and share the learning journeys of students who have participated in social initiatives and community service projects locally and overseas. It is hoped that their stories would inspire more students to come forward and volunteer their time to help others who are less fortunate. In the process, students would learn life skills such as effective communication, project management and leadership.
3. The Library has developed the ADM Portfolio Review blog with the ADM publicity and outreach manager to improve the process for portfolio review during the annual School of Art, Design and Media Open House. Instead of submitting hard copies of their artwork, prospective students are advised to upload their works to the Portfolio Review blog. The Art Librarian has prepared a brief guide on the online submission process. It is more convenient for the faculty to browse and review students' portfolios online. During the open house, faculty would retrieve the online portfolios and give specific advice to the students. This new workflow drastically eliminates the printing and distribution of hardcopy portfolios. The ADM Chair and Associate Chair (Academic) have expressed their appreciation for this project to streamline the workflow.

## LIBRARY BLOGS

The Library started its experiment in social media with the use of blogs to enhance user outreach and content delivery in 2006. Over time, we have changed the themes and added new features to make the sites refreshing and interesting.

1. Many libraries use Libguides from Springshare to create subject guides to introduce resources and services to their users. We have decided to leverage on our blogs@NTU service instead as it is economical and offers more template choices and plugins. To date, we have set up 45 subject guides providing a one-stop portal to a range of subjects and courses. As our librarians are already familiar with using blogs in other areas of work, creating and maintaining the blog-based subject guides require minimum training and effort. Several librarians have also integrated subject guides into the NTU Learning Portal (Blackboard) so that students can access library resources conveniently.
2. Another early blog application in our Library is the use of blogs@NTU to support our mobile service for smartphone users. Apart from enabling users to search the library catalogue, the blog platform also provides news updates, guides, resource recommendations, FAQs and other useful links.
3. We also use blogs to support our internal staff development and training programme. A compulsory training session is held for librarians each month to ensure that they make time for professional development and are kept abreast of new trends and technology. A professional development (PD) blog is used to capture and share resources, feedback, quizzes, activity sheets, training materials and discussion summaries related to the monthly session. As more topics are added to the PD blog, it becomes a valuable quick reference resource for all staff.

## SOME ISSUES IN SUPPORTING A BLOG SERVICE

To reap the full benefits of Wordpress, we have implemented a self-hosted Wordpress within NTU instead of using Wordpress.com, blogger.com or other hosting providers so that we could use custom themes and plugins as needed for our projects. However, this approach places a

great demand on staff expertise and time. Initially, the learning curve has been fairly steep as open source technologies are not well supported on campus. The need to apply regular updates to the Wordpress operating system and to resolve potential incompatibility issues arising from the use of plugins and themes coded by different people are a constant source of concern. In particular, it is painstaking and time consuming to troubleshoot compatibility, system performance and security problems.

As the Library and Centre for IT Services are under severe manpower constraints, it has become increasingly difficult for us to keep up with the constant technical updates to ensure that the Wordpress platform is working optimally. As a result, we have decided to migrate to a dedicated Wordpress hosting service. Though this does not allow us to have full control over the blog platform (which allows extensive blog customisations), we will still have sufficient flexibility and yet do not have to deal with infrastructure and security issues. As the popularity of Wordpress increases, there are now more choices for Wordpress hosting services today compared to the past.

Due to the exponential growth in the use of social media, the University issued an extensive set of guidelines on the use of social media applications. However, many blog owners are blissfully unaware of these guidelines. Librarians go the extra mile to advise new blog users about mistakes and pitfalls of improper use of blogs which could lead to major reputational, ethical or legal issues. For instance, we draw their attention to the management of user comments, especially negative ones, in social media. We also highlight these guidelines in our workshops and give tips in our handouts.

#### STAFF SKILLS & EXPERTISE IN PROVIDING BLOG SERVICES

Though blogging is an easy activity to start and maintain for anyone with a desire to communicate, it can also be used in more sophisticated ways as demonstrated in the examples described in this paper. Librarians can play an important role in helping their users to apply blogging in their teaching, learning and research activities. To do this successfully, librarians need to have deeper knowledge about blog platforms, tools and new trends.

While librarians need not be proficient in coding, we need to have a strong technical understanding of the blog features and processes so that we can advise users on blog customizations and new functionalities. As blogging and related technologies are constantly evolving and developing, librarians must also continuously update and upgrade their knowledge and skills in order to be better informed than their users and thereby be of value to them. This in turn depends on high levels of motivation and interest in social media space on the part of librarians.

From the short description of the different blog projects, it is obvious that librarians would need to be equipped with more than technical knowledge. To move up the value chain, librarians have to understand research communication trends, learning pedagogies and community engagement strategies in order to engage and advise users competently. For instance, as the adoption of altmetrics in research institutions is increasing rapidly, librarians must be able to articulate how altmetrics and related social media tools can be used to monitor the social impact of research.

Librarians also play the role of intermediating between users and the university's policy on social media, external engagement and IT security. For example, the corporate communication department may impose conditions on the use of university identity while the computer services department has restrictions on network security matters. Wearing the hat of a project manager, librarians will have to help users navigate their way to achieve their goals in using social media.

Librarians also need to support users and communicate widely by blogging, conducting Wordpress workshops and providing help services. Often these requests for assistance come in



thick and fast when the assignment deadlines are drawing near. Librarians must learn to manage this deluge by working smarter. For instance, they might create a FAQ page or point users to relevant YouTube videos. This extends our work with users who may be faculty, administrative staff or students beyond the initial blog setup and fosters a long term relationship.

## CONCLUSION

Unlike many academic libraries, we have chosen to adopt a “social media for the whole campus” approach instead of social media for the library. We have also advocated a whole-of-library approach where all subject librarians employ social media in their work though the strategy is coordinated by the New Media Group. This creates greater ownership and has amplified the impact of our outreach efforts.

We have started small at first by focusing on library’s needs for blogs. Over the years, we have steadily diversified and expanded the blogs@NTU services by introducing course, research, marketing, portfolio, community and e-journal blogs. From being a blog provider, we have taken on new roles of digital publishing, content curating, social media consulting and community builder. These expansion of our traditional library roles enabled us to partner our faculty more effectively in their teaching and research projects and win the mindshare of academic leaders, faculty, programme directors, and administrative managers. We believe that providing blog services and helping faculty to develop blog applications to enhance and even transform their research, teaching and learning activities could be a key role for librarians.

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