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ATG Interviews Laura Dawson

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by Katina Strauch (Editor, *Against the Grain*) <kstrauch@comcast.net>



ATG: *Laura, you used to be in publishing. Have you left publishing? What exactly are you doing now?*

LD: I was an editorial assistant, an author's assistant, and a bookseller before getting into the area of book data, which I loved. I haven't left publishing, but approach it as a data expert now — helping publishers distribute their content electronically.

ATG: *We are intrigued by Bloggapedia. Tell us about it? When did you start it? Why? How many active people are on Bloggapedia?*

LD: I started **Bloggapedia** in April, 2005, largely because (due to some other consulting work I was doing) I noticed that while there is a tremendous amount of valuable information and good writing out there in the blogosphere, no one had yet managed to taxonomize it, to organize it in a way that made sense. **Technorati** and other blog search engines use tags, but if you're really interested in determining the good information in the blog world, you need a more formalized directory. And that's what we do. There are over 7500 blogs categorized on **Bloggapedia** right now, and we have over 4700 active members.

ATG: *What's the average life of a blog? How many are in the English language? Do you just include English-language blogs?*

LD: The average life of a blog is a statistic we've found difficult to come by; nobody seems to be tracking that. 36% of blogs worldwide are in English — **Bloggapedia** just tackles those, for now. **Technorati** has identified 70 million blogs out there, but many of them are abandoned, or are "splogs" (spam blogs — blogs filled with gibberish keywords designed to attract hits and therefore advertising). So there's an awful lot of garbage cluttering up some really excellent, valuable resources that can amplify traditional electronic resources like journals or mainstream media articles.

ATG: *Who's really behind Bloggapedia? Are you a librarian? I notice that the Website says "created by library and taxonomy experts". Are you working with a librarian team? Who is involved?*

LD: My team consists of myself, **Rachel Rushefsky** of **Barnes & Noble**, and my tech gurus **Tess Strand** and **Hamid Alipour**. I am not a librarian, but I have worked in the library environment since 2001, when I was director of content for **Sirsi** (now **SirsiDynix**). I created the taxonomy for **Newstex's News on Demand** product, which is distributed through **EBSCO** (among others) and has won numerous awards in the library sector. **Rachel** has worked extensively with the taxonomy that runs the **B&N Website**, and **Tess** and **Hamid** are actively involved in the **Open Source Directory Project**. So amongst the four of us,

we constitute a pretty formidable force in the information market.

ATG: *Many of us don't read blogs. There are just too many to read and many blogs have content that seems too specific to the person who's doing the blog. For many of us, blogs are like a diary that we'd rather not read in most cases. Can you comment?*

LD: I think you are right. And that's the whole purpose of **Bloggapedia** — to categorize all these blogs so you know what you can delve into and what you can safely ignore. Because there is actually quite a bit of information out there, written in the form of personal experience, which is valuable — for example, if you are a photographer and you want to know what other photographers are grappling with, it's helpful to read some personal experience. If you're into cooking, or if you're having child-rearing dilemmas (and what parent isn't?), or you're an astronomy major, or... whatever your interests, chances are there's someone out there blogging on that. **Bloggapedia** organizes this information so you don't have to sift through a lot of irrelevant material to find what you want. I look at blogging in the same way a lot of people look at memoir. Years ago, memoirs were kind of scoffed at, as a genre, and yet they've persisted and shot to the bestseller list time and time again. Why? Because personal stories are compelling and informative. We can relate to them. The specific is easily expanded to the general. And this is true of the information passed on in blogs as well — it's a form of storytelling that can be as useful in its own way as articles and other media are in theirs. I don't look at blogs as replacing any existing media, but certainly as supplementing what's out there to give a great total picture. And I think it's very much in the library's interest to bring that total picture to its users.

ATG: *Can a blog be refereed? How? Can you have such a thing as peer review on a blog?*

LD: There are some basic standards that **Bloggapedia** blogs have to adhere to. You have to have been blogging for over 3 months. You have to update your blog regularly. Your content has to be intelligible — contributing to the conversation, not detracting from it. We don't deal in hate speech. We're looking to create a useful resource, not add to the chaos. In that sense, I think blogs can be peer-reviewed, for inclusion or exclusion — but not refereed. Free speech is free speech — I wouldn't want to be in the business of telling people what to say. Either we'll include their resource in **Bloggapedia** or we won't, based on the merits of their content.

ATG: *I notice on your Website you allow people who have signed in to rate a blog. How do you monitor this for accuracy?*

LD: Ratings are an opinion.

So accuracy isn't really the objective — it's a question of how useful a blog is for someone. I wouldn't presume to apply accuracy standards to that, any more than I would to restaurant or movie ratings. There are restaurants that only get 2 stars in a review, but we return to them over and over again because there are certain things we like about them. Conversely (or perversely?), there are restaurants that have garnered 5 stars, but they're not always suitable for the kind of evening we want to have. You have to factor in ratings with other information in order to get a good picture — and that's true for blogs as well.

ATG: *Tell us about your personal blog(s).*

LD: My blog should have a name and it doesn't — **Tess** just calls it **LJND** — it's the homepage of my Website (<http://www.ljndawson.com>). I blog on that sector of the book industry where publishing, libraries, bookselling and technology converge. So I cover eBooks, downloadable audio, issues in copyright and digital distribution, identifiers, the electronic side of the book supply chain, RFID, metadata in online bookstores and library catalogs, and the increasing role that libraries play as books get more digital. I'm a total wonk about that stuff, and I love it.

ATG: *So, what's the future of blogs? Look into your crystal ball. Will they survive? Or what's the next generation?*

LD: Blogs are here to stay. I do think that there will be fewer of them as time goes by, just because people will come to realize how much care and tending they require (it's almost like having a pet). For a lot of people, I think they were a fun toy for a while, but the fun wears off after you realize you have to post every day or every week for people to keep coming back to your blog. So I think that human nature will take care of a lot of the blog glut we see right now. But for those who have a lot to share, they are a wonderful medium that can add to existing mediums such as news/journal articles, video, books, audio files — they contribute to the overall picture of a topic, and for that reason, I feel very strongly that they shouldn't be dismissed. You'd be surprised how many knitting blogs are out there — and how many of those blogs are, for knitters, absolutely essential reading. The same is true across the spectrum of subject categories, and I think it's in a library's interest to provide distilled information about quality media to its users. 🐾