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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations -- Column People

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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — Column People

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Of course there's no such thing as "Column People," which was the point in naming this column. Everyone understood right away, on the other hand, when in 2005 former ALA president **Michael Gorman** coined the phrase "Blog People." **Gorman** was referring to people who write blogs, who follow blogs, who care about blogs. He described them in a negative way, which earned him a lot of negative comment for his trouble, in blogs and in print too; but no one argued that **Gorman** hadn't referred to an identifiable group.

But when I was asked recently to speak about blogs and columns, it took a moment to realize I'd been asked because I was a columnist. Although I've written a column for *Against the Grain* since 2001, not for a second have I thought of myself as a "columnist." Instead, I think of myself as somebody who every couple of months or so gets a reminding email from **Katina Strauch** that it's again time to write about 2,000 words before some looming deadline hits.

Somehow, I doubt bloggers have any trouble thinking about themselves in that way, as bloggers. They knew who **Gorman** meant, and they were proud of it.

So there's once difference between columns and blogs. Bloggers and their readers resemble a subculture, true for some individual blogs and true for blogs in general. Columnists and their readers do not. The word "columnist," in fact, I think of as almost a title, reserved for someone who has written great columns over a long period of time. People like **Russell Baker**, **Maureen Dowd**, **Ring Lardner**, **Ann Landers**, **Dear Abby**, **Miss Manners**, **Dave Barry**, **H.L. Mencken**, **Jack Anderson**, **David Broder**, **Stephen Jay Gould**, **Shana Alexander**, **Walter Winchell**, **James Reston**, **Hedda Hopper**, **Jimmy Breslin**, **Drew Pearson**, **George Will**, **Mike Royko**, **William Safire**, **Liz Smith**, **Erma Bombeck**.

It was another of the great columnists, the sports writer **Red Smith**, who wrote the famous description of what it's like to write: "There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and open a vein."

My hunch is that bloggers don't feel that way. And if they did, they would ease the pain by blogging about it. So, let's see how it feels to indulge myself a little. Even though nobody uses typewriters anymore, writing a column is still something like how it felt to **Red Smith**, for this "columnist" anyway, and I suspect for others, whenever that summoning email arrives and it's time to spill, well, coffee in my case, or maybe a glass of wine, depending on place and time of day, since these columns tend to get written in short bursts while I am in between doing something else, usually with a beverage in hand, or my glass or cup precariously sharing some inadequate surface space with my laptop, on planes, in airports, in restaurants, bars, and hotels. The notes and thoughts for this one I

took down in odd moments on a pad of yellow paper. They went on for page after page. Now that I think about it, the whole thing resembled a blog. I might have posted somewhere, and skipped this writing part.

Which is another thing about bloggers. They have it so easy. Do they have deadlines, editors, minimum words, maximum words, or any of the structures afflicting columnists? Do they keep dictionaries, thesauri, usage guides at hand, to help find the right word, and to avoid the wrong one? Do they have any pressures at all? How is it that one library blogger could begin a conference report by reporting:

"Today is my first day back at work.... Wow, the inbox. Wow, the piles did not reduce in my absence. Alas, back to work. Time for new ideas and getting things done.... Even with a full day of meetings, I managed to get through my work email. I had about 260 messages and only 10-15 actually needed to be read or required a response. Overkill?"

And another could say:

"...because I'm really not keeping up with blogs right now. I have quite a bit going on in my life at work and at home, and all things blog are sort of taking a backseat, except for the team blog that my department is using at work — I'm participating in that daily!"

Wow! The Wows, the exclamation points, the self-referentialness, the sloppiness, the pointlessness.

That's not playing fair, of course. Plucking a couple of silly passages from the Web is too easy. And also too clichéd, to cite such clichéd blog style as a criticism. It would have been almost as easy, although not nearly as much fun, to find examples of more substantive blogging. A columnist should aim for more, should aim to have something to say. Unlike bloggers, columnists are not independent, but are a part of whatever publication runs their column. There's no assuming that a reader leafing through a newspaper or magazine or journal will care at all about how many emails the columnist has had to delete or read that day. Or, that a reader will pause to read a column in the first place.

That's unlike readers of blogs, who visit purposefully. They might post. They might follow the links. They might network. They might start their own blog. They might partake in the sense of community, online as it may be, that bloggers, even the least of them, do offer their readers, and that columnists do not. Not even the best. Not **Russell Baker**, not **Maureen Dowd**, not **Red Smith**. Beloved as they may be, or may have been, columnists

write from a distant place. Blogs, we all know, have the immediacy that columns, or any writing in print, can't have. But, what blogs principally have over columns, is this sense of belonging.

It starts with the names, with the way the blogs are named. My *Against the Grain* column is called, "Issues in Vendor/Library Relations." Nothing personal there, and nothing too inviting either, especially since you could call the entirety of *Against the Grain* "Issues in Vendor/Library Relations." But look

at library blogs, how they are named in a personal way. Just picking a few, reading A-Z in the list of hundreds of library blogs you can find at the site **LISZEN** (<http://libraryzen.com>), there's *Aaron the Librarian*, *Bad Girl Librarian*, *The Cynic Librarian*, *The Days & Nights of the Lipstick*

Librarian!, *Easy Librarian*, *Family Man Librarian*, *The Gypsy Librarian*, *Heavy Metal Librarian*, *indie rock librarian*, *JasonUnbound*, *The Kung-Fu Librarian*, *Librarian's Rant*, *The Misfiled Librarian*, *NewlyMintedLibrarian*, *The Other Librarian*, *Pop Goes the Library*, *quiddle*, *Right Wing Librarian*, *SlackerLibrarian*, *Theoretical Librarian*, *The Ubiquitous Librarian*, *The Vampire Librarian*, *Writings of the Loud Librarian*, *Young Librarian*, *The Zenformation Professional*.

Do you think these people are opening a vein? Probably not, and these names alone, aside from whatever might be posted on the sites, all live ones as of a recent check, assist readers of the blogs to define themselves too, by their very choice of blogs to follow. It's not news that today, when a person is looking for a sense of belonging, of community, of being a part of something, very often they will look for it online. They might find it in a blog. Who's to criticize?

The list above suggests as well that another thing is going on with library blogs. They seem to be a way of certifying that members of *this* blog community have shed *The Stereotype*, that ancient curse of our profession. Instead, these blogs say, we're bad girls, cynics, gypsies, ranters, misfiled, unbound, kung-fu; we're slackers, loud, young. We're Zen.

Columnists don't offer this, much help, that is, in achieving community or self-definition. You read a column and you put it down. Seldom do columnist and reader interact at all in any direct way. We're from another era. We're black and white TV, we're DOS, we're telnet, we're Beta tapes, we're 1.0. We're the monograph. We're **Sears**, not **Saks**; **Maxwell House**, not **Starbucks**; **Budweiser**, not **Belgian**; catsup, not salsa; **Rust Belt**, not **Sun Belt**; we're Chinese food, not pan-Asian.

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That sounds like an elegy, as if we're done, columnists. But it's not an elegy. It's an appreciation. **Budweiser**, catsup, Chinese food? A solid track record, all three, I believe most of us would say. We've all enjoyed them. And we'll continue to enjoy them, alongside newer pleasures. Columns are not going away either. They are just no longer at the epicenter of opinion-making. But columnists are dependable. They'll show up. They'll try to have something to say. They'll work hard at it. They'll try to be interesting, try to be funny. They won't expect you to interact. What good columnists do offer readers is a point-of-view, their own way of thinking, and an attitude, their own way of expressing themselves. This I think is what columns have over blogs, where the attitudes and the points-of-view seem much too much the same, no matter which blog it is you are looking at. They don't call it the "blogosphere" for nothing, I guess.

Lonely as it usually is for columnists, sometimes even library columnists do hear from readers, however. It's sustaining. It helps keep you going. It feels, even, a little like a community, a very small one, one writer and one reader.

A few do better than that. The great columnists do, at least. I was gratified earlier this year when **Molly Ivins** died. Not, of course, because she had died, since I was among the many readers saddened to lose **Molly Ivins**, at age 62, to breast cancer. I was gratified, uplifted, by the outpouring of love that followed the news of her death. It wasn't all love, either, since she wrote passionately about politics, Texas and national politics, for some thirty years, many of them as a columnist, and a few of those who had disagreed with **Molly Ivins** greeted her death with some mean-spirited remarks. In a way, that was uplifting too. She was that good.

She would take a regular break from politics to write Fourth of July columns. Here, from the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, are parts of her 1995 celebration of our national holiday.

"Happy Fourth, beloveds! As we celebrate our country's natal day, it's fun to catalogue some of the lovable stuff about America.... For some reason, many people believe that England is the great nation for eccentrics; this is because they see nothing peculiar about all the Americans who have dedicated their lives to setting a world record for knocking over dominoes in sequence. Or crocheting toilet-paper covers.... We're the country that put Elvis on a stamp! We buy pink lemonade and striped toothpaste! ... Huge numbers of us believe in flying saucers, horoscopes, palm-readers, the lottery, pyramid power.... A nation undeterred by reality — no wonder we went to the moon! ... O.K., O.K., so America is not what you could consider a highly tasteful country. So we can do better than Barbie and the Golden Arches. One thing you can count on is that we will. Maybe our national motto should be, 'You want it, we got it.' I grant you, the USA requires a consider-

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able tolerance for diversity and a fondness for dissent. The full-throated roar of a free people exercising their constitutional right to free speech can be a little deafening at times. But peace and quiet and solitude are among our options. This is the country with Enough Room. If you don't believe it, go to Lubbock."

Her funeral took place the afternoon of February 4, at **Austin's First United Methodist Church**, where the overflow required a second chapel. **Molly Ivins** was probably a friend to most who were there, but she would have caused overflow conditions anywhere else too, thanks to people who had never met

her but who would come because they read her columns. In Austin, people stood up to tell their best stories and jokes in remembrance of **Molly Ivins**. **Marcia Ball**, a legendary Austin blues singer and piano player, gave the crowd "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels." Then she closed the service with "Great Balls of Fire," which brought the churchful of singing, clapping mourners to their feet. Afterward, everyone proceeded to a nearby beer garden for free beer, for barbecue, more music, more laughter, and more tears.

Now, that's what I call interacting with your readers. 🍷