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More on Blogging for Law Librarians

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After several months of experience trying to maintain a law library blog[1] (and being reasonably successful, I hope) I have a few thoughts to share.

The first is something I anticipated at the end of my last column;[2] the difficulty of keeping up with the blog. Some of my favorite blogs update several times a day – I content myself with trying to update once every weekday. Even this is challenging, though. My coworkers are very helpful, posting entries when they run across things of interest, but it is also important to have new and fresh material all the time – even when there is not necessarily anything that needs to be posted. I have discovered that I spend more time than expected thinking of subjects or looking at my favorite blogs and news sites for new material (I always credit them, of course). I have multiple people now who are in the habit of mentioning to me anything they think worthy of a blog entry. It can be work, but currency is important.

I learned a lesson on that importance over the winter holiday. I took nearly two weeks off for vacation, and I meant to either line up a series of posts to go up while I was away or at least post an entry explaining that the BLAWg would take a short hiatus. However, I was unexpectedly ill for the last day and a half before I left, and consequently blog entries just stopped suddenly for a week or so. When I got back and checked the statistics of our readership I was disheartened by what I learned. The number of visitors to our site had dropped, and, what is worse, we lost about fifteen people who had 'subscribed' to the BLAWg by RSS feed. As the blog entries have

become regular again our readers have been slowly returning, but we haven't seen the RSS subscriptions return. The causal readers are back, but the devoted readers have not returned. Particularly sad is that the day entries stopped there were double the usual number of hits – people were repeatedly checking the blog expecting the usual update. Clearly there were some people who were disappointed by the disappearance of the BLAWg IN Bloom, and since we have undertaken to provide readers with new material every day, they are unhappy when we do not. You do not have to post every weekday, but it is important to pick a posting schedule and stick to it. Your readership may notice if you miss a post now and then, but it will forgive you. If, however, you let readers break the habit of coming to you, it will be difficult to convince them to pick it up again.

Content is also important. Some blogs do nothing other than copy entries from other blogs in their entirety, but I feel that a good blogger should also be bringing some new content to the table. Some of this is mundane and easy. There are a fair number of library announcements, responses to suggestion box items, and things specific to the law school that are important blog material. After all, we would like a broad readership, but the law school community comes first. The more difficult part of blogging, though, is to present new ideas. This is especially difficult if you are blogging for a community. A personal blog is much simpler – your readership is for the most part known to you, and will generally be interested in your opinions and take them with the appropriate measure of salt. Blogging for an institution, however, and one that is neutral on many fronts, is more

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[1]   Indiana University Maurer School of Law – Bloomington, *BLAWg IN Bloom* <http://www.law.indiana.edu/lawlibrary/blawg/> viewed at 9 January 2009.

[2]   Dabney, L Cindy, 'Blogs and Law Librarians' (2008) 16(3) *Australian Law Librarian* 197.

difficult. You want to be interesting without being too opinionated.

One way to do this is to present both sides of an argument. Politics is a particularly difficult area, because it so interesting and at the same time it is difficult to examine without coming down on one side or the other. Some time ago, before an election, the local paper[3] ran an article revealing the past history of several judicial candidates.[4] This was an interesting article – and it contained some rather alarming information about particular candidates. Our blog entry on the subject,[5] however, dealt more with the comments on the online version of the article than with the article itself. There was a very lively debate about whether or not this was appropriate information for the paper to be reporting. Is it scandal-mongering or important information that every voter should have? The blog entry let me call attention to the article without taking a side on how good or evil it was, and also discuss the issue of its relevancy. I hoped that it was a tactful and also unusual way of looking at the article.

It does seem to me that it is when I put a little of my own voice into a post that reader statistics jump. People read the posts that I have taken the time to do a little of my own research, rather than just pointing out two or three interesting articles on a subject. I also like to write about blogging on occasion, sharing some of the same thoughts that I advance here, though I try to limit those as being a little self-indulgent.

Another issue that I have tackled in writing the blog is more mechanical. Who should be on our blogroll? I read several really stellar law librarian bloggers, but despite the quality of the information that I get there, it is not necessarily relevant to my readers. I am, though a law librarian myself, and writing a blog for a law library, writing for an audience of law students and faculty, rather than other law librarians. So I have to appeal to what they are interested in. There are a great many legal blogs to choose from. It is difficult to choose just a few, but you do not want to bog the reader down with too many.

I think that the best strategy is to choose a blogroll (and, on a related note, a set of non-blog links you want to emphasise) that is a combination of popularity and your own judgment. Watch sites like Technorati[6] and BlogPulse[7] to see what people are reading. Check for lists of blogs that cover your own field.[8] At the moment, according to Technorati's 2008 State of the Blogosphere Report residents of Australia only account for about 3% of blogs,[9] but there are still lists out

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[3] *The Herald-Times* at <http://www.heraldtimesonline.com/> viewed at 9 January 2009.

[4] Graham, Andy, 'Judge Candidates Have Experience on Other Side of the Bench', (29 October 2008) *The Herald-Times* (Bloomington, IN, USA).

[5] Indiana University Maurer School of Law – Bloomington, *BLAWg IN Bloom: What Do You Look For in a Judge?* <http://www.law.indiana.edu/lawlibrary/blawg/?p=211> viewed at 9 January 2009.

[6] Technorati, Inc., *Technorati: Front Page* <http://technorati.com/> viewed at 9 January 2009.

[7] Nielsen BuzzMetrics, *BlogPulse* <http://www.blogpulse.com/> viewed at 9 January 2009.

[8] There are many examples of this – one is McDonough, Molly & Randag, Sarah,'The Blawg 100', (December 2008) ABA Journal 34, (Chicago, IL, USA); also available at <http://www.abajournal.com/magazine/blawg_100_2008/> viewed at 9 January 2009.

[9] Technorati, *State of the Blogosphere 2008 – Day 1: Who Are the Bloggers?* <http://technorati.com/blogging/state-of-the-blogosphere/who-are-the-bloggers/> viewed at 9 January 2009.

there of top Australian blogs.[10] At the same time, you should never discount your own judgment. A blog may not be overly known, or it may appeal to a limited interest, but if you find it useful, others probably will as well. By the nature of its focus the Indiana Law Blog[11] will never reach number one on the Technorati ratings, but it is invaluable for the legally minded here in Indiana.

There is also the question of who to link to within your community; for me faculty bloggers, of course, in the law school setting. You want to advertise any professional endeavor of a key person at your institution. If you have a faculty member who founded a leading tax blog you absolutely want to show the blogger that you are proud of him, and remind the world where he hails from. But even if the blog has not yet attracted wide readership, you still want your readers to know that your community contributes to the profession, and has the time and writing skills to share thoughts. But what about blogs that a faculty member has contributed to for only a week or two? What about faculty columns? And what about student bloggers? Or alumni blogs? Honestly, this is something where you have to use your own judgment. You do not, on a professional blog, want to link to a purely personal blog, but if there is also substance, you may well want to acknowledge someone who has made a contribution to the broader community. You want very much to build a strong network of bloggers with ties to your school or office, but at the same time, make sure that they represent you well.

Finally, a word about categories. Blogs are wonderful in that they are, in many ways, self organising. However, you want to have a little of your own structure. People should be able to immediately jump to the information they want. Consequently you want to attach categories to each entry that are neither so broad as to capture more than a quarter of your blog, nor so narrow as to limit yourself to an entry or two. Some people like the strategy of deciding in advance what categories to use. This is a good exercise in making sure that you keep yourself relevant, as you have to stay within your own subject guidelines. The other method, which I use, is simply to create category headings as they arise. I found that after creating ten in rapid succession I settled down and essentially use those same headings for most things. You want to watch yourself to make sure that you are not constantly creating new ones, though, as you will quickly have such narrow headings as to make them useless.

Good luck and good blogging! Australia needs to bring up its numbers to more than just three percent of the world, and law librarian bloggers definitely need a bigger presence. Blogger Dennis Kennedy mentions law librarian blogs in the 'Best Legal Blog Category' each year in his 'Blawggies', and not without reason.[12] We know a great deal, and should share it!

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10 For example, Dipping into the Blogpond, *Top 100 Australian Blogs Index* <http://blogpond.com.au/top-100australian-blogs-index/> viewed at 9 January 2009.

11 Marcia Oddi, *The Indiana Law Blog* <http://www.indianalawblog.com/> viewed at 9 January 2009.

12 We only make runner up in the most recent awards, however – see *Dennis Kennedy's 2008 Law-related Blogging Awards* (The Blawggies) <http://www.denniskennedy.com/blog/2008/12/dennis_kennedys_2008_lawrelated_blogging_awar.html> viewed at 9 January 2009.