

MICROBLOGGING

Getting Less Out of Your Blog

AMANDA ETCHES-JOHNSON

You can't toss a dart towards a library conference program these days without hitting a session on blogging. Blogs were, arguably, the first major web 2.0 application that libraries turned to in considerable numbers. Libraries are blogging about their news, events, programs, collections, suggestion box submissions, renovation projects, technology implementations, and more. They're also blogging about some of the larger issues in the knowledge economy: literacy, intellectual freedom, copyright, and civil liberties, among others (check out the Blogging Libraries Wiki for a fairly comprehensive look at what libraries are doing with blogs blogwithoutalibrary.net/links).

While blogging still continues to be a popular communication method for libraries, there's a new kid on the blogging block that provides a little something different that could allow libraries to take their blogging in a different direction ...

MEET MICROBLOGGING

Microblogging is exactly what the name suggests: short blog posts. While you might not have heard of microblogging, my guess is that you've probably heard of Twitter (twitter.com). On Twitter, users answer the question "What are you doing?" in brief textual updates of 140 characters or less. Sounds ridiculously inane, right? Well, it can be. But Twitter works for the same reason that applications like Facebook and MySpace work: they're social applica-

tions that revolve around friends. Just as Facebook is a vapid void until you start "friending" people, Twitter can be a quiet, boring place until you've got friends to "follow" who also follow you.

WE ALREADY HAVE BLOGS: DO WE REALLY NEED MICROBLOGS?

As a format, blogs are conducive to certain types of conversations: reverse-chronological posts ensure that the most recent content is always at the top of the page, categories allow users to browse similar posts, and comments facilitate conversation between the library and its community. All useful features, to be sure, but have you ever written a blog post for your library, or read another library blog, and despaired at the utilitarian nature of the posts and the lack of interaction with users? While it's important to keep your library's users up to speed on network status and maintenance downtimes, sometimes there is just no way to make that post about the printer network being down sound interesting and engaging!

I'd wager that less than half the posts on most library blogs are interesting enough to warrant comments from users. That's not to disparage any library blogs; rather it's about recognizing that we're using our blogs to post announcements and updates that really could be better handled by another tool – perhaps one that allows users to receive updates via text and IM, rather than just RSS (as is the case with most blogs). Enter Twitter.

TWITTER IN PRACTICE

There are already a few libraries making use of Twitter to send their message out to their users. The Undergraduate Library at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign uses Twitter for everything from network status updates to reminders about open student positions at the library. They also syndicate their Twitter updates on their homepage (library.uiuc.edu/ugl/).

Cleveland Public Library posts updates about interesting items from the collection on its Twitter stream, including links to catalogue records (twitter.com/Cleveland_PL). The reference staff at the Nebraska Library Commission publishes the reference questions they receive to their Twitter account in an attempt to market the service (twitter.com/NLC_Reference). The Missouri River Regional Library posts reminders about upcoming programs and pictures from library events to its Twitter stream (www.twitter.com/mrrl). The Science Libraries at Yale use Twitter to promote new resources, upcoming events, and general announcements about the library (twitter.com/yalescilib).

YOU STILL LOOK SKEPTICAL

I'm always the first to admit: not every 2.0 tool is for every library. If your library is doing just fine with the social applications and 2.0 channels you already use, then you can probably walk on by with nary a glance at microblogging. But if what you've read so far intrigues you, try this: set up an account for your library on Twitter and publish your network status messages to it. Then add a Twitter "badge" to your news page (or any page) listing your most recent updates. Provide a link to the RSS feed as well and start publicizing your Twitter stream. Encourage your users to add the library account as a friend and allow them to get network updates via their cell phones or their favourite Instant Messaging client.

If library 2.0 is all about getting our content out to where our users are, Twitter just might be able to get you a step closer.

Amanda Etches-Johnson

is the User Experience Librarian at McMaster University. She is also an adjunct faculty member at the Faculty of Information and Media Studies, University of Western Ontario. Both of her jobs are pretty 2.0 focused, and that makes her happy. You can find her online at blogwith-outalibrary.net.

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