

## **Blogging in an Academic Health Library Setting - the Case of the SchARR Library Blog**

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### **Abstract**

The SchARR Library Blog based at The School of Health and Related Research at The University of Sheffield was born in September 2007, through a need to enhance the current awareness email service already provided by SchARR's own in-house information and library service. The information service which supports the school's research and teaching obligations has embraced blogging along with other Web 2.0 technologies especially the use of wikis. The blog provides a mixture of content for SchARR's 200 members of staff and 300 postgraduate students as well as external visitors. The content ranges from training course information and seminars to recommended websites and sources of funding information.

### **Building the blog**

The blog was created using Google's free software named Blogger <https://www.blogger.com/start>

Like most free applications on the Internet for the Internet, it does not have all the bells and whistles that the pay for applications do offer. Nevertheless, this is blogging, which in essence should be simple in function and design.

There are other blog creating and hosting websites, some of which are free, whilst others may try and lure you into paying for their services or additional add-ons. Another notable and established free blog site is that of Wordpress, which can be found at: <http://wordpress.com/>

Again like most things on the Internet the choice gradually becomes more overwhelming, so it perhaps worth using a comparison site to choose how best to bring your blog to life. Just like websites such as Kelkoo.co.uk for comparing the prices of consumer goods, and Confused.com for comparing house and car insurance; there is a way to compare the different types of blog building websites. WeblogMatrix <http://www.weblogmatrix.org/> compares the differences between over 20 weblog tools, looking at everything from their cost to whether you can include a photo gallery.

### Why go Blogging?

The original purpose of the SchARR Library Blog came from trying to extend the library's current awareness service. At present SchARR Library has an email-based current awareness bulletin, which goes out to approximately 200 members of staff and students. The bulletin is a compilation of current health-related news and research items, in addition to news from the library such as new books and journals. There is also a funny story tagged at the end of each bulletin as a way of enticing readers to the end of the bulletin. These bulletins go out at least two times a week. The downside of this service was that it wasn't aesthetically pleasing; at best readers could view the bulletin in Microsoft Outlook, which added coloured lines and text – so not exactly eye-catching.

Another key reason for introducing the blog was that SchARR's official Web pages,

<http://www.shef.ac.uk/scharr/sections/ir/library>, as with those of the University of Sheffield, are quite regimented with little scope for flexibility in terms of layout and content. In essence the library service at SchARR is limited by the boundaries set out by the University website content management system which at times can be limiting, not only technologically but by the content



that can be uploaded to it. The original remit of the content management system was to democratise the web pages. Sadly due to the complicated nature of the software this has failed in some areas, and this is where the blog steps in.

Blogs can provide a quick and easy way to publish material without having to learn the ins and outs of an organisational system. This obviously does not mean that there are no rules, on the contrary, the blog is still representative of ScHARR and as a result must adhere to the rules and policies set out by the wider university settings, this is a crucial point all blogs must take into account.

Along with the technological ease, there is the aspect of creating an informal approach to the established service. The very nature of being a library and information service means that there is daily human contact, whether in person, telephone and email. Many of the hourly communications received at the library are formal, but there are also informal meetings and enquiries with internal and external colleagues. With this in mind, it was decided that the blog should reflect this by adding occasional informal content, which will be touched on later.

Unlike a traditional website, a blog does not remove old content; obviously as time goes by some links may become broken or dead, but that problem affects all websites. The blog can itself become a resource and a useful tool as organisations store previous posts and the information contained in them. How useful this will become, only time will tell; at present The ScHARR Library Blog has 86 posts, with some of the early posts acting as testers to see what worked the best.

Blogs are also portable, meaning that new posts can be added from anywhere provided you have an Internet connection and password to access the blog site. Many organisational websites can only be manipulated onsite or through a secured network; editing a blog is as easy as posting to a public forum.

Blogs are also easily navigated with the aid of keywords, provided you tag each post you write. The ScHARR Library Blog now has dozens of keywords ordered with the most popular at the top. The real advantage of this is that if you post a story on public health, visitors with an interest in this field can click on the keyword 'public health' and retrieve all previous posts on the similar subject.

## Target Audience

Like the official SchARR Library website, the content of the blog posts are split into three main categories, internal, external, and both. Firstly, posts especially for our staff and students, information for external organisations and finally posts that are of interest for all parties. Those visiting the blog have the option of posting comments on stories which allows an interaction between hosts and visitors, something not so easily achieved with a static website. One such example is the post title 'Booth on the Move', in which photographs taken from the European Association for Health Information and Librarians 2007 Workshop held in Krakow were linked to the post highlighting the Director of Information Resources at SchARR, Andrew Booth and his attendance at the workshop. [http://scharrlibrary.blogspot.com/2007/09/booth-on-move\\_13.html](http://scharrlibrary.blogspot.com/2007/09/booth-on-move_13.html) A fellow attendee at the workshop was then able to comment and post his own photographs, hosted on Flickr.com from the very same conference.

The introduction of the blog has been integrated into the current awareness email service, where new posts are added to the news bulletins so as to keep the blog very much in the minds of staff and students. In addition to this, a small amount of marketing has been utilised to promote the blog to other libraries and organisations. This emphasises a big reason for the blog's existence, being that it is another conduit to our library and information service and its website.

## Content, Design and Style

What actually goes on the blog is still in a state of flux as the site is only six months old, but in that time the net has been cast further a field to bring in a few interesting posts, resources and stories that we have quite literally stumbled on. The core of the content revolves around a few areas. Firstly there are the research and news bulletins. These can consist of the in-house bulletins we create, such as our research funding opportunities and current awareness compilations. Whilst we have pointers towards external bulletins such as those offered by The Kings Fund, it is important to note that some of these bulletins have been made only accessible on our own intranet so as to adhere to the policies of some external organisations.



Next there are posts relating to the interests of our students and staff, this can include new books to arrive in the library, our own in-house training schedules, lunchtime seminars, new reports and health-related news and research that is of particular interest to SchARR's current research directions.

One particular item we post for the wider audience is that which identifies interesting and useful websites and resources. In the past few months we have highlighted websites such as; Google Health - <http://www.google.com/Top/Health/> and the Evidence Based Medicine Page Generator -

<http://www.ebm.pyramid.org/home.php>

The blog is easily editable and allows several tools which can be dragged and dropped into place. The ideal way to start any new blog is to play around with the functions on offer, try mixing and matching the tabs and options, and do not be afraid to experiment.

Google's Blogger offers a multitude of options ranging from the basics of URL linkage and photo adding to rss feeding and picture slideshows. When setting your blog up, it is important to decide what additional content you want to supplement the main posts. It is recommended that you include a blogroll which is a collection of external links to other similar blog sites. Other websites can still be linked in a separate box, which is also recommended. Most blogs have their additional information such as links attached to either side of the main textual content. It is important to note, that despite the amount of links and tabs you include, it rarely detracts away from the main content of your blog.

Other useful functions incorporated into the SchARR Library Blog are a user poll, an rss feed to UK health news, a Flickr picture slideshow, a visitors counter; links to academic articles, new books and useful resources.

Each item posted on the blog has an accompanying picture and an external link to the copyright holder. Most of these photographs are taken from Flickr using the Creative Commons Licence <http://creativecommons.org/>.

The main reason for adding pictures is to enhance the look of the blog and to create an informal webpage unlike the text heavy pages many websites are blighted with. Text use is limited and brief, again to keep the visitor engaged. Taking into consideration that most people flit from website to website at

the bat of an eyelid and that much online content is scan-read; it is best to make you point as succinctly and briefly as you can. The blog also allows the imbedding of video content from such sites as YouTube.com and there is the provision for adding automated presentations.

As more content is added to each blog the page will become longer, which in turn means more scrolling down. As a result the SchARR Library Blog only has seven posts on the front page, with older posts falling back onto subsequent pages, which can be easily accessed.

### **The future of the Blog**

At present, The University of Sheffield is contemplating offering a blog service for its various departments. If this becomes a reality, then the positives will be that The SchARR Library Blog will be hosted on a more secure site and will become uniformed with that of other University pages. On the downside it runs the risk of becoming over-complicated and too formal, which in turn will detract from the casual 'anyone can have a go' ethos.

It is still early days for the blog at SchARR Library, and whether there is a case for its existence, considering we have an official website, only time will tell. So far, feedback has been totally positive and most of the team have taken to regularly posting and in turn have found it to be an easy, time-friendly experience. As with so many Web 2.0 technologies it is a case of suck it and see. Social networking, tagging, wikis, blogging and pod casting have been embraced by information professionals, academics and students. Many such innovations have been taken up by SchARR, and whether they are only a stop-gap until bigger and greater things only time will tell. At present, they work and seem to work well, which is good enough for us.