EDITORIAL

I see blog people

I was reading a book about writing. (This was thirty years ago, and I was sitting at a study carrel on the bridge that connects the two wings of the Golda Meir Library at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee.) The author said that being a successful writer required loving the language for itself; loving the play of it and the wonder of it, even more than what one might be trying to say. There is a gap that can never be completely closed between the image or idea in one's mind and the way it is finally revealed in sentences. The challenge that faces the writer is to narrow that gap, and that can only happen when one is immersed in the language and willing to play with it, to roll around in it, to take one's sentences apart and rework them, again and again, seeking that perfect, elusive, correct fit. I no longer recall the name of the book, but I have never forgotten that moment. Although I had been an avid reader all my life, and thought that I wrote pretty well for a teenager, I was just beginning to understand what a mysterious and complicated process good writing really is, not just a way of recording what one is thinking, but rather a way of thinking itself.

Now, we are all on Internet time. I am writing this at the end of March 2005, as the frequency with which blogs and blogging are being commented on in the news is steadily increasing. (A search on ''blog'' in EBSCO's Newspaper Source retrieves 542 citations.) The number of new blogs popping up every month is phenomenal. A recent column by American Library Association President Michael Gorman [1] stirred up a flurry of hostile reaction and led me to spend some time over the past few weeks wandering around in the ''blogosphere,'' as it is called. I wanted to take a closer look at what was being said and, perhaps more interestingly, *how* it was being said.

I have been playing with my own blog for about six months. I was curious. My friend Tom Roper has one <http://tomroper.typepad.com>, and, because I find Roper to be one of the more intellectually curious people I know, I was inspired to give it a try myself. Until the Gorman flap, however, I had not actually spent very much time following other blogs. I kept an eye on Roper's, and, when I discovered the blog of a friend or acquaintance, I would add it to my list and check in on occasion, just to see what they were doing. What I liked best about doing my own blog was that it forced me to put down a complete thought or scene in a relatively short space. I found that I could manage about 700 to 800 words in a single sitting of a couple of hours, with *lots* of revision. Sometimes I wrote a few sentences that I thought were pretty good.

This essay, on the other hand, like all of my *Journal of the Medical Library Association* (*JMLA*) editorials, was composed over a period of several weeks. Very un-bloglike. I have tried to use the *JMLA* editorials as a means of exploration, as a way of finding out what I think, not merely reporting it. That requires time. I scratch out a few paragraphs, let them sit, reread them, question them, add to them, delete them, rework them. Often I surprise myself, and often I end up someplace very different from where I thought I was going when I started.

So, for the past few weeks, trying to understand some of the differences between that kind of writing and the kind of writing now flooding the Internet, I have spent quite a bit of time exploring. I have set myself up with ''Bloglines,'' a service that enables me to easily track when the blogs that I follow have been updated <http://www.bloglines.com>. I have set up an account with ''Technorati,'' so that I can easily search for the latest hot discussions going on among the bloggers <http://www.technorati.com>. I have been learning about really simple syndication (RSS) feeds and Moveable Type and podcasting.

The early adopters of new technologies tend to be very enthusiastic supporters. This is certainly the case with blogs, particularly those that attempt to track the news of the day. There are bloggers ready to declare that the mainstream media (the ''MSM'') is already dead and useless. The commercial news networks, newspapers, and newsmagazines should just get out of the way. They have been superseded by the bloggers, who, because they can be quick and responsive, are able to get news out faster, utilizing sources that are sometimes unavailable to those who are stuck in the dinosaur processes of traditional journalism.

This attitude is amusing, unsurprising, and perhaps a little overenthusiastic and naive. As Jack Shafer pointed out in the online magazine Slate [2], new technologies rarely live up to the revolutionary dreams of their most ardent partisans. And the divide between the MSM and the blogosphere is not nearly so great as blog people like to imagine. While it is unlikely that blogs signal the demise of the MSM, there should be little doubt that they are transforming it. But it is far too soon to say what that transformation will consist of as it unfolds.

While the political blogs have garnered most of the mainstream attention—particularly given the undeniable impact that they had on the way that stories were told during the 2004 presidential election—they represent only a portion of the blogging activity that is going on. Defining blogs turns out to be more difficult than might at first appear, and the communication confusions that arise when we deal with imprecisely defined neologisms are rampant in discussions about the

value, danger, and opportunities of blogs.

At a technical level, a blog is nothing but a software suite that enables an individual to easily post text and media files to an openly accessible Website. There is generally a mechanism for anyone reading the site to post comments about what they see, and this interactive aspect is their most distinctive feature. A number of services are available that require no knowledge of hypertext markup language (HTML) coding or any sophisticated programming abilities. I use Typepad <http://www .typepad.com>, for which I pay a modest annual subscription fee. I picked Typepad only because Roper was using it, and it looked like it would be easy to get started. And so it turned out to be.

It used to be the case that having an Internet presence required building a Website. This involved a certain willingness to invest time and money in learning to use the various tools that were available. While many individuals got very excited about the initial potential, the number of dead Websites scattered across the Internet is a testament to how fleeting that enthusiasm can be.

Blog software makes it easy to have a dynamic and interactive Internet presence. The most popular blogs have thousands of incoming links, and a posting can generate dozens of comments within just a few minutes of appearing. Regardless of the subject matter a particular blogger chooses, that interactivity and immediacy characterize the blogosphere and most clearly differentiate it from all previous forms of communication technology.

The development of these tools is a natural outgrowth of early Web development tools, and the obvious question is, what can they best be used for in the library world? I went looking for blogs by librarians or blogs from libraries. The Library Index <http://www.libdex.com> provides a good, global listing that is updated regularly. A good bit of experimentation is going on. Some of the librarian blogs are like mine: not necessarily devoted to librarianship, but composed by librarians who are playing with the tools and using them as an online journal covering a multitude of themes. Some, like Michelle Kraft's The Krafty Librarian <http://kraftylibrarian .blogspot.com>, try to focus on a particular aspect of librarianship—usually having to do with technology (another logical interest of the early adopters). Some libraries have set up blogs that are used primarily to deliver news about events in the library or interesting new Websites or tips for making use of library resources.

I am not entirely sure who we are talking to. Blog software makes it very easy to post your library's latest news—but is anyone reading it? Is this the best way, or even a good way, to share information about the library? It certainly seems to be worth a try, but I hope that someone, somewhere, is planning a systematic evaluation of its efficacy.

The personal blogs are even more of a conundrum. I like Saucy Librarian <http://www.saucylibrarian .com>, because she has a flip and irreverent writing style (she almost never posts anything about librarianship). My favorite so far is Bizgirl <http://bizgirl.blogspot.com>, but she is a work of fiction! Amid the vastness of the Internet, how does one decide what is worth writing and what is worth reading?

Gorman was being deliberately provocative when he wrote, "Given the quality of the writing in the blogs I have seen, I doubt that many of the Blog People are in the habit of sustained reading of complex texts. It is entirely possible that their intellectual needs are met by an accumulation of random facts and paragraphs" [1]. He certainly did provoke a number of bloggers, who, quite rightly, took exception. There is plenty of junk out in the blogosphere, but there is so in every other medium. Gorman's characterization is simply not an accurate reflection of most of what I have come across. The people who may add a comment to a particular posting have, no doubt, a tendency to shoot from the hip, and the quickness to get something online results all too often in bloated prose and flabby thinking. Too few bloggers take the time to think about that tenuous connection between thought and writing—they are too much in love with their ideas and not enough with the language. But, with a little patience, one can find much that is rewarding reading.

I do not think the political blogs will replace the mainstream media. I am not sure that a blog on a library Website is an effective way of getting information about our services to our clientele. I suspect that many of the people who are experimenting with their own personal blogs (perhaps myself among them) will tire of the experiment after some months. And yet it is very clear that blogs are creating the kinds of communities of interest that the Internet has long promised and that they present significant opportunities and challenges for librarians. It must be a little like the early days of newspapers, broadsheets, and pamphlets: new forms of communication that needed to be organized, disseminated, and preserved. Whether or not you want to start one of your own or put one up in your library, as librarians, we are all going to have to deal with them in one way or another.

One model for how technological innovations impact a society goes something like this: you start out by doing the same things almost as well with the new technology as you did with the old (think of comparing the first clumsy horseless carriages to the elegant buggies that they competed against or Gutenberg's first printed bible and the exquisite handmade bibles he tried to emulate); then you begin to do those same things better than you could with the old technology; and,

finally, you begin to use the new technology to do things that you couldn't have envisioned before. In the world of electronic journals that librarians spend much of our daily lives in, we are in the second stage of transformation. When we enter the blogosphere, we have moved into the third.

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