

Column People: What's Their Future in a World of Blogs?

Part I: Columns and Blogs: Making Sense of Merging Worlds

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Presenter

ABSTRACT. The newspaper and magazine column, key sources for news comment and analysis prior to the Internet, is being challenged by a powerful new contender—the blog. Has the column's importance diminished, even been rendered obsolete, by new e-venues such as the blog? The author, appreciative of the value and history of both columns and blogs, first defines these venues of publication, gives a brief history of each, and then outlines similarities and differences between the two. With this foundation in place, the author then discusses how the boundaries between new modes of online discussion, such as blogs, and traditional modes of journalistic commentary, such as columns, are blurring. The author looks at how blogs are changing professional and academic communication, calling for discussion on how blogs and columns can serve complementary purposes. This paper was the basis for the author's presentation at a panel entitled "Column People: The Future of Columns in a World of Blogs" (with Bob Nardini) at the North American Serials Interest Group (NASIG) Conference in Louisville, Kentucky in 2007.

KEYWORDS. Weblogs, journalists, scholarly publishing, communication in learning and scholarship, columns

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INTRODUCTION

The spirit of Web 2.0 is sweeping the library world.¹ Librarians are seeking ways to implement emerging web technologies in order to provide better online interaction among patrons and librarians. Weblog software is at the forefront of these emerging interactive technologies and serials librarians are taking serious notice. Library conferences, such as the North American Serials Interest Group (NASIG) Conference, in Louisville, Kentucky, provide excellent opportunities to examine and discuss how new e-venues, such as weblogs (or blogs), are changing how we communicate personally, professionally and in terms of scholarship.² As experienced journal columnists and librarians, we are especially interested in how the rapidly spreading blog phenomenon is blurring the landscape of journalism, calling into question the purpose and future of traditional publishing venues such as columns.

Blogs are already taking an increasingly prominent role in public discourse while mainstream media in many ways is adopting the tools of the web. Bloggers are commonly quoted and cited on news programs and magazine commentaries. A growing number of newspaper and magazine columnists are themselves continuing their print commentary on the web via their own blogs often hosted by their parent publications. Newspapers and magazines are not only increasingly expected to have an online presence but also to provide interactive features, such as a means for reader comments. These and other manifestations of the interaction and mutual influence between traditional media and new online venues led to our decision to facilitate a discussion forum at the 2007 NASIG Conference on the future of columns in a world of blogs.

Before beginning a discussion on issues intersecting the realms of columns and blogs, it is helpful to establish some general definitions and establish a little history of these modes of expression. Of course, we must keep in mind that one can find exceptions to any list of general characteristics of categories as broad and diverse as “columns” and “blogs.” What are columns and blogs and where did they come from? Should we differentiate blogs from other online web objects that use weblog software for various purposes not commonly associated with blogs?

Once general characteristics common to each mode of expression are established, we can begin to compare and contrast them, as well as deal with their interrelationships. What characteristics do blogs share with columns? What qualities separate them? How do blogs and other

weblog-based publications fit into the spectrum of scholarly and popular communication? Are online forms, such as blogs, part of a paradigm shift in professional and scholarly communication that will transform what we traditionally regard as journalism and formal scholarship? How do librarians fit into and even facilitate such an evolution?

DEFINING THE COLUMN

Anyone who reads magazines or newspapers has a sense of what columns are. Some of us may have even contributed to a column at some time. *Webster's New World Dictionary of Media and Communication* defines the word "column" as "a series of features or articles appearing regularly in a newspaper or magazine, by a particular writer (a columnist) or on a certain subject."³ The web version of the *Infoplease* encyclopedia defines "columnist" as "the writer of an essay appearing regularly in a newspaper or periodical, usually under a constant heading . . . Usually independent of the policy of the publication, the columnist is allowed to criticize political and social institutions as well as persons."⁴ We generally regard a column as a section of a newspaper, magazine, journal, or other serial publication where a specific writer expresses opinions, analysis, or treatment of a particular topic on a regular basis. For many decades prior to the Internet, newspaper and magazine columns were a primary source for news editorials and social commentary and analysis. But, the purpose of columns over the years has ranged beyond news commentary and included such areas as book and movie reviews, gossip, food, advice, technical information, gardening, travel, and others.

Columns can generally be differentiated from other forms of journalism, though individual columns can often closely resemble other kinds of articles. There are no set rules, but generally columns can be described as: (1) having a single voice; (2) being carefully composed and topic focused; (3) published periodically (they can be expected by the readers to reoccur); (4) supervised by an editorial filter of the parent publication; (5) composed by a writer who is hired or selected; (6) being part of a larger publication; and (7) possibly requiring subscription before access.

HISTORY OF COLUMNS

Published commentary in magazines and newspapers has been around for well over two hundred years. In 1704, Daniel Defoe published

A Review of the Affairs of France, considered the first English magazine. It contained opinions, criticism, and satire. In 1709, Joseph Addison provided essays for Richard Steele's *The Tattler*. After that publication ended, Addison created *The Spectator* in 1712. One of the most famous early British journals, it lasted three years and had a newspaper appearance but contained only commentary. Addison is attributed with introducing the short informal essay.⁵ Another early hallmark in the history of published personal comment was Joseph Dennie's *Port Folio* in 1801. This Philadelphia periodical "set a pattern for future magazines by appealing to a general audience and featuring wit, insightful criticism, and political analysis."⁶ Early periodicals such as these laid the foundation for the tradition of comment magazines that began to emerge in the 19th century and flourished in the 20th—*The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, *Weekly Standard*, etc. Columns have also appeared in scholarly journals. In terms of the librarian profession, the columns of *Library Journal*, *Against the Grain*, and *Serials Review* may come to mind.

In recent years, we have seen comment magazines along with newspapers migrating to the web, developing a growing readership that only accesses their periodicals online. We are seeing changes in structure and features that allow readers more options for searching, responding, and navigating. Many of these evolving features are blurring the boundaries between traditional journalism and scholarship and emerging online forms such as blogs.

DEFINING THE BLOG

According to Technorati, a search engine that tracks blogs, "Blogs are powerful because they allow millions of people to easily publish and share their ideas, and millions more to read and respond. They engage the writer and reader in an open conversation, and are shifting the Internet paradigm as we know it."⁷ Technorati also notes, as of May 2007, that there are well over 80 million blogs in existence. And as one may imagine, with so many blogs in existence, there must be an enormous range in quality and characteristics. Cory Doctorow in his 2002 book, *Essential Blogging*, described blogs simply as "a webpage that contains brief, discrete hunks of information called posts . . . arranged in reverse-chronological order . . . uniquely identified by an anchor tag, and is marked with a permanent link."⁸

Mark Tremayne in the introduction to his 2007 book, *Blogging, Citizenship and the Future of Media*, described blogs as "distinguished from other websites in their dynamism, reverse chronological presentation,

and dominant use of the first person.”⁹ So, therefore, some common characteristics that distinguish blogs from web sites that utilize weblog software are: (1) a personal voice; (2) dated entries in reverse-chronological order with older entries archived; (3) a list of other blogs that are linked separately from the posts; and (4) a mechanism for comment by readers.

A study that looked at random samples of 200 blogs in 2003 found that “the average English-language blog had a single author, focused on personal events in the blogger’s life, contained relatively few links, and received few comments. A similar study the following year found similar results.¹⁰ The authors of that study “characterized blogs as having more in common with diaries than with independent journalism.” Other studies that looked at random samples of blogs have supported the earlier characterizations—that most blogs are single-authored personal diaries with an overall predominance of personal over news content and few links to news sources. These studies are important arguments against the general notion of blogging as “citizen journalism.”¹¹ It is useful to note these studies in defining blogs since it is easy to formulate one’s notions about blogs based upon those with which we are most familiar and thus to extrapolate that definition upon the whole. If we are accustomed to only reading some of the most popular political blogs, or blogs associated with our profession, or in some cases, only announcement web sites that use weblog software, we might assume that most blogs share these characteristics when in fact the vast majority of blogs tend to be personal and diary-like. Some blogs are meant for a small audience; others vie for readership with national news media. Blogs reflect as many topics and opinions as there are bloggers writing them.

In a 2007 Balance Point column in *Serials Review*, a number of librarians expressed their understanding of what makes a blog: Jacob Eubanks wrote that “the blog has the potential to be an extremely useful tool for a librarian seeking a simplified medium through which to communicate professionally” while K.D. Ellis suggested that “blogs seem like a good way to keep a large but undefined group current on certain topics.”¹²

HISTORY OF BLOGS

Compared to columns, blogs are quite young, in fact only about ten years old, and are therefore a relatively new format in the world of personal comment. Jorn Barger is commonly credited with coining the

use of the word “weblog” in 1997 for the kind of web sites we now regard as blogs. Peter Herholtz is credited with splitting the word in 1999 into “we-blog” and extracting out “blog.”

One can find various chronologies of the history of blogs on the web that note predecessors to blogs, such as the *Xanga* site that hosted online diaries back in 1996, the *Mosaic* “What’s new” page back in 1993 and the bulletin boards of the late 1980s. Popularity and widespread use of blogs began in 1999 with the advent of easily available, easy to use blogging software such as *Pitas*, *Blogger*, and *Groksoup*. By 2003, the *Oxford English Dictionary* had included the terms weblog, weblogging, and weblogger in their dictionary.¹³ The emergence of simple weblog software in the late 1990s made an already open web even more democratic, what some might even describe as anarchistic.

We saw a rapid increase in political commentary blogs after September 11, 2001. Some of the most well known blogs emerged in that period such as Glenn Reynolds’s *Instapundit* and Bob Somerby’s, *Daily Howler*, for example. In the following year, we saw the birth of other popular blogs, such as Markos Moulitsas’s, *DailyKos*. The year 2002 also saw the first blog-driven political controversy when bloggers noted comments made by U.S. Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott at a party honoring U.S. Senator Strom Thurmond, in which he praised Senator Thurmond by suggesting that the United States would have been better off if Thurmond had won his 1948 presidential campaign, with its platform of racial segregation. No major media outlets reported the Senator’s remarks, which were seen as a tacit approval of racial segregation, until after blogs had posted the story.

Blogs continue to gain readership, and though most Americans still depend on television for their news, an increasing number of people are regularly visiting blogs to sort and filter their news as well as to have someone else decode the essence of what is important to know among the vast information and news flooding forth every day. The percentage of people who have incorporated blogs into their information seeking routine is steadily growing. A Pew study reported in 2005 that 16% of adults in the United States read blogs. Gallup, however, reported in the same year that only 2% of Americans read political blogs on a daily basis compared to the 39% who watch cable news, the 36% who watch network news, and the 21% who listen to talk radio.¹⁴ In 2006, Pew reported that 39% of Internet users read blogs and that 57 million American adults read blogs.¹⁵ Contrasting interestingly to these polls are the number of journalists who read blogs and take them seriously. According to a 2005 University of Connecticut study, 41% of journalists read blogs at least once a week and 55% report reading blogs as part of their work.¹⁶

LIBRARY BLOGS—LOTS OF VARIETY CLOSE TO HOME

The topic of weblogs and their uses is among the most popular in library literature these days. A search of a library literature database for the term “weblog” or “blog” will reveal an impressive number of related articles.¹⁷ Recent articles published about blogs in *American Libraries* and *Serials Review*, for example, exemplify the growing interest librarians have in this topic.¹⁸ On one end of the discussion, there is wide interest among librarians for adapting weblog software for practical library purposes, such as providing a convenient container to mount a library “what’s new” page and to advertise upcoming library events to patrons. Librarians have also seized upon weblog technology to disseminate library news among the profession and to explore library issues. Library blogs such as *ACRLog* and *Catalogablog* may come readily to mind.¹⁹

We are seeing all kinds of uses of the weblog software: to disseminate professional news, share advocacy information, and post work-related knowledge. And, of course, many librarians are using weblogs like most users, as personal “blogs,” creating their own personal publication for exploring professional, scholarly, or very personal ideas and feelings. Examples of librarian blogs include some with interesting names such as *The Days and Nights of the Lipstick Librarian*, *The Well-Dressed Librarian*, and *Free Range Librarian*.²⁰ Discovering the right library blog for one’s interest may often seem like a haphazard discovery process for someone new to them. The continued development of better discovery aids will help. Search sites such as Peter Scott’s *Library Weblog* index can be useful in exploring library blogs.²¹ Blog search engines, such as Technorati or Google Blogs, can be helpful in finding blogs of interest as well. Many blog readers also find their new blogs from a “blogroll,” a list of recommended blog links common on many blogs.

COLUMNS AND BLOGS—SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

When samples of the growing number of blogs are examined, a number of similarities between blogs and columns become apparent (Figure 1). Both forms: (1) usually have a personal voice or single point of view; (2) usually contain opinion and/or analysis; (3) can have a substantial readership; and (4) can exhibit either good or bad qualities of journalism.

Blogs differ from traditional newspaper and magazine columns in some interesting ways.²² Blogs are generally written rather informally, while

FIGURE 1. Differences between blogs and columns

BLOGS	COLUMNS
Blogs can be informal / diary-like / can have miscellaneous related content and daily updates	Columns are carefully composed and topic focused / periodic / less frequent
Accumulating posts in reverse chronology	Single post
Usually no editorial filter	Editorial filter of parent publication
Writer autonomous - anyone can start one	Writer hired or selected
Autonomous entity	Part of a larger publication
Contain links to archives, other blogs	Few or no links to other columns or archives
Mechanism for readers' comments and input	No mechanism for immediate reader input
Open access	Many have subscription barriers

(Note: There are exceptions to these general trends)

columns are usually more polished in style. Blogs accumulate in reverse-chronological order with past posts preserved and even older posts organized in a set of linked archives. Columns, on the other hand, are generally not directly linked to the past issues of the columns. Columns have editorial filters while most bloggers are autonomous, without editorial oversight. (Granted, some blogs, such as blogs sponsored by associations and publications, can have editorial oversight.) Finally, blogs are open access and invite readers' comments and discussion while columns, at least traditionally, are part of a subscription publication for which the only way readers can respond is through a letter to the editor. Times, of course, are changing and many of the features here associated with blogs are making their way over to columns. And much of the respect once afforded to columns is increasingly being attributed to blogs.

HOW THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN BLOGS AND COLUMNS ARE BLURRING

Where do blogs fit among other forms of communication and publishing? Are the boundaries blurring? Are new online forms of expression, such as blogs, usurping traditional formats in readership and regard?

Name any mainstream media outlet, whether it is news broadcasting, or magazine or newspaper publishing, and you will probably find some

kind of web portal for it. Mainstream media managers know the value of harnessing the Internet to their advantage. And they realize qualities of blogs can serve them well. Their web pages are organized with the expected web amenities online readers now expect. As Mark Tremayne noted in his recent book, "Often some things that were once called columns are now called blogs."²³ Thus, we see, for example, mainstream media sites inviting readers' comments. We are also finding columnists starting their own blogs, some of which are provided by the parent publication. Joe Klein of *Newsweek* is one example. Whether all the magazine and newspaper columnists that now find themselves doing blogs as part of their work actually enjoy the more frequent personal contact with their readers is a question for another day.

Mainstream media outlets recognize the influence and importance of popular bloggers, have sought their opinions, and even hired them as consultants. For example, Markos Moulitsas, creator of *DailyKos*, has been cited as an expert by such publications as *Newsweek*.²⁴ Other bloggers, such as Ana Marie Cox, also known as *Wonkette*, appear as guests on cable television. Columnists, like their colleagues in mainstream media, have also recognized the growing importance of blogs and the web. As Mark Tremayne succinctly wrote, "Columnists assume their readers are aware of the viewpoints of major blogs and increasingly cite them."²⁵ In January 2005, *Fortune* magazine listed a number of bloggers "that business people 'could not ignore.'"²⁶

As the professionalism and credibility of mainstream media is increasingly questioned (i.e., critiques of the over-emphasis on entertainment, cutbacks in news programming budgets, political leanings, and lack of civil discourse on cable news), the reputation of many blogs, in contrast, continues to grow. Steve Twomey, in an article in *Columbia Journalism Review*, argues that as high quality local newspaper columns are diminishing, creative bloggers are proliferating and attracting the attention of readers.²⁷ Readers tired of the cacophony of pundit cross talk on cable television have a growing array of online commentary to which to turn. Many of these opinion makers, such as Daniel Drezner and J. Bradford DeLong, are considered experts in their fields and can provide more in-depth analysis than many popular television and radio pundits can. Blog sites such as *TPM Café* host a wide range of government policy experts who frequently discuss political issues at a depth that is not found on cable television or in newspapers.

We certainly see the landscape of journalism changing in radical ways. Bloggers are engaging a growing number of readers in serious discussion

of important issues. The journalistic reputation of some bloggers is growing (a self-sorting process) both among readers and professional journalists, while traditional forms of journalism, such as columns, are looking more and more like blogs.

HOW BLOGS ARE CHANGING PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION AND SCHOLARSHIP

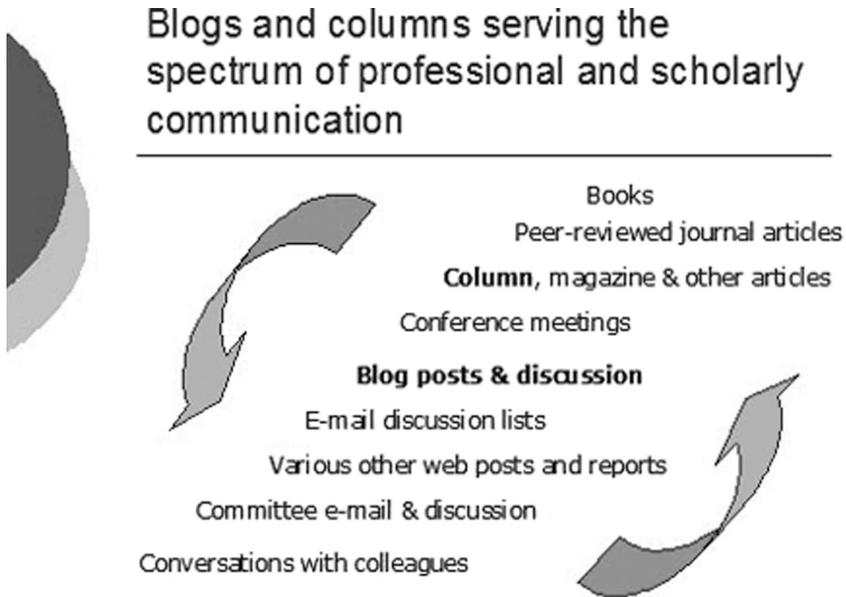
Blogs and other online formats are becoming important vehicles for continuing daily professional and scholarly discussion over space and time. It is becoming increasingly obvious that blogs have a place in the spectrum of scholarly communication (Figure 2). Many professional and scholarly ideas are born and developed within discussion blogs just as they are born in conference discussions, e-mail discussions and among colleagues talking over coffee or beer. As Jennifer Arnold noted in the *Serials Review* column, “Ultimately, I think blogs are a complementary form of publication and communication—different from traditional formats, yet another piece of the scholarly and professional communication pie.”²⁸

Some librarians argue that blogs and other e-venues, such as wikis, offer so many advantages over e-mail discussion lists that a new era in e-discussion will render listservs obsolete. Blogs focused on issues or specific aspects of librarianship are already major sources of knowledge for many librarians. As Jennifer Arnold reminds us, “The most interesting role that blogs will play in professional communication is the ability to engage in immediate conversations across time and place.”²⁹

In order to better incorporate blogs into one’s professional reading and discussion, there must be ways for reviewing and evaluating professional and scholarly weblogs. *Technical Services Quarterly* has taken a lead by setting aside a regular column to review popular library blogs, including such blogs as *The Shifted Librarian*, *The Free Range Librarian*, and *Stephen’s Lighthouse*.³⁰ We can expect professional associations to also take a lead in developing and promoting blogs, wikis and other online collaborative discussion devices for continuing the discussion of conferences and official committees in order to more systematically and efficiently develop topics into practice.

Such online discussion mechanisms as blogs have the potential to allow more members to participate in the development of professional and academic knowledge. Blogs and other online discussion mechanisms can permit distant members to monitor, and, in some ways, participate in

FIGURE 2. “Blogs and columns in the spectrum of professional and scholarly communication,” from the NASIG 2007 presentation.



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activities and discussions of an association’s conferences in real time in a way that they might not otherwise be able to do. The courage engendered by online distance, quasi anonymity, and ease of submission can also encourage broader participation by those who are not comfortable contributing to conferences or other scholarly discussions. However, this can also lead to the problem of dysfunctional “noise” such as emotional venting or inappropriate digressions that must then be filtered for useful content.

Certainly, we each have our own style of doing scholarship and advancing our own knowledge of our respective professions. For some, isolation with published literature and a laptop is best. For others, preparing for and delivering conference presentations is the best way to organize ideas on a subject before, say, submitting those ideas to a journal for publication. But there are a growing number of scholars who thrive in an online discussion environment. For those who benefit from online collaboration and networking, such as writing or reading a blog, the new technology is welcomed as an asset to their intellectual and professional development.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Good columnists—those with the right combination of talent and personality—will continue to inform and entertain their readers in the future even if many of the features of what they do are more like the workings of a blog. There will always be a place for genres of writing that lie somewhere between the daily diary of reflections and the peer-reviewed article. Columnists and the entire guild of professional librarians should welcome the evolving manifestations of publishing that continue to form and reform the world of communication.

With nearly a hundred million blogs expected to be counted by Technorati in the near future, where is all this headed? For some, it may be overwhelming while for others the abundance of human expression can give the same thrill one enjoys when faced with a great library of unread literature. Perhaps this is where librarianship comes in—as guides to the best of this new content.

We are seeing an evolution not only in modes of online expression but also in how we evaluate authority of online scholarship, what Michael Jenson calls “the new metrics of scholarly authority.” Such metrics may someday combine traditional measures of authority, such as reputation of a publication and citation impact, with other measures such as hits and links to other prestigious works.³¹ Librarians are already interested in applying online resource evaluation techniques and criteria, such as the CRAAP test (Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy, Purpose), to blogs. How such evaluative criteria could be meaningfully used is an excellent topic for discussion.³² Perhaps we can still take comfort in the organizing effect of traditional publishing systems, with their peer-review and editorial boards to ultimately arbitrate the final products of myriads of manuscripts arising from untold numbers of blog posts and countless discussions both live and online. We can also take comfort that librarians are already discussing their role in dealing with emerging online media in terms of using it professionally, of archiving and indexing it, and of guiding users to the best of the blogosphere.

As Barb Palser suggests, “The enlightened way to regard the advent of the bloggers would be to accept them as part of an evolving media scene rather than treat them as an invading force.”³³ The combination of reader-controlled sorting of the fittest on the web, emerging library selection tools, and a continuation in some form of traditional peer-review and professional journalism should bring comfort to those in fear of the loss of natural order in the scholarly communication spectrum. We can only benefit from

a more open flow of ideas and knowledge. In short, welcome to the new age of journalism and scholarly communication.

NOTES

1. See Robin Hastings' article, "Journey to Library 2.0" in *Library Journal* 132 (7) (April 2007):36 for a recent discussion of one library's account of grappling with this phenomena.

2. This paper served as the foundation for the my presentation as part of a "strategy" discussion session, co-presented with Bob Nardini at the North American Serials Interest Group (NASIG) annual conference in Louisville, Kentucky, May 31, 2007. The background text of Bob Nardini's presentation for the session is published in this volume and in *Against the Grain*, 19 (3) (June 2007).

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15. Pew Internet & American Life Project Surveys. January 2006: Feb-April 2006; Nov-Dec 2005; and Feb-April 2006. Retrieved June 14, 2007, from http://pewinternet.org/PPF/r/186/report_display.asp

16. Palser, *Journalism's Backseat*.

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18. American Libraries published a cover story entitled, "Mattering in the Blogosphere," March 2007 followed by another article, "Mattering in the Blogosphere," two issues later in May 2007. The 2007 Balance Point column in *Serials Review* ("What's the Ballyhoo About Blogs") provides a forum for several librarians to reflect on the importance of blogs in their lives and work.

19. The Association of College and Research Libraries's (ACRL), blog called ACR-Log. is available at <http://catalogablog.blogspot.com> (Retrieved June 10, 2007).

20. The Days and Nights of the Lipstick Librarian, (<http://www.lipsticklibrarian.com/blog/>); The Well-Dressed Librarian, (<http://welldressedlibrarian.blogspot.com/>); and Free Range Librarian (<http://freerangelibrarian.com/>) (Retrieved June 14, 2007).

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22. Of course, publishers who have been developing their web presence have not been blind to the benefits of the web and have progressively adopted many of the tools of Internet (i.e., qualities of blogs) into their columns and their publications in general.

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