
Birthday reflections on a blog: a subject librarian's blog one year on

Christine Love-Rodgers
*Academic Liaison Librarian - Divinity
University of Edinburgh
New College Library
Mound Place
Edinburgh EH1 2LU
christine.love-rodgers@ed.ac.uk
<http://newcollegelibrarian.WordPress.com/>*

INTRODUCTION

The world is full of blogs and social media. Research by OCLC in 2012 found that 50% of UK academic librarians read blogs to stay informed (and 33% used Twitter).¹ Many people are out there doing social media, and I'm sure many are doing it better than I am. One of the attractions of social media is that you can just do it – and this is how I did it, developing new skills in social media to support my own role as a subject liaison librarian for divinity at the University of Edinburgh.

GETTING STARTED

A social media course inspired me to start my blog <http://newcollegelibrarian.WordPress.com/> in April 2012, partly to replace a previous library newsletter that I wasn't convinced was widely read. I wanted a more dynamic, flexible way of communicating to divinity staff, students and alumni at the University of Edinburgh. Being based at New College Library, which has retrospective cataloguing projects for special collections in progress, I am in the privileged position of being able just to pop downstairs and pull out an item from in the incunabula collections to blog about. I wanted to use the blog to make links between the School of Divinity and New College Library's collections, old and new, to demonstrate the value of the investment being made by the School of Divinity in our cataloguing projects. Guided by the university's social media guidelines,² I chose WordPress.com as a blogging platform because I knew that other staff

in the School of Divinity were using it and that there were WordPress blogs in similar libraries to mine (e.g. Glasgow and St Andrews universities). One of the features I liked about WordPress was the ability to link up with other forms of social media to broadcast your blog posts automatically, and I linked my blog to my Twitter and LinkedIn accounts. I wanted to set up a digital identity for myself focused on New College Library, and so chose an image from one of the library's stained glass windows as an identity picture.

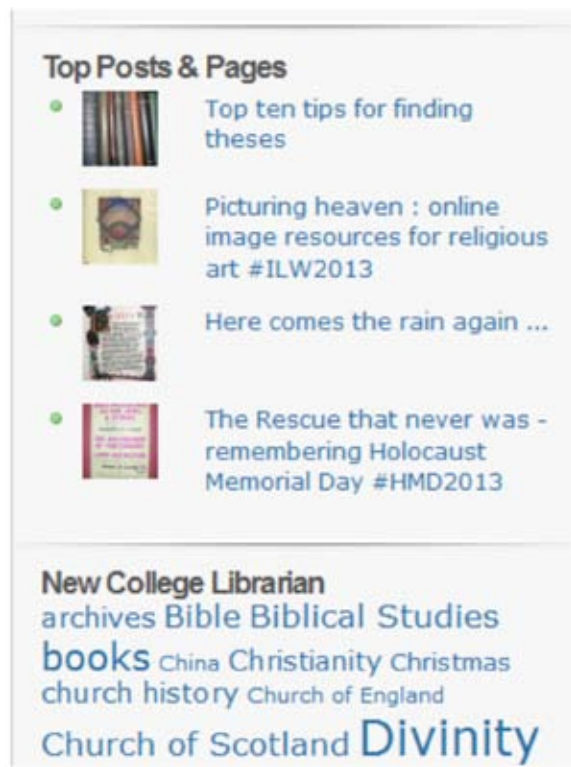
WHAT DID I BLOG?

Many excellent blogs exist, by individual librarians, institutions and special collections departments or projects within institutions (see UKLibrary blogs³ or CILIP members blog landscape⁴). My focus was to articulate the diversity and activity of my academic liaison librarian role to my user community and beyond. I blogged the information that I was already sending out by email to the School of Divinity – the 'need to know' news about library closures, important deadlines and online resources trials. But I also blogged about 'would like you to know' information that I would not have directly emailed staff and students about, such as bulletins on new books and articles on special collections items and collections. I aimed to keep my posts short (100–200 words) with an accompanying image. This helped me to keep the blog updated regularly, enabling me to use the blog to add value to my activities and fit blogging into a busy schedule.

I hesitated at first about whether to blog about e-resources and e-resource trials when these resources would not be accessible to blog readers outside the University of Edinburgh. However, a colleague reminded me of the professional importance of sharing information with other librarians about what we are trialling, so I went ahead, taking care to flag up that the links were for University of Edinburgh users only.

Dickson and Holley point out that 'traditional blogs still require the student to come to it rather than the library going to the users',⁵ contrasting them with Twitter, which allows 'librarians to go where the students are already located'. This was one reason why I used Twitter in conjunction with my blog, and it meant I could spread my net that much wider. With my blog posts automatically distributed by Twitter, I also tweeted and retweeted news from e-resources relevant to my subject area. Acting with my subject liaison librarian filter, I could interact with official UofE

Information Services accounts to pass on relevant information to my user community. I also found the use of hashtags effective for linking my activities as advertised on the blog to wider University of Edinburgh events, such as Innovative Learning Week (#ILW2013). I included some brief information skills posts – for instance on theses, or the use of the catalogue, but found that interactivity was limited.



TIME SPENT

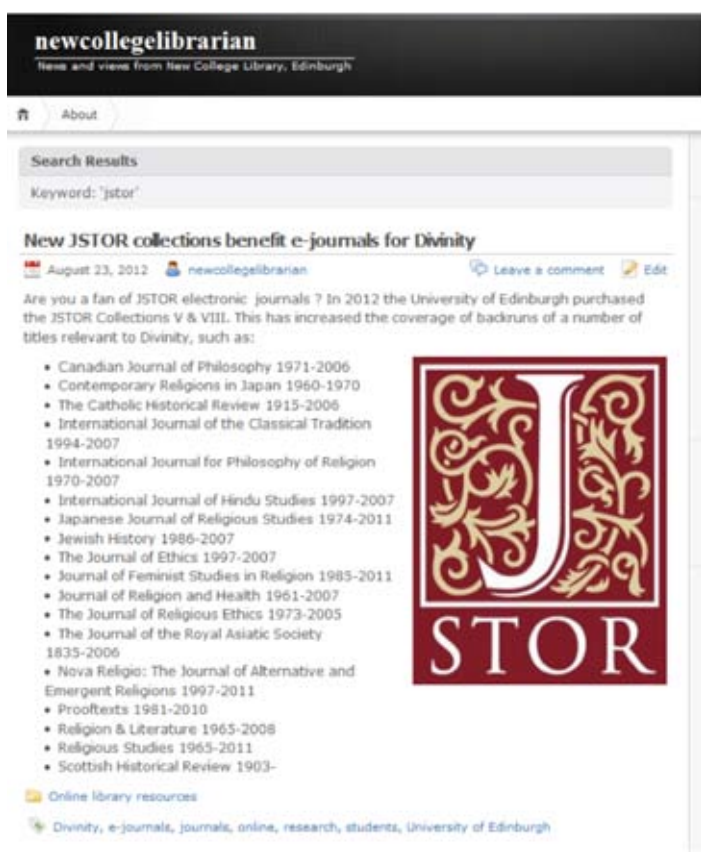
The actual writing time for each post depended on the material chosen – many blog entries were amplifications of material I was already sending out by email, or drew on material I had written for reports or project plans. More time consuming were the blog entries written on special collections items which, even if I restricted my research to the use of the *Dictionary of national bibliography*, still required time spent retrieving, examining and photographing the item itself. I found I could manage my writing time more effectively if I composed some blog posts during quieter periods and scheduled them to be published in a later and busier part of the university year.

I did spend time publicising my blog, through emails to the School of Divinity in induction sessions, and through mentions in university newsletters and magazines. I also spent time building my social media profile, through sourcing other relevant blogs and twitter feeds and following them in the hope that they would follow me.

Some time – but not a lot – was required to deal with the comments and queries that came via the blog and via twitter. An effective spam filter dealt with many of them but I did receive some genuine enquiries.

WHO READ MY BLOG?

Usage started small and steadily increased, to 100+ followers and 5500+ hits in 12 months after it began. WordPress's accessible statistics functions allowed me to see who was reading my blog in some detail. Jumps in usage followed publication of blog posts, but also peaked at unexpected times such as weekends. By far and away the most popular blog post was *New JSTOR collections benefit e-journals for divinity* – which was little more than a list of e-journals available via a new JSTOR package.



Other popular blog posts included articles about finding theses, a special collections pamphlet from Jacobite Edinburgh and a medieval manuscript on display in the library. I was surprised at how much the usage data pointed to my users searching my blog for information about e-journals and electronic resources, and I now blog much more about online resources than I did at first. One question that interested me was how much of the UK usage came from my target audience, the University of Edinburgh. Some of my blog

posts received 'likes' from users, but to date none of these has appeared to come from anyone with a visible connection to the University of Edinburgh. Around half of the hits each day come from Google searches. However, the others appear to be generated by users going directly to my blog, supporting the oral feedback I've had from the School of Divinity that they are reading it. From the beginning the School of Divinity was supportive of the blog, and put a link to it on the front page of their website which, as the statistics showed, generated steady traffic. I have carried out small polls asking for information about the identity of blog readers at six months and a year into the life of the blog, and found that the majority of respondents replied that they were from the University of Edinburgh.

Examples of impact include student enquiries following blog posts – often on a different subject entirely – and a postgraduate student enquiring if newly catalogued collections featured on the blog contained items relevant to his PhD – exactly the type of interaction I would wish to see.

An interesting example in the life of the blog came from a week of blog posts on our newly catalogued Gaelic Collections in October 2012. Broadcast on Twitter, the statistics information on WordPress showed that links to the blog articles were also being circulated on Facebook. In November I received a phone call from BBC Radio Nan Gaidheal, who had picked up the information on the blog and were asking to broadcast an interview from New College Library about the Gaelic collections. When the interview went out, Gaelic listeners responded by phoning in to the radio station with additional information about the collection's donor, Rev. Roderick Macleod – a lovely example of the wider public interacting with our collections.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

I have found that my blog makes a creative and dynamic space to develop the story of New College Library Edinburgh and to try out new ways of reaching my user community. My blog also forms a resource bank of information about New College Library that doesn't exist anywhere else.

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About

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Gaelic hymns from the Highlands

October 23, 2012 newcollegelibrarian Go to comments Leave a comment Edit



Grant, Peter. Dain spioradail. Elgin : Peter Macdonald, bookseller, 1837. New College Library Gaelic Collections 250.

New College Library's recently catalogued Gaelic Collections contain several editions of "Dain spioradail" by the celebrated hymn writer Peter Grant.

This edition at Gaelic Coll. 250 is the fifth edition, considerably enlarged and improved from earlier editions. It was published in Elgin, in the highlands of Scotland.

The title page information refers to Grant's Gaelic name Pàdraig Grannd nan Òran, which means 'Peter Grant of the songs'. Grant was a Baptist minister, born on 30 January 1783 at Ballintua, Strathspey, Scotland. He was a skilled fiddle player, who was able to set his poems on evangelical themes to well known tunes which were popular into the twentieth century. This work is typical of the works in the Gaelic Collection, which contains many volumes of religious poetry.

With thanks to Patrick Murray, our Gaelic Cataloguer, for supplying details of this item.

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Rare Books at New College Library

Gaelic, hymnbooks, hymns, new college library, nineteenth-century, rare books, Scotland, Special Collections

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Stranack⁶ talks about how 'social media tools can provide the foundation for building your personal learning network', and I have found that Twitter, in particular, can be great for connecting with other librarians and for broadening horizons, and making links with other sectors. New College Library holds significant archive collections, and the tweets for funding calls from grant funding bodies for archive projects that have come my way have spurred me on to explore archive projects. I've learned that interacting in Twitter by retweeting is a quick and easy way to stay active in social media and helps to build your profile by telling others what you're interested in. I've found that even my small amount of dabbling in Twitter has turned up a few pearls of useful information to be shared on the ebb and flow of the social media tide.

IMPACT: ONE YEAR ON

My blog has now been active for one calendar year. I would call it a modest success so far, as it

has met my aim for it to be a more dynamic newsletter for the Edinburgh Divinity community. One of the things I like about blogging is that my posts have a life far beyond their first appearance – the internet search traffic means that even the very first posts I made are still being picked up and read. For me, this retrospective blog life increases the value of the time spent writing it. My blog gives me a digital visibility – an advantage, as I am rarely visible in the library on an issue or reference desk. I also like the fact that I control the parameters of the blog, such as how much and when I post. While the blog has not attracted a huge following, if it were only being read by the 35 members of the School of Divinity staff it would have achieved a large part of my aim. But it has done much more. My use of Twitter has been successful in not only broadcasting my content (and hopefully putting that content where my users are) but also making connections with other librarians and with other staff at the University of Edinburgh. It would be interesting to develop more two-way social interaction via the different social media, as I can see there's been more telling than talking from me so far. I have also,

to date, avoided using Facebook for work purposes, but it may be that it is a more effective way to reach the student community. We'll see ...

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