

Mining Information Gold in the Blogosphere

How to use Web logs as reliable research tools

by Paul J. Moorman

In many ways, the Internet has become both a blessing and curse, especially for librarians. While we benefit from the ease of having an incredible amount of information readily available at our fingertips, we also have seen a dramatic increase in the questionable quality of that same information. Our goal of providing reliable, trustworthy, and relevant information for our patrons has become much more difficult because of this vast increase in the amount and quality of information available and produced—infoglut.

One of the main reasons behind both the increased availability of information on the Web and the attendant information explosion has been the ubiquitous Web log, or blog. These chronologically ordered online journals have made it possible for everyone who wishes to publish his or her thoughts, observations, analyses, and links for the world to see. And while blogs have the potential to be information gold mines, wading through the blogosphere (the world of blogs) to find nuggets of information gold can be as time-consuming and unsuccessful as panning for gold at the end of the California Gold Rush.

However, all is not lost. With some guidance, you can find information gold in the blogosphere and learn to manage infoglut.

Blogs as Information Sources

When it comes to blogs, not too many people are neutral: you're either a blog detractor or a blog supporter. Blog detractors point to the sheer number of blogs and claim that navigating this ocean of information is simply not worth the effort. To make matters worse, much of the information created in the blogosphere disappears almost as fast as it appears. All this seems to support blog-detractors' assertions that anyone looking for information in blogs is living in a fool's paradise and is bound to waste time and energy with little to show for the effort.

Blog supporters, on the other hand, point to the prestige and the consistently high-quality writing on some blogs. They see bloggers at the top of their various professions, using their blogs—read on a daily basis by thousands of people in their fields—to discuss weighty issues of the day and undoubtedly influence policymakers and the public. Blog-supporters can't understand how anyone can dismiss this veritable information gold mine simply because the presentation is unorganized and time-consuming to follow.

But if you take a closer look at the arguments for both blog-detractors and blog-supporters, you will find that they really aren't that far apart. Blogs can be both trivial and profound, and these traits are evident even in the best blogs.

Blogs written by lawyers, law professors, and law librarians are of particular interest to law librarians. These law-oriented blogs (often called blawgs) are taking the legal world by storm. Some of the most highly respected law professors, attorneys, and law librarians have turned to the blog format to present their opinions, observations, and analysis to an ever-increasing audience of readers.

One well-regarded blog filled with information, including analysis of legal issues, opinions, and links to various sources, is the Volokh Conspiracy (www.volokh.com) by UCLA Law Professor Eugene Volokh. Volokh uses his blog to "articulate ideas to scholars, other lawyers, and the general population," according to Susan

“... just because blogs are so diverse and the information difficult to find, we librarians, as information experts, do our patrons disservice if we fail to make an effort at tapping into [them].”

Davis in the June 2004 issue of *California Lawyer Magazine*. But for every Volokh Conspiracy there are thousands of blogs that can end up being nothing more than attractive nuisances that eat up valuable research time while offering nothing of substance for the effort. However, just because blogs are so diverse and the information difficult to find, we librarians, as information experts, do our patrons a disservice if we fail to make an effort at tapping into some of the information that may only be found in the blogosphere.

Current Information is Blogs' Strength

The variety of useful information in blogs is as varied as the blogs themselves, but for librarians they are particularly useful in finding current information. Since bloggers



Tips to Navigate the Blogosphere

Finding Blogs

- Use search engines like www.google.com (search term: “-blog inurl:archives”), www.yahoo.com (search term: “blog inurl:archives”), or www.teoma.com (search term: “blog archives”).
- Use blog-specific search engines like www.feedster.com or www.bloglines.com.
- Check out Ari Paparo’s Big List of Blog Search Engines at www.aripaparo.com/archive/000632.html.
- Use a blog related directory like www.blawg.org or www.Kinja.com.
- Ask for recommendations from friends and colleagues familiar with the subjects you are interested in following.

- Check out the blogrolls of blogs you trust and follow.

Following Blogs

- Review the blogger’s biographical information.
- Evaluate the blogs you follow on a regular basis and weed out any unnecessary blogs.
- Use an RSS reader to give you the headlines of your favorite blogs in one location. Download a free reader (www.Feedreader.com) or sign up through online blog services.
- Check out “RSS for Non-Techie Librarians” by Steven Cohen at www.llrx.com/features/rssforlibrarians.htm.

are often “in the trenches” of the fields they discuss, they can provide unique and valuable information, especially when looking for new developments and changes in a particular field. Genie Tyburski, Web manager of the popular legal research site The Virtual Chase (www.virtualchase.com), agrees that blogs are a great source of current information when found on trustworthy sources.

“**The variety of useful information in blogs is as varied as the blogs themselves, but for librarians they are particularly useful in finding current information.**”

How do you find those information nuggets in blogs? The best way is to use either a general or blog-specific search engine. While most general search engines, like Google, Yahoo, or Teoma, have changed their algorithms so that blogs are no longer some of the most highly ranked sites, blogs still appear in many search results. With these tools you can also limit your search to blogs by using specific search

commands in addition to your keywords. For example, with Google, you can search information in blogs by adding “-blog inurl:archives” to your search command. Similarly, for Yahoo, simply add “blog inurl:archives” to your search terms, and for Teoma add “blog archives,” according to Christina K. Pikas in the March/April 2004 issue of *B/ITe*. By combining the terms blog and archives, you get great precision in your search results because almost all blogs have an archive, she adds.

Another way to search for information in blogs is to use blog-specific search engines like Feedster or Bloglines. These engines work much like general search engines but limit their searching to blogs. For a more comprehensive list of these tools, check out Ari Paparo’s Big List of Blog Search Engines at www.aripaparo.com/archive/000632.html.

Blogs Worth Following

One of the most useful ways to use the blogosphere for information gold is to develop a list of trustworthy blogs in subject areas of interest to you and your patrons and follow them regularly. However, finding the right blogs to follow can be a time-consuming and difficult task. One of the best ways to start is to ask for recommendations from friends and colleagues familiar with the subjects you are interested in following.

You can also check out the “blogrolls” of blogs you trust and follow. Blogrolls are lists of blogs that a blogger recommends and/or follows and are found on almost every blog.

Paying attention to blogrolls is a great way to evaluate the relevancy, usefulness, and potential bias of the blog. However, the most valuable aspect of blogrolls is to help cherry-pick the best blogs in a particular subject. This will also allow you to let the bloggers you trust do much of the deeper searching of the blogosphere while you reap the rewards.

Another way of finding blogs is to use a blog-related directory like www.blawg.org or www.Kinja.com. Blawg.org has a great selection of legal blawgs organized by subject and popularity and is a particularly valuable tool for a law librarian.

Once you’ve located a blog in your or your patrons’ subject interest, the first thing to do is to review the blogger’s biographical information. If this information isn’t provided, its value as an information source is limited and probably is not worth the time and effort to follow. Also, it’s important to remember to evaluate the blogs you follow regularly to verify that they provide information of use to you and/or your patrons, much like a library makes a regular effort to evaluate its collection and weed out materials it no longer needs.

RSS: The Smart Way to Follow Blogs

Once you’ve developed a blog list, your work is just beginning. You can, of course, follow them the old fashioned way and read each blog directly. But a far more time-effective and efficient way to read a large number of blogs is to follow your selected blogs through an RSS reader. RSS readers give you the headlines of your favorite blogs in one location that’s easy to skim and search.

Using an RSS reader is quite simple once you’ve learned the basics. First, you can either download an RSS reader (www.Feedreader.com has a great free, open-source version) or sign up through online blog services like [Kinja.com](http://www.Kinja.com) and [Bloglines.com](http://www.Bloglines.com) to read the RSS feeds of the blogs online. Once you’ve done this, you can scan the headlines and highlights of a blog without getting bogged down in the details of each posting. For more information about RSS and how it can be useful for librarians, check out “RSS for Non-Techie Librarians” by Steven Cohen at www.llrx.com/features/rssforlibrarians.htm.

Finding reliable blogs in fields of value to you and your patrons and using them to find current information may help you find information gold in the blogosphere without drowning in infoglut. ■

Paul J. Moorman (paul.moorman@pepperdine.edu) is reference/electronic services librarian at Pepperdine University Law Library in Malibu, California.