



# HISTORY BYTES

BY TIM GROVE

## To Blog or Not to Blog

**B**log, blogger, blogosphere, blogroll, blogsnob, dark blog, milblog, photoblog, plog, splog, vlog... sounds like an alien language rather than a new vocabulary that has formed to articulate the world of blogging. The activity of blogging has hit the big time. The blog search engine Technorati claims to track more than 112 million of them.

The strange, alien-like term is a contraction of web log. A blog is a website in the form of an online journal. The blogger writes new entries on a regular basis and commentary often includes graphics, videos, and links to other websites and blogs. Visitors to the blog can respond by commenting on the entries, linking to them, or emailing the blogger. According to the Internet in American Life study ([www.pewinternet.org](http://www.pewinternet.org)), thirty-nine percent of Americans have read a blog and twenty-two percent have posted a comment to an online news group, website, blog, or photo site. The study also reports that seven percent of Americans claim to read a blog every day.

Though there are many styles of blogs, there are some common characteristics. Blogs tend to feature an informal, conversational, sometimes even off-color, tone. Blog readers do not expect academic or journalistic writing. Their readers value timely and new information and expect fresh entries on a regular basis. They can be highly visual with links to images, video, websites, and animation.

Since they first appeared in the late 1990s, blogs have had a major impact on many facets of culture, including journalism and politics. They provide a voice for millions of people. And history organizations are jumping on the bandwagon. Many blogs focus on a specific topic (like the restoration of a historic house, for example) and bring together a community of people who have an interest in that topic. So it might seem that starting a blog is an obvious move for any organization, part of

a comprehensive communications strategy.

Why consider a blog? As a complement to e-newsletters or standard hard-copy newsletters, a blog offers an opportunity to hear back from the people who matter most to your organization. The National Trust for Historic Preservation launched a blog in November 2007 as an alternative to an e-newsletter and as a timely resource for its twenty-nine historic sites located across the country. The Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES) started a blog in August 2007. Recognizing their unique ability to share stories and years of expertise, SITES decided that a blog targeted to museum professionals could be a valuable contribution to the museum field. Smaller organizations like the General Lew Wallace Study and Museum in Indiana have also made the decision to start a blog in large part because of the ease of updating information and reaching members, prospective visitors, and local residents.

But who is the audience? Most organizations find it difficult to track who is reading their blogs, although they can track what website the reader has just come from and the number of times a blog has been viewed. Reader comments on the blog also provide clues about the audience. But most bloggers I spoke with admit, and statistics verify, that very few readers take the time to comment. This ability to offer readers the opportunity to comment provides the potential for increased dialogue, but only if readers contribute.

Jennifer Brundage of the Smithsonian Affiliations Program maintains that organization's blog. She says that blogs work best when their topic attracts a communi-

ty of readers who are passionate about the topic and want to discuss it at a deep level. When this happens, it benefits both that community and novices who want to learn more about the topic. Brundage reads [museumtwo.blogspot.com](http://museumtwo.blogspot.com), a blog about Web 2.0, to stay up-to-date on the medium.

Blogs of cultural organization focus on many different topics. The SITES blog offers behind-the-scenes stories and tips from their staff about exhibition installation and mounting and related topics. Some organizations use a blog specifically to promote an event. Some maintain a blog about an ongoing project such as a restoration. The Montpelier Foundation launched a blog about its ongoing restoration of President James Madison's home at [montpelierrestoration.wordpress.com](http://montpelierrestoration.wordpress.com). The Historical Society of Pennsylvania is processing the papers of the Chew family, one of Philadelphia's wealthiest and most influential families, and maintains a blog about this project at [chewpapers.blogspot.com](http://chewpapers.blogspot.com). Other organizations find a blog a useful tool to showcase collections. Yale's Beinecke Library website offers links to a variety of blogs that highlight items from collections such as [brblroom26.wordpress.com](http://brblroom26.wordpress.com), the Room 26 Cabinet of Curiosities blog.

According to Bryan Kennedy at the Science Museum of Minnesota, there are four main kinds of blogs that museum staff tend to write:

- 1) **Institutional information** the Smithsonian American Art Museum's Eye Level: [eyelevel.si.edu](http://eyelevel.si.edu)
- 2) **Museum content** the Minnesota Historical Society's Collections Up Close: [discussions.mnhs.org/collections](http://discussions.mnhs.org/collections)

**Congratulations to the history sites selected as winners of the Best of the Web 2008 competition at the Museums and the Web annual conference.**

**WINNERS ARE LISTED AT:**

**[conference.archimuse.com/forum/mw2008\\_announcing\\_best\\_web\\_2008](http://conference.archimuse.com/forum/mw2008_announcing_best_web_2008)**

**3) Community and expert Science Museum of Minnesota's Science Buzz:**

[www.smm.org/buzz](http://www.smm.org/buzz)

**4) Personal voice the Walters Art Museum director's blog: [www.thewalters.org/blog](http://www.thewalters.org/blog)**

Yet blogs are not a good idea for every organization. Like other social media, they take time, money, and commitment. The organization must be prepared to provide the human resources necessary to maintain the blog and to write entries on a continual basis. Max van Balgooy of the National Trust advises that "maintaining a blog requires continuous activity." He cautions that "many blogs eventually fail when the owner stops posting frequently, most often due to time constraints or lack of personnel." Van Balgooy recommends one posting a week at minimum. Others recommend two postings. A blog that

does not show recent activity will lose readers very quickly.

Another challenge is marketing. If you want people to read your blog, you need to advertise it wherever you can. List the address on your website, in the signature line of staff emails, write a press release, advertise on AASLH and other professional listservs. One of the best ways to drive traffic to your blog is to make comments on other blogs and link them back to your own blog. That's how to become part of the blogosphere.

Every blogger I spoke with said he or she would recommend that other cultural organizations start a blog. But there are important decisions to make right at the start:

- 1) What topic will be the focus of the blog?**
- 2) Who is the target audience?**
- 3) Who is going to maintain the blog**

**(just one or several authors)?**

**4) How often will a new entry be added?**

**5) How will you market the blog?**

To find out more about museum blogs, read [www.MuseumBlogs.org](http://www.MuseumBlogs.org), a directory of museum and museum-related blogs. The purpose of the site is to raise awareness and increase the authority of blogs focusing on museum issues. To learn more about blogs in general read one of the many blogs about blogging. Two with helpful tips are [www.pureblogging.com](http://www.pureblogging.com) and [www.bloggingtips.com](http://www.bloggingtips.com). And while you're at it, you may want to try out the blog search engine Technorati and check if anyone is blogging about your institution! ●

"History Bytes" is a forum for discussing Web issues facing all types of historical institutions. Tim Grove can be reached at [grovet@si.edu](mailto:grovet@si.edu).

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