Best Practices for Public Comment on Library and/or Association Websites
American Library Association
Library 2.0 Boot Camp
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GOALS
• Identify best practices for open comments in weblogs on both ALA and individual library organizational websites.

• Explore open partnerships and collaborations between library users and/or association members, as engaged in dialog, that promotes individual ownership.

ORGANIZATIONAL VS. PERSONAL BLOGS

There appear to be significant distinctions between organizational and institutional blogs that impact the selection of best practices for open commenting. Currently, blogs published by individuals tend toward the free expression of the individual’s experiences and opinions. The individual uses her own resources to maintain the blog, and can select the degree of openness of the blog based on personal preference and capability.

Blogs published and maintained by organizations are usually informational in nature, and have several issues that are not evident in the personal sphere. First, the blog is an aspect of the organization’s service and image, and items posted to it impact the perception of the organization by its community. Second, there are legal issues (e.g., compliance with IRS rules for nonprofit organizations, legal liability for libelous postings) that may impact the organization’s decisions about best practices for open commenting.

Because these differences will have a significant impact on the selection of best practices, the team decided to focus on organizational blogs.
THE PROJECT

The team identified four scenarios for institutional blogs and evaluated best practices for each, by analyzing the purpose, audience, best practices and guiding principles. The matrix below summarizes the findings of this project.

It is important to note that the degree of moderation varies inversely with the size of the audience. The degree of radical trust varies inversely with the degree of verification of the commentator’s identity.

Following are detailed descriptions of the four scenarios represented on the matrix.

Scenario 1: Defined Task with Restricted Access
This type of blog is used to share information and receive feedback among a defined group of members. It requires verification of identity by required login, match towards a membership list, or access behind a firewall. The need for moderation reduced by defining membership. One example is a blog used by a working committee that does need or want open commenting (or even viewing).

1. **Purpose of tool(s):** to share committee work among team members and seek input/feedback from committee members and/or membership.
2. **Audience**: Depending upon scope/purpose of the blog, the audience for the tool may be only committee members and/or registered members.

3. **Best practices**
   a. All authorized members should have the ability to both write posts and add comments to post.
   
      b. Identification:
         
         i. If the tool is used is for committee work and only open to comments by team members, user identification (via verification) should be required. Example: For the ALAL2 project, only project members may comment on each other blogs. Verification/login is required.
         
         ii. If the tool is used to seek input from only the registered membership, identity verification should be required in some form (verification against a membership directory or registered list of users). However name & email (hidden, used only for reply) and URL (optional) should be asked for. Note: This does not prevent a user from identifying themselves as anonymous (me@anonymous.com) but it does establish name and email required fields to post a comment.
   
   c. There should be an understanding among all team members regarding editing of each others posts. Since editing history is not inherent with blogging tools, commenting on blogs should be the preferred method for suggesting changes.

   d. **Moderation & Censorship**
      
      i. If the blog is closed to only team members (via either firewall and/or password protected, there should be absolutely no moderation of team member comments and/or censorship.
      
      ii. If comments on a blog are open to all members of membership there may be moderation of comments, but it is not recommended.

4. **Guiding Principles**
   a. All contributions from all team members are seen as equal.
   
   b. Blogs allow team members to voice individual threads of conversations and hence are the preferred mechanism for generating comment and conversations. Even with group blogs, individual voices are easy to identify.
c. Confidentiality of the blog (i.e., restricted access) may engender more “radical trust” among participants, who do not have to be concerned with unknown individuals viewing or commenting on their entries.

Scenario Two: Blog open-to-the-world
Example: Blog that promotes an organization or library, and open commenting will increase potential involvement from membership or patrons.

1. **Purpose of tool(s)** - Endless purposes could exist here. From an organizational perspective, primary purposes might include promotion of the organization or its activities, communication with its membership and potential members, or informational uses (news headlines, political issues, issues specific to profession, intellectual freedom, etc.). Goals could include PR/marketing, or promotion of knowledge & discussion.

2. **Audience**: Open to ALL.

3. **Best practices**: 2 possible situations exist
   a. **No commenting** allowed because the blog is informational rather than interactive. For example, blog might just be a listing of activities or news announcements.

   **Positives** - This allows an organization to keep the professional look of "press release" page of a web site without moderation or extra work.

   **Negative** - No interaction or discussion. For example, if people have a question about a posting, they need to locate an email address and submit a question. If open commenting was allowed, the question and follow-up answer would have been available for all viewers.

   b. **Open commenting allowed** to promote discussion. Some moderation might be necessary to decrease spam attacks or prevent vulgatory. If moderation is utilized, policies should be posted so participants understand what is and what is not allowed.

4. **Guiding Principles**: Optimally, moderation and identification procedures will be set at a minimum level, but may be increased at any time to protect the integrity and usefulness of the blog for the organization.

Scenario Three: A blog that requires registration to participate (rather than membership)
Example: Blog with a registration component to reduce abuse, but not restricted to members only such as:
1. **Purpose of tool(s):** Can vary, e.g., can be used to seek input from a certain type of user on a specific topic. Requiring registration would help filter those not qualified.

2. **Audience:** May be open to certain groups or to anyone willing to register.

3. **Best practices:**
   a. Registration can be used to reduce spam and user abuse of the system.
   b. An anonymous feature could be used to promote a more free-flowing discussion after the participant has logged in.

4. **Guiding Principles:** once registered, participants are seen as equal and are free to post at will.

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**Scenario Four: Personal blogs hosted by an organization's resources.**

Example: University operated blogging system that allows every student or employee to have individual blogs. There are many easily available examples of this type since many universities host one. www.biblioatipici.it/ is a foreign example of a site that is made by and for part-time workers in Italian libraries.

1. **Purpose of tool(s):** Allows members, employees, or patrons an additional resource to support research, enjoyment, professional development, promotion or discussion of organization, or other information-related personal goals.

2. **Audience:** Determined by host. It could be restricted by the hosting organization to a type of activity, e.g., book review/discussion, but would be hard to manage without a controlling entity which would diminish the value.

3. **Best practices:**
a. Expectations of the organization and the users must be defined up front.
b. Definition of who is considered a user must be made clear and when user access ends, e.g., current employees, students/alumni, etc.
c. Established guidelines for material suitable for posting or appearance.
d. Designated ownership of posted material.
e. Amount of space allotted to each blog, if limited.

4. Guiding principles: open to all who fit the definition of a user, and if not limited to a specific topic/task then users are free to post at will.

Summary

The matrix at the beginning of this report summarizes the team’s determination of best practices for open commenting on organizational blogs. In addition, it should be emphasized that the importance of radical trust grows with the size of the audience and openness of the blog to the world. Finally, the framework for blogging, along with Library 2.0 principles, are constantly evolving as tools and dialog channels mature. It will be important to constantly revisit and revise open commenting policy and procedures to keep pace with new developments and ensure the vitality of these new communication technologies.

Resources

Wisconsin Library Association blog
http://wlaweb.blogspot.com/

Ann Arbor District Library
http://www.aadl.org/

Case Western Reserve University blog system
http://blog.case.edu/

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:
The Freesound Project
http://freesound.iua.upf.edu/

Team 1 and individual team member ALAL2 blogs

ITEMS ABOUT THE ACT OF OR PROMOTION OF COMMENTING:
Reflexions: The Art of Commenting on Blogs
http://susanavg.blogspot.com/2006/03/art-of-commenting-on-blogs.html#links

The Mentorship Project: Podcasting the Power of Comments
http://mentorsblog.blogspot.com/

A Pirouette: Commenting
http://newballetcommenting.blogspot.com/
Micro Persuasion: A Guide to Leaving Comments on Blogs