LibWorld – South Africa

By Johann van Wyk

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Johann van Wyk, Library Manager of the Education Library of the University of Pretoria, South Africa, has been employed by the University of Pretoria since 1989. He is interested in knowledge management, Communities of Practice, Library 2.0/Web.2.0 and E-research. He is blogging at www.edulibpretoria.wordpress.com.

Introduction

South Africa is a country of 47 million inhabitants, with a variety of cultural groups and 11 national languages. The country has approximately 4.5 million Internet users, and an estimated 5000 active bloggers (24.com reveals SA's blogosphere).

Prior to 1994 the South African library and information sector mirrored the inequalities created by Apartheid policies. Since 1994 many initiatives have taken place to address inequalities of the past. An inclusive national library association, the Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA) was launched. A South African Library Leadership Programme (SALLP) in partnership with the Mortenson Centre at the University of Urbana-Champaign, USA followed, and a joint initiative between the South African Department of Education, the European Union and 17 historically disadvantaged higher education institutions was launched, to facilitate the development of learning resource provision and Library and Information provision, including human resources development (Thomas, 2007).

In 2004 the Committee for Higher Education Librarians in South Africa (CHELSA) was found "to transform the existing library practices to respond to the existing new realities and laying the foundation of a learning society". CHELSA has had a huge impact on the higher education library sector. At the same time the South African higher education sector went through a major reconstructuring intervention, which resulted in the reduction of 36 institutions (universities and technikons) to 25 institutions through mergers and campus incorporations. This has had a major impact on academic libraries, with many of the libraries of these institutions undergoing mergers (Thomas, 2007).

Higher Education libraries in South Africa will for the foreseeable future probably continue to be preoccupied with national policy goals and adapting to the mergers, while responding proactively to rapid technological developments and constant changing user expectations (Thomas, 2007).

History of Blogs in South Africa

The audience for blogs in South Africa is currently very small, but the level of sophistication of blogging is slowly increasing (24.com reveals SA's blogosphere). The reason for this small number of blogs has been the high cost of access to broadband internet connectivity across South Africa, which has limited the number of individuals that could afford access to the Internet. Though higher education institutions and big companies have access, the speed of connectivity has not been fast enough to handle the ever increasing need for social computing.

In 2007 the telecommunications market was opened to more telecommunications players, which resulted in an increase in the number of individuals having access to the Internet. In addition to this South Africa has been busy preparing for the 2010 FIFA Soccer World Cup, which has resulted in a huge Infrastructure Development Programme, which inter alia will see a rollout of a much more affordable and much faster broadband connectivity in the country.

Most of the country's platforms and innovations for what is collectively known as Web 2.0 emerged between April to July 2007 (even though some higher education institutions have been experimenting with this as early as 2002). At the same time there was an increase in the number of blogs across the country (Goldstuck, 2008).

Defining moments for blogging included the launches of Afrigator (Africa's first blogging aggregator), My Digital Life by ITWeb, which put commercial resources and interests behind blogging, Amatomu (the first comprehensive tracking service for blogs and bloggers in SA), and the Sunday Times, the first mainstream newspaper to embrace Blogs, and the development by 24.com of its own blogging platform (Goldstuck, 2008).

Blogging in South African libraries is a relatively recent phenomenon. The first library blog appeared in 2002 when Amelia Breytenbach an information specialist at the University of Pretoria set up a Blog on e-Books at the University, called Ebooks @ TUKS. After this blog it took another 2 years before the next 2 library blogs appeared. In the next three years blogging in South African libraries increased slowly by 12 to 13 Blogs each year. Reasons for the slow increase probably had to do with slow bandwidth and the limited number of clients who had access to computer workstations and Internet. Another factor was also the perception among some librarians that it would be too labour intensive to keep these blogs updated on a regular/constant basis.

The real breakthrough in South African Library blogging came in 2008 when 36 new library Blogs exploded on the scene. In 2008 many university libraries launched initiatives to focus their endeavors on Library 2.0 tools. For example the University of Pretoria's Department of Library Services had a "Planning Workshop on the implementation of Web / Library 2 tools in

Library Services", resulting in the Department focusing on FaceBook, Flickr, YouTube, and Blogging for 2008. This was then followed by a number of 60 Minute Practical Workshops on Blogs and other Web/Library 2.0 tools, as well as a Library 2.0 Roadshow where staff could demonstrate their best practices to other staff. The Department also presented in conjunction with the Mortenson Centre at the University of Illinois a Leadership Training Workshop titled "Thinking Outside Borders", for promising library leaders across South Africa. During this workshop attendees were also exposed to Library 2.0 tools. The Library and Information Association (LIASA) also presented a 60 minute workshop on Library 2.0 to staff from academic libraries across the country, and the the South African Library Academy that was held from 13-18 October 2008 for librarians from the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), University of Cape Town (UCT) and Rhodes University played its part in stimulating interest in Blogs.

Degree of utilisation

Number of Library Blogs in South Africa

Up to March 2009 there has been 79 SA library Blogs of which 32 Blogs are still active (an active post is seen as one in which the last post or entry was no more than two months old). 59 of these are from university libraries while 20 are from other types of libraries or library organisations.

Duration of blogs

Most of the blogs lasted only 1-2 years, but the majority of the blogs have only been in existence for 1-5 months. Two of the library blogs lasted for 4-5 years.

Number of posts

The Blog that has had the most postings has been the Gender Focus Blog by Berthie van Eck from the Library of the Parliament of South Africa, with 1139 posts.

Social Interaction

Blogs as part of the Web 2.0 phenomena is normally seen as social software tools, which implies a two-way interaction between the library/librarian and the audiences they address. When looking at the South African library blogs it seems that the idea of social interaction has not really caught on yet. 7 of the SA library blogs does not even allow comments, 24 of the blogs have never received any comments and only 10 blogs have received 10 or more comments from their readers/audiences. The reasons for this could be manifold, but some of the librarians at University of Cape Town indicated that they switched their comments function off because they had received too many spam mail (Dunlop, 2009). This however could be solved by switching to another blogging tool with a better spam filter. WordPress has a very good spam filter called Akismet, which has protected my blog with great success.

The South African blog that has received the most comments has been "RCL Librarians on the Move" authored by librarians attending the South African Library Academy, with 116 comments. Most of the comments came from librarians attending the Academy.

Comments however are not the only measure whereby the success/popularity of a blog can be determined. One could also look at the number of hits a blogging site has received, but unfortunately not many of the library blog sites in South Africa have hits counters. Looking at those that do have counters, the following blogs can be highlighted as having the most hits:

- Gender Focus: with 87793 hits (21 Feb 2009), a blog by Berthie van Eck of the Library of the Parliament of South Africa, and
- UP Education Library Blog: with 10424 hits (16 Feb 2009), a blog by myself and Clarisse Venter from the University of Pretoria.

Where do South African librarians blog?

Four blogging programmes are used: Blogspot (65) , LifeType (8), WordPress (4), and b2Evolution (2). All are free platforms and three (WordPress, LifeType and b2Evolution) are open source.
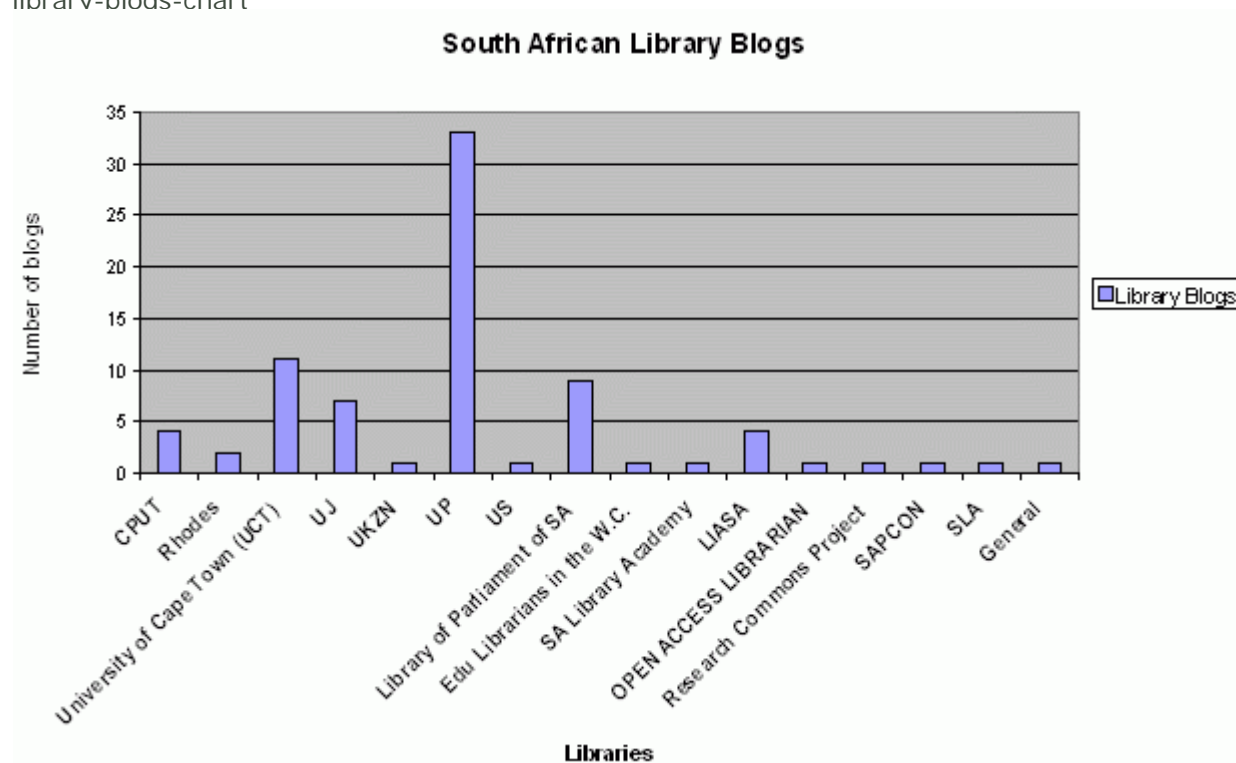
Blogging activity by South African libraries

39 of the South African library blogs are focusing on clients and 37 of them are focusing on library staff or librarians in general, while the focus of 2 of the blogs could be categorised as general, and 1 blog, Cultural Lessons, focus on the community. This blog acts as forum between students from Gatang Comprehensive School in Mamelodi, Pretoria, South Africa and Parkway Northwest High School in Philadelphia, Pa. in the United States to exchange ideas, thoughts, and information about their lives and communities. This blog was started as part of a community project by University of Pretoria, South Africa and Penn State University, USA.

For a list of South African Library Blogs see attached file (PDF)!

A graphic illustration of the number of South African Library Blogs

library-blogs-chart

South African librarians use blogs for the following:

For personal and professional development, and career advancement; for sharing thoughts, news, articles, events and achievements on a specific academic discipline; to make clients aware of new books acquired by a library; news in the library; as current awareness services of useful services and products in the library; as communications channels for librarians; as library help-services for post-graduate students; as discussion forums for people attending workshops; as news sites that carries stories that appear in South African newspapers (online or in print) or on South African websites about South African libraries; as sites with internal library information; as communication tools for staff, as communication tools for attendees of conferences; as discussion forums about setting up and managing a Research Commons, as sites about Open Access, and as library suggestion boxes.

Special Features used

Links

South African library blogs also link to various sites depending on the aim of each blog. Examples of interesting links are: a link to Public Relations students and graduates on LinkedIn, Nurturing the Creative Spirit (Belly Dancing, Artist's Way), Accredited Journals, Science Impact Indicators, Research News, Science watch (What's new in research?), Open Access Journals, Electronic Books (Full Text), Electronic Reference Books, Podcasts, Tags, Newsletters, Information Literacy and Study skills, Daily News from Apple, Google and

Microsoft, Bridge Blogs, Cartoons about Blogging, Ethics of Blogging, History of Blogging, Older Bloggers, Personal Blogs, Teaching and Research Blogs, Web Design Principles, Web Design Elements, Library 2.0 Blogs, Wikis, Avanced Blogging, Related Technologies, Blogging Fun, Google News, Techie Blogs for Librarians, Open Access Librarian Links, The Meanings of Timbuktu, University World Rankings, Photo Gallery Special Collections, Software for Creating Metadata, Encoding Schemas, Controlled Vocabulary Tools, Best Practice Guides, Metadata Articles.

Other interesting features:

Other interesting features that can be found in South African library blogs are:
• a Youtube Video about the circulation counter and faculty libraries at the University of Pretoria;
• pictures of book jackets listed on the Book of the Month Blog by the Special Collections of the University of Pretoria;
• an Electronic Registration Form on The Library 2.0 Workshop Blog also from the University of Pretoria,
• as well as Sound Streaming on how to download exam papers on the University of Pretoria Merensky Library Blog

The future of Library Blogging in South Africa

At present many of the South African Library Blogs are experimental but expectations are that as broadband access becomes more accessible, the number of blogs and the level of sophistication of these blogs will increase.

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