

Blogging at the Beinecke: Promoting Special Collections in the 21st Century

By Kathleen T. Burns and Nancy Kuhl

IF THERE WAS A TIME when rare book and manuscript libraries rested behind sturdy doors, accessible only to those with appropriate credentials or connections, unknown and undiscovered to all but the most persistent scholars (and many would argue that there was, indeed, such a time) it is clear that it has passed. A growing emphasis on “primary materials” in both undergraduate and graduate humanities curricula coincident with the ubiquity of internet research and a continuing demand for electronic access to information of all kinds present academic special collections with an evolving set of opportunities for serving academic communities and for providing new ways to access collections.

And such libraries aren’t just serving scholars and students; the very nature of the increasingly digital pathways into special collections has begun to make them visible to varied populations interested in the widest possible range of research – from queries about a researcher’s personal heritage and community to dissertation research about obscure historical subjects or literary texts. Though its primary users may still be academic researchers, the Beinecke Library, like many special collections and academic libraries, also serves a broader community. For repositories housing cultural and artistic documents and objects, there is a responsibility not only to care for and preserve rare and unique materials, but also to make collections known to the public beyond the academic arena; the general public, as well as the scholarly public, has the right to know about and care about the materials in the library’s custody.

Evolving internet technologies provide opportunities

and present challenges for rare book and manuscript libraries to reach out across the spectrum of potential users and interested communities. Web technologies are generating rich and varied discovery paths that supplement and enrich – not replace – more traditional research practices. We can no longer hope to reach users by creating an actual or virtual “place” where people have to go to find us. With the new resources available to us, we must find ways to push content and collection information out to possible users. We can aide our users’ research and discovery by establishing resources that can be used not only to introduce researchers to our collections and support their scholarship, but also to allow interested users to build on, extrapolate, mash up, and spit out information about our collections in all sorts of ways.

REACHING OUT:

FROM BROCHURES TO BLOGS

Librarians and curators in academic institutions have traditionally used scholarly resources (such as academic journals and conferences) and campus media (including student newspapers, in-house newsletters, reports to faculty members) to announce recent acquisitions and highlight collection strengths. Though effective in connecting with immediate communities, these traditional means of promoting special collections connect with only a fraction of a special collection library’s potential users. Even collection-derived special events and programs, such as lectures, performances, and poetry readings – innovative

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programs designed to promote and enliven our collections and to reach beyond the scholars and students already in our reading rooms—generally reach only existing user populations when they are promoted using conventional methods alone.

Electronic means of collection promotion have helped us achieve broader awareness of our collections. A library website, though somewhat static, often provides incredibly powerful resources for research in collections alongside more or less frequently updated calendars of events and acquisition announcements. Email lists help us target interested users who self-identify by signing up to receive information about our collections; as scholars forward our notices to colleagues, they help spread the word.

But as we consider new developments in Internet technologies and electronic research resources, we see additional opportunities presenting themselves. The Beinecke Library, like other rare book and manuscript libraries, is working to find ways to employ new web resources in collaboration with tested promotion methods to introduce our collections to distant and uninitiated potential users in addition to our own faculty, students, and library advocates.

THE BEINECKE BLOGS: THE NUTS, BOLTS, AND BYTES

In 2006, the Yale Collection of American Literature at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library launched two experimental weblogs in an effort to generate awareness about our collections and about associated programming. The blogs focus on two strengths of the Yale Collection of American Literature: African American arts and culture and modern and contemporary American poetry. The blogs can be found at the following web addresses:

African American Studies at the Beinecke Library
<http://beineckejwj.wordpress.com>

Poetry at Beinecke Library
<http://beineckepoetry.wordpress.com>

These sites serve as dynamic information portals announcing new acquisitions, calling attention to underutilized materials and collection highlights, and promoting collection-related events and programs. The sites link to related research resources, academic departments, and

programs around campus, providing the Yale community with convenient clearinghouses for important subject-related information. Both blogs cross established curatorial boundaries, thus educating users about the variety and depth of materials in our collections. In addition to materials in the Yale Collection of American Literature, the Poetry at Beinecke Library blog, for example, has also featured poetry-related materials embedded in historical collections in the Library's Western Americana Collection. African American Studies at Beinecke Library is even more interdisciplinary, drawing on literary, historical, political, and cultural materials across the library's collections. Recent postings include notices about the following exhibitions: "Let It Resound! Sheet Music in the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection" and "The Black Panthers Trial: Courtroom Sketches by Robert Templeton;" announcements about new and recently processed materials including: E. L. McGlashan Collection of Documents Concerning Slavery in the United States, Materials Relating to the National Negro Housewives League, and the papers of poet Claude McKay; community events and news including poetry readings and national awards received by African American Studies faculty members.

There are a number of advantages to highlighting collections in a blog environment:

Visibility And Access

The blogs are crawled and indexed by major search engines, including Google. Collections that can currently only be found by searching in-house databases directly from the Beinecke's website, like the majority of our recently acquired and uncataloged materials, are highlighted and "pushed out" to potential users; researchers and students can find collection and event announcements in the organic course of their web searches. Because search engines crawl our entire blog text, users find us even if their subject is buried in a notice about something only tangentially related. Such serendipitous discoveries are sometimes at the heart of ground-breaking scholarship.

Additionally, RSS feeds are automatically generated from our blogs. RSS, or Really Simple Syndication, allows for more user-centric customization of data, essentially allowing the posted information to be automatically extracted and reformatted by users into web browsers, aggregators, and even fed into other blogs or websites, reflecting updates as they are made. Thus, blog-readers can tap into

the network at their preferred point-of-access, rather than continually visiting our sites to see whether new content has been added.

Discovery Networks

Visits by scholars and writers as well as related campus programming are announced in close proximity to narrative descriptions of new or existing collections. We are able to forge links, conceptual and literal, from these announcements directly to online finding aids, the OPAC, and into databases on the Beinecke's website where readers can more closely examine descriptions of collection materials. In this way, we connect the vibrancy of the living arts of American literature and the excitement of cutting-edge scholarship to local and unique resources in our collections. The hypertextual nature of blog entries ensures that our online texts overcome certain limitations of printed announcements and press releases, linking, interacting, and pointing to our own and others' sites. This enriches the online research experience in a way that cannot be simply replicated in fixed-text models. We've seeded the blogs with pointers to some of the Beinecke's other online initiatives, for instance, including collections of streaming audio recordings and links to our rich digital image collections, to both maximize the visibility of these materials and create additional pathways to these collections for users.

The blogs may also help us reach researchers far beyond our campus and even beyond the broader academic community. We are mindful of the fact that many collections in our care document the history, culture, artistic output, and in some cases the suffering and oppression of historically marginalized communities—African American, Native American, Gay and Lesbian populations among others. And as the keepers of such cultural records, we feel an abiding obligation to respect the varied significances our collections may have to those communities. We are aware, too, that non-scholarly individuals and communities with historical and cultural investments in our collections may learn about and make use of them in ways that differ from those of scholars. Research and discovery may depend at least in part on word of mouth and community networks; collection blogs make it possible (and even easy) for individuals and groups to circulate and repurpose information about library collections and exhibitions and programs that celebrate and interpret those collections.

Ease Of Use

The blog is easy to use in two senses: for the public, there's no need to navigate an OPAC or employ non-intuitive bibliographic search strategies; instead, keyword searches in a web search engine bring users directly to the blog and eventually into the other discovery tools that the Beinecke has created to assist researchers.

Equally important, the Beinecke has chosen to establish its blogs with free software and hosting services. There are several free developer-hosted blog publishers, including Blogger (blogger.com), Typepad (typepad.com), and Wordpress (wordpress.com). Using a free host with a user-friendly interface allows us to focus on the content, rather than on installing, maintaining, and tweaking software on our own servers. With blog hosting sites, it's possible to register, select the overall design template, plug in content, and launch a site in a matter of minutes. If design flexibility is needed, many free services offer upgrades for a nominal cost, allowing code-savvy bloggers access to the stylesheet that controls the look and feel of their blog.

Initial blog entries can be recycled from existing materials: published announcements about current exhibitions, detailed descriptions of collection materials included in the OPAC or in finding aids, press releases, and invitations to library events can all be recycled for use on a blog. There's also plenty of opportunity to take advantage of the networked nature of the web, and create links to local organizations, online exhibitions, and other blogs or sites of interest.

Continuity

The Yale Collection of American Literature blogs don't employ the personal tone and diaristic style of many blogs, working instead toward a news bulletin model with an institutional identity. By maintaining a professional tone, we insure that the blogs can be sustained regardless of staffing changes or shifts in administrative responsibilities.

Designing our blogs around a broadly conceived theme that draws on materials from many collections throughout our library—including archival and printed collections as well as electronic records in a range of formats—also ensures that the task of populating the blogs can be distributed among many, drawing on the interests and expertise of library staff members whose duties range from technical services and public services, to public rela-

tions and curatorship of the Beinecke's important collections. This model of content production also emphasizes the inter-related nature of these spheres of responsibility, building morale and appreciation of staff from different departments. In our model, technical services staff (rare book catalogers and archivists) have been invited to submit notes about recently cataloged or processed materials; with minor additions and editing, the detailed catalog records produced in the course of their work can be repurposed as brief announcements for individual titles and collections. We've also successfully used a student employee to assist with general maintenance of the blogs, charging her with writing descriptions of recently acquired materials, and with researching and proposing groups of materials worthy of being highlighted. As a result, the blogs are richer in content, and the student receives valuable experience in library research, selection, and online publishing.

Tracking And Feedback

One of the blog features that has been most intriguing is our ability to track visitors to the site – how many visits per day, what posts have received the most hits over time, when spikes of activity occurred, what specific search terms have brought people to our site, and what sites are our most popular referrers. Recently, our hosting service also introduced a feed statistics feature, which allows us to peek at how the RSS feeds running off the site are being utilized. Such tracking features quantify what has already become obvious after a few months: we have a growing user base, and as we anticipated, our site is being pointed to from all over the web and many visitors are finding us through searches that would be difficult to anticipate. Another trend is that both blogs and individual posts are beginning to show up in social bookmarking tools like del.icio.us, indicating that resource-sharing among users is creating additional paths and linkages to the Beinecke's collections.

WHERE WE STAND:

OUTCOMES AND EXPECTATIONS

After only a few months, the potential for the Beinecke Library blogs is evident. The sites have come to function not only as virtual newsletters for collection information, but also as gateways for user access to research tools, resources, and collections. But our experiment hasn't been

without challenges. At the end of the term, when our student assistant is busy with exams, we give up more time than we'd like to research and write announcements for the blogs – a blog is a content-driven site, one that needs regular updates if it is to be useful and relevant. Thus, two or more weeks without postings seems too long, even when other job responsibilities are at least as pressing. And though often our statistics show an active readership, the bare-bones information available from our blog host does little to educate us about what readers want or need to know about our collections at this introductory stage of their research process. And they reveal nothing about why our numbers of readers occasionally drop off significantly. When the numbers rise again, we're grateful, but not at all sure about what caused the increased interest. One answer to this dilemma is to encourage public interaction with the site through comments, link backs, etc., but the additional labor of monitoring or moderating such feedback seems daunting.

We study our statistics, hoping that, over time, we'll develop a better understanding of how people are using the information they find on our blogs. And we've begun to stock pile information for possible announcements to protect against future posting dry spells. But we are aware always that this is an experiment, and that we must be continually prepared to revise our goals and expectations as we develop our understanding of how the blogs can function best and as we come to understand their – and our – limitations. The success of this experimental approach has actually been one of the major lessons of this project for Beinecke staff, proving that not all digital projects need to be the product of committee efforts and that playing with new technologies on a small scale, with existing free tools and a limited commitment of time and energy, can yield tremendous learning opportunities for staff and new resources for the public.

ONE STEP AT A TIME: BLOGGING, DISCOVERY, RESEARCH, AND WEB 2.0

Even as we look positively at our efforts with the Beinecke blogs and consider a range of plans to enhance them (including the production of podcasts of poetry readings, lectures, and performances hosted at the library), we are cognizant that our efforts are just baby steps into the advancing and rapidly-changing digital information land-

scape that is sometimes referred to as “Web 2.0.” Our efforts with the two blogs take advantage of some of the dynamic characteristics of the web environment, but are still managed and controlled in a bounded way. We’ve backed away from a more participatory model that would, say, allow Beinecke researchers to add their own posts, invite public response to new tools and collections, or allow the general public to add links to announcements that point users to additional resources, whether at the Beinecke, other libraries, or elsewhere online. The explanation for this cautious approach is complex. We are concerned about including and promoting information about our collections that isn’t necessarily authoritative or even correct; in our informal discussions about these matters, questions we consider range from “Are we ready to turn over the tools we’ve created to a public free-for-all?” to “Isn’t it our responsibility to create authoritative and trust-worthy resources?” We feel constrained, too, by the labor we anticipate it would take to manage a site that included significant feedback and user-generated content.

In spite of this, we recognize that research methods and avenues of research and inquiry are changing as a result of the increasing prominence of public and user-generated web-based resources that harness collective intelligence – communication and discovery tools as diverse as social networking and bookmarking sites, blogs, and wikis. These sites often supply frequently updated and revised content; they can provide interdisciplinary views of subjects, views drawn from many fields and taking many perspectives into consideration; and they can create environments for collaborative knowledge-sharing and knowledge-building that recognize that users add value.

As librarians and archivists contemplating successful implementations of knowledge-sharing networks, we ask ourselves whether we’re poised to move beyond our comfort zone and seize the potential of these technologies; do we risk falling short of user expectations and scholarly demands if we don’t develop a more networked perspective? Is there a middle path, which would allow us to maintain a sense of stewardship and order, but would encourage and benefit from user input? Alternatively, can online initiatives introduce varying modes of public participation, honoring the values that have served to ground librarianship and create reliable print and early web resources, but adapting to capture and interact with user-generated content?

The blogs are a small-scale venture into this larger dis-

cussion, a starting point for further exploration of web-based participatory technologies. With the blogs, we’ve created content that can easily be fed into future efforts, and through experimentation, we hope to develop further means to respond to and promote evolving models of 21st century scholarship. We’ve also come to believe that Web 2.0 tools and practices offer the profession opportunities to create an appreciation and context for our collections in the landscape of digital research. Evolving technologies have enabled librarians and curators to create innovative collaborations with faculty to incorporate the use of primary resources in their classes, to develop inventive tools to facilitate research by scholars at all levels, and to educate a wide range of possible audiences about our collections, and they will continue to do so.

Though the materials we work with are often from earlier and much different eras, the Beinecke Library recognizes that its users live and work in a digital era, one where “access” to special collections materials often refers to online access of some kind, even before students and researchers come into the library. We strive to respond to the shifting and diverse discovery strategies of all kinds of researchers by placing ourselves into the networks we observe our user base turning towards – a digital information frontier rich with opportunities for rare book and manuscript libraries. As we continue to experiment, it’s possible we must stretch ourselves and, invoking a pioneering spirit, charge more fully into the social media revolution; we know many special collections librarians are already on this path with us, and we invite still others in the profession to take up the torch as well.

1 Wordpress, for instance, charges \$15.00/year per blog for a “Custom CSS Upgrade” which allows us to modify the visual style of the blog. As of April 2007, there were also nearly 60 free templates available, reflecting a range of styles for nearly every taste.

2 However, the nature of the web is such that unfettered commenting is occurring, whether librarians or others like it or not. Sites like del.icio.us, digg.com, and a recent wave of web annotation services (Fleck!, SharedCopy, Trailfire, Stickis, etc.) allow users to publicly share tags and annotations.

3 O’Reilly, Tim. “What is Web 2.0: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software.” O’Reilly. 2005 Sep 30. O’Reilly Media. 2007 May 26. <http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/news/2005/09/30/what-is-web-20.html>