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A Tale of Two Blogs: Lessons Learned Establishing *The Top Shelf* and *La Cocina Histórica* at the University of Texas at San Antonio

Sean Heyliger, Juli McLoone, Nikki Lynn Thomas

Introduction

When establishing a blog, Special Collections departments face a variety of decisions that will affect the future shape of the blog and its readership. The University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) Libraries Special Collections is in the unusual position of publishing two blogs with distinct audiences and content: a general department blog, *The Top Shelf*, and a collection-specific blog, *La Cocina Histórica*. This article examines various strategies employed by both of these blogs in the areas of content, targeted audience, management and authorship responsibility, media exposure, and platform-choice and how those strategies affect blog readership.

Establishing Content Guidelines

UTSA Special Collections established *The Top Shelf* in October 2008 as an informal outreach tool, intended to demonstrate the department's activities to library staff, potential donors, and the local community by highlighting new acquisitions, special events, and content from collections. A decision was made early on to allow an open content format, with posts ranging from interesting items found in collections to featured researchers and staff introductions. This openness allowed staff to include items that, while important to the department, would not necessarily be featured on the university or library press feeds. Although announcements have a place in the scope of *The Top Shelf*, it should be noted that research-based posts generate roughly 2.5 times as many page views as announcements. Also, because the focus of the blog is so broad, staff sometimes have difficulty deciding on a topic, given the entire holdings of mid-size special collections to choose from. The challenge is to maintain a roughly equal balance between announcements and subject-based content.



Figure 1. Screenshot of *The Top Shelf*

Based upon the perceived success of *The Top Shelf*, a subject-based blog, *La Cocina Histórica*, was created in April 2010 to promote the department's Mexican Cookbook Collection. It was conceived as a dual-purpose cooking-archival blog that would post bilingual recipes from the collection every Friday. By posting recipes in both Spanish and English and testing recipes at home, the goal was to position the blog between as many potential user groups as possible—English speakers, Spanish speakers, historians, and food bloggers. The enthusiasm with which readers greeted the idea of preparing historical recipes inspired staff to dramatically increase their frequency. Currently, 56 per cent of posts are kitchen-tested, and comments posted to the blog suggest that readers appreciate this emphasis on kitchen-tested recipes. An open approach to content ensures that all of a department's activities fall within the blog's purview as is the case in *The Top Shelf*. However, a tightly-defined scope as is employed by *La Cocina Histórica* simplifies the process of planning posts.



Figure 2. Screenshot of *La Cocina Histórica*

Targeting Audiences

As noted, *The Top Shelf* was originally envisioned as an outreach tool to reach many potential audiences. However, writing for such an undefined audience has further complicated the process of topic selection. Blog posts can at times seem disconnected and lacking in continuity, which makes it difficult to cultivate a committed audience. Readers are less likely to regularly follow a blog when they cannot predict whether the content is applicable to their interests.

By focusing on publishing content in a specific collecting area—recipes in English and Spanish—*La Cocina Histórica* sought to attract a more targeted readership of foodies, culinary historians, and amateur cooks. The more than 1500 site visits *La Cocina Histórica* receives each month illustrates its popularity. Several reference questions from readers indicate that at least a portion of the audience consists of cookbook enthusiasts.¹ And the fact that a scattering of the blog's 35 followers subscribe from locations in Mexico suggests that the blog is reaching both English and Spanish-speaking readers. Attracting a popular, rather than professional, audience for an archival blog is challenging. If readers can tell that a blog will regularly feature content in their area of interest, they are more likely to return. Furthermore, focusing on sharing content directly from collections, rather than telling narratives about collections, may attract more readers with a topical, rather than general interest in special collections.²

Blog Management

Determining who will have ongoing responsibility for managing content and scheduling posts is an often overlooked, but important step in the process of setting up a blog. For *The Top Shelf*, all professional staff are able to post and edit blog entries with no single person overseeing the management of the blog. This has frequently led to long gaps between posts, as well as multiple posts appearing close together. The only regularly scheduled post is a formulaic list of monthly acquisitions, unlikely to have wide appeal. Statistics from *The Top Shelf's* first blog hosting service demonstrate that while a popular and informative post may cause a spike in readership, a schedule of regular posts, no matter the content, is needed to maintain that readership.

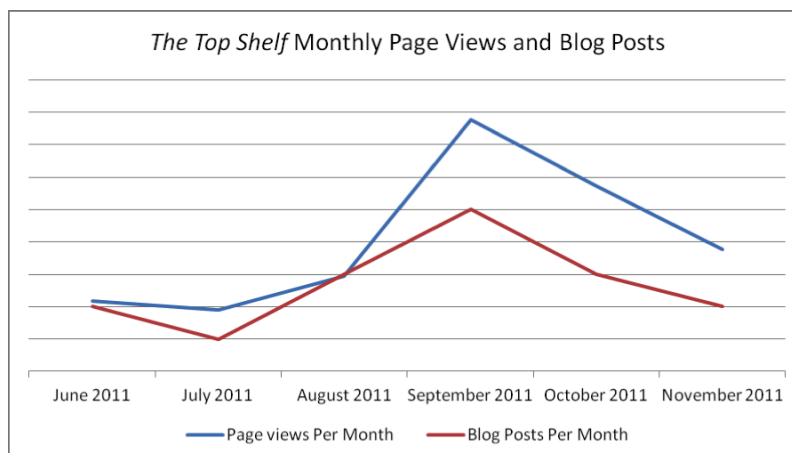


Figure 3. Page Views and Posts, *The Top Shelf*

The rare books librarian is responsible for scheduling posts on *La Cocina Histórica* and for this reason the blog has maintained a regular, weekly posting schedule. There is broad agreement among staff that assigning management responsibility to one person is vital to maintaining consistent scheduling of blog posts. Page view statistics from both blogs demonstrate that consistent and frequent blog posts are an important factor in generating and maintaining readership.

Authorship

Author burnout has become a serious problem after three years of publishing *The Top Shelf*. This issue was temporarily solved by recruiting support staff to provide content from projects they were working on. Recently, however, the department has lost all support staff. Student workers and graduate interns are sometimes able to fill gaps left by support staff, but because they work limited hours and their posts require a high level of staff intervention, it is not feasible to rely on student labor for regular content. Staff reduction has not only increased author burnout, but also lowered the blog's priority among professional staff's growing list of responsibilities. The loss of support staff has significantly reduced the frequency of blog posts, which in turn has negatively affected readership.

La Cocina Histórica has largely been able to maintain a frequent posting schedule by recruiting authors throughout the library, which has also raised the profile of the department and encouraged staff from other departments to develop an interest in Special Collections. However, even though 12 per cent of posts are written by non-departmental staff, *La Cocina Histórica* still faces author burnout. This is partially attributable to the frequent posting schedule and to the commitment of personal time and money required to prepare historical recipes.

All blogs will likely face author burnout at some point, which is likely to be exacerbated by the increased responsibilities and reduced staff many special collections departments currently face. UTSA does not have a tested solution to offer, but possible strategies include recruiting guest bloggers, reducing posting frequency, and avoiding time-intensive posts. It must be recognized, however, that the latter two strategies are likely to negatively impact the blog's readership. A forthright discussion and decision on the place of the blog in the department's priorities will help staff to rank it appropriately within their individual responsibilities.

Leveraging Local and National Media

The Top Shelf's varied content does not lend itself to being easily summarized to appeal to a particular audience. For this reason, *The Top Shelf* has not been featured in local or national news outlets. However, a significant, though unsustainable, increase in readership has been seen when local news outlets run articles on the donation of archival collections to the department. In September 2011, Special Collections received the collection of a notable businessman and philanthropist that was featured on several local and national news sites. Though none of the news stories linked to *The Top Shelf*, readership spiked to 776 page views for the month of September, which was a three-fold increase from the previous month. But because the increase was related to a singular event, the page views for *The Top Shelf* in the months following the spike returned to previous levels.

Due to its focus on a particular subject, *La Cocina Histórica* has better lent itself to leveraging local and national media to increase readership. Since *La Cocina Histórica's* inception, public relations personnel for the university and the library have featured the blog as a way to highlight the university's growing research collections. *La Cocina Histórica* has been featured on a popular local culinary blog, in UTSA's alumni magazine, and on a bilingual library blog. The most significant media exposure, however, came from a holiday-related press release that UTSA issued on December 21, 2010, which was picked up by more than 500 news feeds, including Fox News Latino. Referrals from the latter led to *La Cocina Histórica's* busiest day with 500 visits on January 5, 2011. The media coverage led to a dramatic increase in readership in the following months—a 20 per cent increase in page views from November 2010 to February 2011 and an additional 27 percent increase the following month. Not all blogs or collections easily lend themselves to leveraging media coverage, but when possible, it is well worth pursuing.³

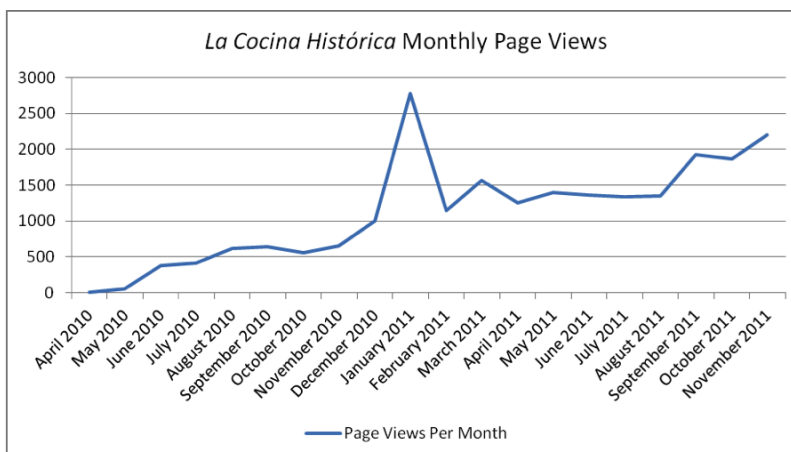


Figure 4. Page Views by Month, *La Cocina Histórica*

Choosing a Platform and Maintaining Continuity

The Top Shelf and *La Cocina Histórica* are both hosted by third-party vendors and not the university. After two and a half years, *The Top Shelf* changed hosts in June 2011, requiring a new URL. The change in blog platform was not only disruptive to staff, but also negatively affected the blog's readership. *The Top Shelf* had built a substantial following at its previous URL, but statistics suggest that many regular readers did not follow the blog to the new address. Regardless of whether readers consciously decided not to follow the blog to the new URL, or simply missed the announcement, Special Collections' staff should thoroughly evaluate various platforms before deciding upon a blog host so as to avoid future disruptions.

La Cocina Histórica has been hosted by Wordpress since its beginning. The fact that Fox News Latino's article about the blog continues to refer readers almost a year later highlights the potential for lost page views that a change in URL could cause. If possible, it is preferable for a blog to be hosted by its parent institution to ensure that the URL remains constant over time. Whether self-hosting or using a hosting service, it is important for staff to discuss how the blog will be integrated into the larger library or institutional website, as 47 per cent of referrals for *The Top Shelf* and 36 per cent for *La Cocina Histórica* are from the UTSA Libraries' main page.

Conclusion

This article has examined how choices in the areas of blog content, targeted audience, management and authorship responsibility, pursuing media coverage, and platform choice influence a blog's readership. Before creating an archival blog, staff should consider each of following questions and how each will affect a blog's readership:

1. How in-depth and frequent will the posts be? What type of content will be included or excluded?
2. Is the department seeking broader awareness for all collections, or is it trying to attract a niche audience for a particular collecting area?
3. Who will be responsible for scheduling, authoring, and editing posts?
4. How will the department utilize potential media outlets? What institutional support is available publicizing the blog?
5. If self-hosting is not institutionally viable, what factors will be considered when choosing a platform?

In some of the areas discussed in this article, one choice is clearly preferable, while in other areas the relative benefits and disadvantages of various strategies must be weighed.⁴ Ideally, a department blog will be managed by one staff member, will have regularly scheduled posts, and will feature content that appeals to a particular audience. But each department must devise a workable plan to build a blog's readership based upon their collecting foci, staff expertise, institutional support, and available resources.

¹ Reference questions include inquiries about where to obtain originals or digitized versions, English translations, and reproductions of cookbooks.

² For more information on performing surveys of blog readers to determine blog content, see Joanna Blair and Allison V. Level, "Creating and evaluating a subject-based blog: planning, implementation, and assessment," *Reference Services Review* 36:2 (2008): 162-164, accessed December 1, 2011, doi: 10.1108/00907320810873020.

³ For a more general discussion of marketing principle for library blogs, see Jill Stover, "Making marketing work for your library blog," *Internet Reference Services Quarterly* 11:4 (2008): 156-157, accessed December 1, 2011, doi: 10.1300/J136v11n04_10.

⁴ For an overview of general steps to planning a library blog, see Joanna Blair and Cathy Cranston, "Preparing for the birth of our library blog," *Computers in Libraries* 26:2 (2006) 12-13, 54.