

Niche News and the Blogosphere:

From *Language Log* to *KnitHacker*

Maxwell Memorial Library's Technology Class

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Aside from seeing pictures and videos of cute dogs or cats, what do people expect from the Internet? One thing they want is solutions to problems, whether that's "How many teaspoons are there in a tablespoon?" or "What should I look for in choosing daycare for my child?"

With our hobbies, work, or passions, though, we don't have just a short, one-time list of questions that we can Google the answers to and be done with it. We have ongoing growth and learning that lead us to new, deeper questions as we go along. For centuries there have been professional journals and hobbyist periodicals that spoke to that need for deeper, ongoing conversation about the general issues in a field. The Internet has broadened that field by making it possible for individuals and smaller organizations to write regularly for audiences of others who share their interests. Blogs are a means of distributing that content in a way that makes it easy to keep up-to-date with it.

This month's tech program addresses questions about how to find blogs and other sites with niche news that are relevant to your interests. We'll also look at software and services that facilitate keeping up with those sites.

1 What is a blog?

Classification of various types of periodicals can get blurry at the boundaries. We know what a newspaper is or magazine or a journal, but even in print-on-paper formats, the boundaries of the types get fuzzy. For instance, the *Syracuse New Times* is pretty clearly a newspaper while *Syracuse Woman Magazine* is clearly a magazine. Some of how this is clear is tied up with format and some in content:

Syracuse New Times	Syracuse Woman
Tabloid size	8½×11
Loose assembly of sheets	Pages stapled into bound form
Newsprint	Glossy paper
Articles relevant for the week of publication	Articles with relevance that persists through longer periods
Fuzzier images in lower resolutions	Sharp, high resolution images

However, these characteristics don't constitute any sort of Aristotelian definition of *newspaper* or *magazine*. Periodicals can have a mix of characteristics from the 2 columns and still be easily fit into the Newspaper box or the Magazine box. So a news magazine like *Time* or *Newsweek* has content that

is generally as ephemeral as that of a weekly newspaper, *Rolling Stone* is practically tabloid sized, and while it's much rarer now, some magazines in my youth in the 1970s were largely on newsprint with only the covers and perhaps a handful of pages on glossy paper.

But what is a blog? You can find various not-quite-adequate ideas of what goes into the definition of *blog* in terms of presentation (“newest content at the top”), style (“informal”, “conversational”), focus (“writing by one individual”), and content (“personal views and opinions”). For each of these characteristics, though, there are blogs that violate them. One can even find blogs that border on the domain of peer reviewed journals (for example *History and Philosophy of the Language Sciences*, <https://hiphilangsci.net/>).

What blogging does, then, is lower the barriers to creation of a periodical of a sort. The ease of publication on the Web and of having one's content then get found by interested audience makes it so that there is a continuum rather than a gap between something like a mimeographed fanzine of the 1970s and a major publication. The quality that seems common to just about any Website that gets called a blog is that new content gets added to the blog frequently enough that those interested in keeping up with it think of the blog as still “alive”.

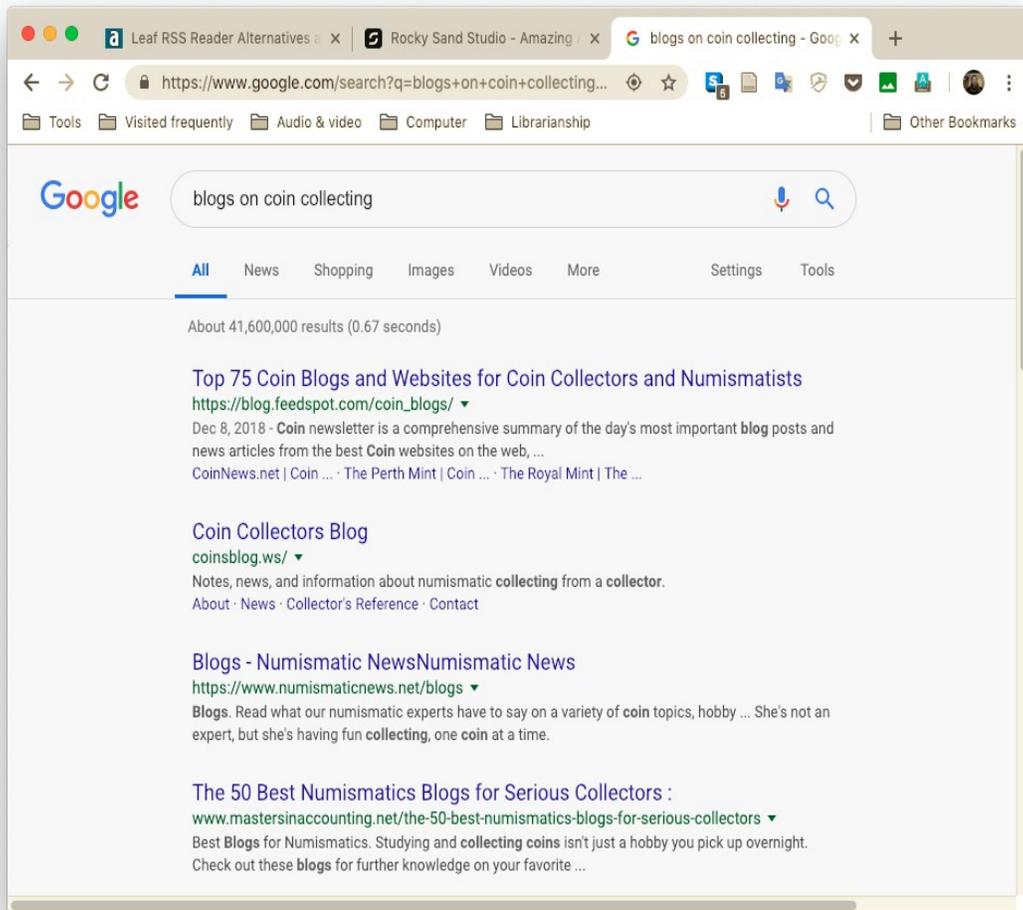
2 So why would I follow a blog?

The short answer is “For the same reasons you'd subscribe to a magazine”. And with much of the same logic, you probably will find blogs to follow in much the same way as you'd find a magazine to subscribe to: some by actively looking for something dealing with topics or activities you're interested in, some by reading articles or issues that get passed on to you, some by finding people who are writing things that interest you and whose writing you'd like to read more of.

3 Finding active blogs with content you're interested in

Most of the blogs I follow, I found because some other resource I used mentioned them or had a guest post by someone who writes for the blog. There are a few, though, that I found because I was looking for a particular perspective on a subject I was interested in.

3.1 Bing, DuckDuckGo, Google, Yahoo! ...



Using your favorite search engine with a query like “blogs on coin collecting” or “blogs on linguistics” or “blogs on Norse mythology” will get links to individual blogs and—what’s possibly more useful—links to articles reviewing some selected blogs.

3.2 Directories

If you recall Yahoo!’s original design, it was a hand-curated collection of links to sites where the links were classified by professionals (some of them were former catalog librarians!). Trying to keep up with that task in the face of a Web expanding exponentially proved to be beyond Herculean, but curated lists of sites still exist and can be useful. Here are some such sites that either specialize in blog links or that have substantial sections that do:

1. Best of the Web: Blog Directory

<https://blogs.botw.org/>

2. Blog-search.com

<https://www.blog-search.com/>

3. Blogarama: The Oldest Blog Directory

<https://www.blogarama.com/>

4. Instant RSS Search

<http://ctrlq.org/rss/>

4 Keeping up to date: Feed viewers & aggregators

There are 79 blogs¹ in my personal follow list. I don't read everything published on every one of them every day, but I like to at least skim headlines regularly and to read some of the content. Trying to visit 79 individual Websites daily would be quite the task, though, so I use an **RSS reader** (aka news reader, news feed aggregator, RSS feed reader) to handle the job.

Here are some Web-based readers that are often recommended. They generally offer some services for free accounts while reserving some others for paid accounts. Since they are Web-based, they work with any make of device and any operating system if you access them using a Web browser. Some of the services have apps while others integrate well with 3rd party apps.

1. Feedly (<https://feedly.com>)

Plays well with many client apps and also offers its own client apps for iOS and Android.

2. The Old Reader (<https://theoldreader.com/>)

Has its own apps for just about all the platforms out there.

3. Inoreader (<https://www.inoreader.com/>)

4. Feeder (<https://feeder.co/>)

¹ Not all of the **feeds** that I follow would be considered blogs, as such, but they use the same method of distribution that many blogs use—**RSS** or **RDF Site Summary/Rich Site Summary/Really Simple Syndication**.

5. Feedreader (<https://feedreader.com/>)

Feedreader Online is a reader much like the others on the list

Feedreader Observe is a tool for previewing a feed and getting a few articles from other feeds that Feedreader suggests for comparison. This is potentially useful in vetting blogs before subscribing.

Some 3rd party apps for macOS include:

1. ReadKit
2. Reeder 3
3. Leaf
4. Feedly
5. Newsflow
6. Safari (its Reading List)