Thinking About Technology and Change, or, “What Do You Mean It’s Already Over?”

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The past few years have seen an explosion in the use and variety of Web 2.0 tools. There are more than 120 million active users of Facebook (Facebook: Statistics), and nearly 3.5 million users posting publicly on Twitter (Twitdir). Web 2.0 tools are characterized by being collaborative, participatory and social. "2.0" is jargon for a set of trends where the line becomes blurred between information consumers and information users, where the web is used as platform and where interactions can be synchronous or asynchronous. For Libraries, Web 2.0 provides the opportunity to reach our patrons where they "live" on the web, and to provide service at the point of need. These tools may provide us the means to reach a different population than we reach face-to-face and to forge new connections between patrons and the library. Web 2.0 provides the opportunity to provide information in multiple formats – text, audio, video – to best match the different learning styles and preferences of our patrons. Most of all, Web 2.0 tools let us make and strengthen connections with patrons, friends, and colleagues.

In January 2008, there was something of a backlash against Library 2.0. In a blog entry by Kate Sheehan, Loose Cannon Librarian, titled "Are librarians culturally self-aware?," she writes, "It’s easy to become enamored of social networking sites and Web 2.0 toys to the point where they seem like a panacea for everything that’s wrong with your library or your job. Slap a wiki on it and call me in the morning. The most successful uses of the newest tech tools have recognized that they’re just that: tools." The conversation continued with a blog entry by John Blyberg, blyberg.net, "Library 2.0 Debased," and from there it was picked up by other library-related blogs (the biblioblogosphere) where suddenly Library 2.0 had a bad name. But Web 2.0 isn’t going away.

At the ACRL Washington & Oregon Joint Fall Conference in 2006, Jessamyn West spoke about the impending death of email. Just as radio hasn’t been replaced by television, so email hasn’t replaced postal mail, and isn’t being replaced by Web 2.0 tools. The way we use email may have changed, but it’s not on its way out. Email is very good for some things, but in some cases (like where you want a quick reply) other tools, like instant messaging, are better. These 2.0 tools should augment current library services, not replace them. We can use the skills and tools we already have, but add a few more possibilities.

When you first discover a new tool, it is tempting to ask “what is it for?” Instead, ask “what can it do?” Often we don’t know what a 2.0 tool might be most useful for until we start using it. Experimenting with new tools opens you up to the unexpected. Like Roentgen’s discovery of X-rays (X-rays), and the discovery of Viagra during angina studies (Sildenafil), exploring a tool that is “for” one thing, we might find that, for us, it’s for something else completely. Exploring new tools is about play, not perfection – there’s no manual, no grades, no style book – we’re all making it up as we go along. So don’t be afraid to dive in and see what happens. In Web 2.0, we’re all beginners all the time.

With all these new tools, how do we choose which ones to try? People like having options. The more options we have, the more satisfied we are with our choices, but eventually it reaches a point where having more choices decreases our satisfaction. The blurb for "The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less," sums up some of the ideas of author Barry Schwartz, “…beware of excessive choice: choice overload can make you question the decisions you make before you even make them, it can set you up for unrealistically high expectations.”

That’s the current situation with library 2.0 tools. There are always new tools being developed, and there’s no way to tell which are going to be important or successful. My solution is to not worry about it. A fundamental rule of the Internet is "trying stuff is cheaper than deciding whether to try it" (Kottke). So don’t worry too much about whether you’re trying the right new tool; as tools come along, try some, ignore some,
watch some, keep some, and discard some. Only do as much as interests you – none of us can try out all the new 2.0 tools. Familiarity with Web 2.0 is like knowing how to drive a car. You can still get where you’re going without it, but it may not be the best way to get there. It’s by knowing the tools that we can identify when they’ll be helpful.

Deciding which tools to implement for your library does take more care. Assess your needs, evaluate options, and select tools accordingly. Don’t set up a blog for your library just to say you have one; add a blog if that’s going to meet your need. This is where the Library 2.0 backlash came from, a reaction to too many libraries using 2.0 “just because.” Assess your need and use the right tool for the job. When you have a shiny new hammer everything can start looking like nails, but don’t forget you have a toolbox full of time-tested tools. It’s not about the technology, it’s about the services we can provide using it.

Web 2.0 is all about connections. Your success in using Web 2.0 will only be as good as your network. So try things out with friends, or find friends once you’ve gotten started. Once you start building your network, it may start growing on its own, as other people find you, and you can end up with a really great network.

Many people have privacy concerns about Web 2.0. The truth is that Web 2.0 can be as private as you want. You select how much you want to disclose, and can even restrict who that information is disclosed to. I want people to be able to find me, so I tend to disclose a lot of information depending on the forum.

So, how do we make the tools work for us? First of all, some Web 2.0 tools can help us keep up with technological change (and everything else!). Second of all, they connect us to other librarians, patrons, experts, and others in a way that has never been possible before. Hearing what other libraries are trying, and how it’s working, will give you ideas about your own implementations.

Specific resources discussed during the presentation at PNLA 2008 include:

- oedb.org/blogs/ilibrarian/, blog of “News and resources on Library 2.0 and the information revolution.”
- technorati.com, a blog search tool
- libworm.com, a search tool for library blogs
- Google Reader, www.google.com/reader, an RSS feed reader
- twitter.com/home, a microblogging tool
- plurk.com/, a microblogging tool
- identi.ca, a microblogging tool
- Facebook.com, www.facebook.com/, a social networking tool


MySpace, www.myspace.com/, a social networking tool
- Ning, www.ning.com/, a tool where you can create your own social network

Library 2.0 Network on Ning: library20.ning.com/

An interesting footnote is that, at the time of the presentation, “Lively” was a new virtual world from Google, introduced in July 2008. Google has since announced that “Lively” will cease to exist on December 31, 2008 (Lively Team)

Works Cited


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