

Social Libraries

The Librarian 2.0 Phenomenon

By Stephen Abram

The author shares his thoughts on the future of libraries and librarianship in the context of the emerging importance and impact of Web 2.0 and social computing.

This paper explores some of the concepts that underlie the emergence of the next generation of the Web and how it will affect libraries and librarianship. Commonly referred to as Web 2.0 and Library 2.0, it is also called the interactive Web or the Social Web. It is an exciting time in which we can use these tools to invent the future we need. These are my personal perspectives underpinned by thirty years in librarianship as a reference librarian, cataloger, indexer, publisher, vendor, and software developer.

Recently I was asked if some software applications I was involved in were Web 2.0 compliant. This was amusing and distressing on so many levels. It is amusing because what is being called Web 2.0 is not a “standard” in almost any sense of the word. It is distressing because it shows how quickly a conversation becomes an expectation in today’s world. This is a perfect example of the power of the ninety-five theses of the Cluetrain Manifesto.¹ The major thesis to me is number one: “Markets are conversations.” I thought it might be useful to explore the opportunities for libraries to use Web 2.0 technologies to generate further success.

The global Web 2.0 discussion is birthing a number of newborn babies: Law 2.0, Advertising 2.0, and Library 2.0 and Librarian 2.0 among them. And why should you read this piece? You have heard it all before. But in a few years these Web 2.0 conversations will have the power to drive huge transformations in our media landscape and therefore our life, work, and play environments. We are entering a period of enormous change—far greater than what we have experienced in our lives to date. Major forecasters such as the Gartner Group and Morgan Stanley have noted that this will be transformational on a very global scale. It will be exciting too, although those of us who care about communities, research, discovery, invention, learning, and information will be tasked with some pretty heavy strategic planning goals. We are going to need to stay alert and nimble.

Web 2.0

According to some sources, the term Web 2.0 has been around since about October 2004. Wikipedia, the free Web encyclopedia, defines Web 2.0 as

A term often applied to a perceived ongoing transition of the World Wide Web from a collection of websites to a full-fledged computing platform serving web applications to end users. Ultimately Web 2.0 services are expected to replace desktop computing applications for many purposes.²

I think Web 2.0 goes much further than this, actually beyond an application focus. It is really about the “hot” Web. I am talking here about “hot” in the

Stephen Abram (stephen.abram@sirsideynix.com) is Vice President, Innovation, SirsiDynix, and Chief Strategist for the SirsiDynix Institute, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

This paper is based on a presentation given at the ALCTS 50th Anniversary Conference “Interactive Futures,” held in Washington, D.C., June 20–21, 2007. The original PowerPoint slides are available on the author’s blog Stephen’s Lighthouse (<http://stephenslighthouse.sirsidynix.com>); see www.sirsidynix.com/Resources/Pdfs/Company/Abram/200707_ALCTS_ALA.pdf.

McLuhanesque sense of the hot and cold or the warm and cool aspects of technology. What makes the Web warmer or hotter?

Interactivity. Of course, the Web is already interactive in a cooler sense. You can click and get results. You can send e-mail and get responses. You can go to Web sites and surf. The old World Wide Web was based on the “Web 1.0” paradigm of Web sites, e-mail, search engines, and surfing. Tim Berners-Lee’s vision was originally much richer (see his current thinking on the semantic, and neutral Web), but we had to spend a few years filling in the details.³ Web 2.0 is about the more human aspects of interactivity. It is about conversations, interpersonal networking, personalization, and individualism. It is focused on content in the context of people, workplaces, markets, community, and learning. In the library world this has relevance not just to our public Web portals but also to workplace intranets and the imperative for greater social cohesiveness in virtual teams and global content engagement. Plain intranets and plain HTML Web sites are fast becoming old stuff, so last century. The emerging modern user needs the experience of the Web and not just content, to learn and succeed. Are the expectations of our users increasing faster than our ability to adapt?

We can already see some of these modalities emerging in the gaming environment. We see it clearly in the convergence of Web 2.0 type features and functions as they emerge in the high growth sites such as MySpace, YouTube, Second Life, Active Worlds, Facebook, Ning, Twitter, Meebo, and others. Context is the word of the day here. Such technologies as are listed below serve as the emerging foundation for Web. 2.0:

- RSS (really simple syndication)
- wikis
- new, simple, and revised programming methods like AJAX, J2EE, widgets, gadgets, mashups, and APIs
- blogs and blogging
- advanced portals and portlets
- commentary and comments functionality
- personalization and “My Profile” features
- personal media such as podcasting and MP3 files
- streaming media audio and video formats
- reviews and user-driven ratings
- personalized alerts
- Web services for enhancement and data mining
- instant messaging and virtual reference including cobrowsing
- folksonomies, tagging, and tag clouds
- photos (for example, Flickr, Picasa)
- social networking software
- Open Access, Open Source, Open Content
- socially driven content
- social bookmarking (such as del.icio.us)

The technology infrastructure of Web 2.0 is complex, constantly in flux, and really in a Renaissance mode. It includes server software, content syndication, messaging protocols, standards-based browsers, and various client applications. In some ways we have the mosaic tiles now and are just starting to create the bigger picture.

This is fundamentally about a transition of the Web site and e-mail-centric world from one that is mostly about information (and largely textual information) to one where the content is combined with functionality and targeted applications. Web 2.0 could be seen as the Web becoming a computing platform for serving up Web applications to end users, but I believe that this is a too geek-centric point of view. It is primarily about a much higher level of interactivity and deeper user experiences, which are enabled by the recent advances in Web software combined with insights into the transformational aspects of the Internet. Web 2.0 is ultimately about a social phenomenon—not just about networked social experiences, but about the distribution and creation of Web content itself, “characterized by open communication, decentralization of authority, freedom to share and reuse, and the market as a conversation.”⁴ It moves the Web experience into a place that more closely resembles an academic learning and collaboration environment than an information delivery and e-commerce vehicle. To enable this new world, we will see a more organized Web with a plethora of new modalities of categorized content and more developed, deep-linking Web architecture and a greater variety of Web display modes like visualization. Ultimately, this will result in another shift in economic value of the Web, potentially equaling that of the dot-com boom and probably driving an even higher level of social, political, institutional, and economic disruption. We had better be ready.

What is truly exciting is that Web 2.0 is just the title of a conversation. There is no standard (at least not just a single one). We can all participate and influence the development of the next generation of the Web. To the detail-oriented, this conversation may be too high in the stratosphere without enough concrete recommendations and, for the theoretically inclined, it may remain too visionary for real implementation. Among all of us, it is worth following. Web 2.0 is probably the series title of the most important conversation of our age and one whose impacts can be truly transformational on a global scale.

Web 3.0

There is even discussion and dreaming about a “Web 3.0.” One could speculate that the Google/Sun Microsystems alliance to create a Web-based operating system for applications such as word processing, spreadsheets, e-mail, readers, and presentations are early indicators of this trend. The

introduction of IBM's Lotus Symphony for free is another indication. Perhaps 3.0 will look something like the Croquet Consortium project (www.opencroquet.org), which is very exciting and worth reviewing as a potential future scenario. Can we imagine the merger of Google Earth and Second Life to truly create a parallel world experience: Second Earth? Web 3.0 will probably be even more distributed in form than Web 2.0, and maybe some of the Web 2.0 applications will disappear or merge with a new integrated whole. Web services or the emerging semantic Web may replace such things as social networking sites and repositories. Either way, it rises to a new plateau of user experience and user control.

Library 2.0

In the library and information professional world, I believe that we generally deal with a savvy audience of users relative to the general consumer demographic. We also tend to the digital divide issues of the more challenged user. This means that what our most critical users do not know about or use, we can often inform them and train them in the newest technologies that can have an impact on their success. We can help users who are comfortable using technologies such as wikis, RSS, instant messaging, news aggregators, and blogs, to leverage these to make a difference in reaching their goals and your institutional or enterprise goals. Libraries that block access to the newest applications are positioning a poor technological presence, which is not a good position to take as a bridge in the digital divide for their communities.

Library 2.0 is another conversation. This narrative is mainly around the concept of how to use the Web 2.0 opportunities in a library environment. This exciting concept can create a conversation that creates the next generation of library Web sites, databases, online public access catalogs, intranets, and portals in a way that allows the end user to thrive and survive (and libraries along with them!). It is also about having a conversation about some of the human aspects of this emerging environment. Are we entering an era where the user experience for learning and research will finally top the technology? I hope so.

Clearly every one of the technologies listed in Web 2.0 above—RSS, wikis, blogging, personalization, podcasting, streaming media, ratings, alerts, folksonomies, tagging, social networking software, and the rest—could be useful in an enterprise, institutional research, or community environment, and could be driven or introduced by the library. Yes, I know that many of these are already used individually in many of your environments. The beauty of Web 2.0 and Library 2.0 is the level of integration and interoperability that is designed into the interface through your portal or

intranet. That is where the real power to enhance the user experience exists. To take advantage of the concepts inherent in Library 2.0 is the imperative to not shy away from adding advanced functionality and features directly into the content. This would provide the context and workflow-oriented features that users will demand or are demanding already. We are seeing the beachfront on this trend in services such as Second Life, Library 2.0, and the MySpace and Facebook development platforms.

Librarian 2.0

We cannot have these changes without some improvements in the capacity, competences, aptitudes, and attitudes of library workers. Librarians have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to invent a new future. Librarian 2.0 is the guru of the information age. Librarian 2.0

- strives to understand the power of the Web 2.0 opportunities;
- learns the major tools of Web 2.0 and Library 2.0;
- combines e-resources and print formats seamlessly;
- is container and format agnostic;
- is device independent and uses and delivers to everything from laptops to PDAs (personal digital assistants) to iPods;
- develops targeted federated search and adopts the OpenURL standard;
- connects people and technology and information in context;
- does not shy away from nontraditional cataloguing and classification and chooses tagging, tag clouds, folksonomies, and user-driven content descriptions and classifications where appropriate;
- embraces nontextual information and the power of pictures, moving images, sight, and sound;
- understands the “long tail” and leverages the power of old and new content;
- sees the potential in using content sources such as the Open Content Alliance, Google Book Search, and OpenWorldCat;
- connects users up to expert discussions, conversations, and communities of practice and participates there as well;
- uses the latest tools of communication (such as Skype) to connect content, expertise, information coaching, and people;
- uses and develops advanced social networks to enterprise advantage;
- connects with everyone using their communication mode of choice: telephone, Skype, IM, SMS, texting, e-mail, virtual reference, and so on;

- encourages user-driven metadata and user-developed content and commentary;
- mines their usage data for insights into user behaviors;
- and understands the wisdom of crowds and the emerging roles and impacts of the blogosphere, Web syndicasphere, and wikisphere.

First and foremost, Librarian 2.0 understands users at a deep level—not just as pointers and clickers, but in terms of their goals and aspirations, workflows, social and content needs, and more. Librarian 2.0 is where the user is, when the user is there. Librarians are eminently qualified to contribute to this immersion environment. Aspects of librarian-influenced e-learning and distance education as implemented by our institutions and communities should allow us to contribute to the preparation of our users to acquire and improve their skills and competencies.

It is essential that we start preparing to become Librarian 2.0 now. The Web 2.0 movement is laying the groundwork for exponential business growth and another major shift in the way our users live, work and play. We have the ability, insight, and knowledge to influence the creation of this new dynamic—and guarantee the future of our profession. *Librarian 2.0—now*.

References

1. Cluetrain Manifesto, www.cluetrain.com (accessed Sept. 19, 2007).
2. Wikipedia, Web 2.0, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2.0 (accessed Sept. 19, 2007).
3. See Tim Berners-Lee's Web site, www.w3.org/People/Berners-Lee (accessed Sept. 19, 2007) for information about his publications and current areas of interest.
4. Web 2.0 Portal, About Web 2.0, http://webtwopointzeroportal.com/_wsn/page2.html (accessed Sept. 19, 2007).