

# Creating Conversations, Connections, and Community

*“This is a given in my world: To remain viable, interesting, and relevant, libraries should seek methods to get out into the community, engage users with services and conversations, and offer collaborative spaces both online and in beautiful physical buildings. But here’s the other side of the coin: Librarians should embrace the social tools as well on a professional and even personal level. It’s the logical first step to put us on the way to Library 2.0.”*

—Michael Stephens, “Social Software for the Rest of Us (or Librarian 2.0),” ALA TechSource Blog, [www.techsource.ala.org/blog/2005/11/social-software-for-the-rest-of-us-or-librarian-20.html](http://www.techsource.ala.org/blog/2005/11/social-software-for-the-rest-of-us-or-librarian-20.html)

Welcome to this issue of *Library Technology Reports*! In this issue, I’ll explore the social software landscape and point librarians toward some implementation strategies and best practices for using tools such as Weblogs, commonly referred to as *blogs*; wikis (server software that allows users to create and edit Web-based content using any Web browser); instant messaging, often denoted by the abbreviation IM; and RSS (Really Simple Syndication) to create new services or improve current ones in all types of libraries. I’ll define as many terms as possible, and point readers toward some useful research, case studies, and concrete examples to ensure that those who choose to use one—or all—of these tools can proceed without any stumbling blocks.

## A Web 2.0 World

Some people see Web 2.0 as hype and hyperbole. Others can see beyond the buzzword and view Web 2.0 as a set of ever-evolving tools that can benefit online users. With these tools, users can converse across blogs, wikis, and at photo-sharing sites, such as Flickr, via comments or through online discussions. With these tools, folks having similar and dissimilar viewpoints can make a connection. With these tools, collaboration is possible despite the barriers of distance and time. With these tools, community is created and enhanced, sometimes between the online and physical realms.

Some libraries and librarians are involved in creating conversations, connections, and community via many of these social tools. But it may be time for more librarians to explore how these tools can enhance communication with users—from academic librarians reaching out to faculty and students; to public librarians reaching patrons

where they are “living” on the Web; to school librarians creating spaces for collaboration and learning; and to special librarians who are finding new ways to deliver information to clients and staff.

In this issue, I’ll start with an overview of Web 2.0, and then I’ll move through detailed chapters on blogs, RSS, IM, wikis, and Flickr. Each section will include selected resources, implementation strategies, and best practices. I encourage readers to use these guides to plan their own cyberspace initiatives.

## A Note about Open-Source Software

One more benefit to this exploration is that each chapter will highlight pointers for open-source software options for each of the tools discussed. For some libraries, these no-cost applications may be just the ticket for launching new services for little money.

Rachel Singer Gordon recently introduced a toolkit of open-source options for librarians in the *Computers in Libraries* department we co-author, “Tech Tips for Every Librarian.”<sup>1</sup> There are literally thousands of open-source solutions, she points out, and librarians can “also find a wealth of options for staff and library-specific use. From open-source messaging and co-browsing software to course-management packages to open-source OPACs [online public access catalogs], you can find alternatives to most software used in libraries. Some will be more appropriate for your organization than others, but keep an open mind.”

## On the Library Cluetrain

A touchstone book for me in the last couple of years has been *The Cluetrain Manifesto*, by Rick Levine, Christopher

Locke, Doc Searls, and David Weinberger, published in 2000 and available free on the Web at [www.cluetrain.com](http://www.cluetrain.com). The *Manifesto* seeks to open the lines of communication between markets and companies in a new, networked age, promoting the idea, “Markets are conversations.”

The Internet enables an open, human-generated/perpetuated discourse the *The Cluetrain Manifesto*'s authors believe will be the most successful path for businesses and organizations to take in regard to their building online and offline presence. The *Manifesto* is comprised of ninety-five points, each point builds on the idea of being human and on organizations exercising voice, trust, transparency, innovation, and networking. I urge my workshop audiences—and really any librarian that I talk to—to read the theses and ponder how they apply to libraries.

These ideas took on a special resonance for me when in summer 2006 the American Library Association mounted an official wiki for its Annual Conference, and Jenny Levine and I taught an online course for ALA. The course, which concluded June 7, 2006, provided an overview of the concepts of Library 2.0 and Association 2.0, and it immersed the fifty ALA Library 2.0 participants (who were a mix of ALA staffers and ALA members) in Web 2.0 tools.

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These networked conversations are enabling powerful new forms of social organization and knowledge exchange to emerge.

*The Cluetrain Manifesto* #9, [www.cluetrain.com](http://www.cluetrain.com)

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Using these new tools, librarians can create networked, open, human, conversations and exchange. With these tools, we can take our services online and out into the social Web, the place in this very early part of the twenty-first century where our users are virtually “meeting” and “talking.”

One note of caution: don't feel that every tool discussed in this issue of *Library Technology Reports* must fit into your plan or into your library's services. Some will work; some will solve problems. While many may work, this is not an all-or-nothing prescription for Library 2.0. Find the tools that best serve your library's needs and run with them! I urge readers to explore the tools presented here and to implement the ones that fit with your mission and vision of outreach and service for the twenty-first-century library.

## A Note on Using this Resource

Learning about Web 2.0 can be overwhelming. Use this issue of *Library Technology Reports* as a guide for deciding which tools work best for you. When I'm asked, “What do

we start with?” my reply is always this: Start with a library blog. Create a “What's New” type blog via Blogger ([www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com)) or on your library's server with a blog software application. You'll get an easy-to-use, content-delivery mechanism that comes with a built-in RSS feed. Train your librarian authors and dive in! Then ponder what other tools your library might use—such as IM for presence? Or maybe a wiki for collaboration? Or possibly a Flickr account to share images (with an RSS feed as well!) among staff members, with patrons, and with the outside world?

## Acknowledgements

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I would also like to thank my comrades in arms at ALA TechSource Blog as well: Jenny, of course; Karen G. Schneider, who challenges us to think about our systems and our users; and Tom Peters, who fosters new ways of looking at libraries and our services. A heartfelt shout out to Teresa Koltzenburg, editor at TechSource, for this opportunity and for inviting Jenny and me to a dinner in Providence, Rhode Island, in May 2005, which marked a turning point for us. Thanks too to the folks who have inspired me to look at our 2.0 world and see how libraries can use such thinking to reach more users in new ways.

*ALA TechSource Blog*  
[www.techsource.ala.org/blog](http://www.techsource.ala.org/blog)

Finally, I would like to thank Brian O'Connor, my dissertation committee chair, as well as the faculty and my fellow students in the Institute of Museum and Library Services-funded Distance Independent Information Science Ph.D. Cohort Program at the University of North Texas. And a special thanks as well goes out to the librarians who make up the Biblioblogosphere, who share information about themselves, about their thoughts and experiences, and to the folks who took time out of their schedules to be interviewed for this report.

To all: Rock On! Dream on! Play! Never stop learning!

## Notes

1. Rachel Singer Gordon and Michael Stephens, “Free Finds for Frugal Libraries,” *Computers in Libraries* 26, no. 3 (March 2006), 45.