

# Presence in the 2.0 World

by Jenny Levine

As libraries synchronize their services to the Web 2.0 world, there are some issues we as a profession need to reconsider in light of changing user expectations. Librarians have traditionally held a gatekeeper role for information, which meant being gatekeepers for such things as authority and patron privacy. Since fall 2005, we've been re-examining what I've called "the four C's"—collaboration, community, commons, and conversation. The discussions have been fruitful, moving from theory to practice as evidenced by the many examples in this issue of *Library Technology Reports* and its predecessor, "Web 2.0 & Libraries: Best Practices for Social Software."

Now that we can better understand the implications for these practices, where do we go next? To continue the alliterative theme, for libraries the last year has seen new issues and tools arise around participation, privacy, point of need, and most of all, presence ("the four P's"). These concepts form the foundation of the intersection of modern library services and Web 2.0, and they will force us to recast our services to be more like those in the rest of the online world.

- **Participation**—As long-time Internet users expect to be able to contact a company's customer service via e-mail or even live chat, new (and especially younger) users' expectations are evolving to expect direct interaction with Web sites. Rather than just sending an e-mail off into the ether for a possible one-to-one exchange, users are coming to expect the ability to contribute feedback and comments directly on a site in order to engage in conversations. How will libraries respond, given their traditional gatekeeper role?
- **Privacy**—In order to participate in various social sites, the emerging reality is that users have to

give up some personal privacy to connect with others online and to participate in these interactive sites. Hundreds of millions of users regularly divulge information that they never would have in the physical world, just for the chance to find others with like interests. Regardless of whether librarians approve of this trend or not, the truth is that we will have to adjust the entry points we provide to patron information and interaction to allow individual users to make choices about their own privacy, rather than forcing our choices upon them. In fact, this might be a golden opportunity for libraries to teach patrons how to manage their online privacy and identities to be smart and productive digital citizens. This can happen, though, only if we acknowledge that patrons may actually want to make some of their library data public or use it in ways we may not expect or condone.

- **Point of need**—As information overload continues to grow and users spend more time on social networks online, how libraries fit their services into our users' work flow—rather than forcing them to conform to ours—becomes a pressing question. More and more, we will need to consider how we can adapt our services to be at the user's point of need when they need us, where they already are.
- **Presence**—Perhaps the most important issue of all, and certainly the one that ties all of these others together, is the concept of presence. Libraries traditionally excel at presence in the physical world, but have yet to implement it well online. In this context, *presence* has multiple meanings. The first is literally just having an online presence that allows for patron participation (e.g., blogs with open

comments), choice for level of privacy (e.g., letting users display RSS feeds of their patron data), and being available at the point of need (e.g., via RSS, Google gadgets, etc.). Luckily, new tools, many of them free or low-cost, have appeared that help us rethink and adapt library services to these new expectations.

However, libraries are struggling with a second type of presence, namely how to provide online the humanity, vibrancy, and expertise that infuses our physical presence. Again, we've seen libraries exploit tools such as blogs and online video successfully to help with this.

As these tools go mainstream, the next challenge for libraries will be an entirely new type of pres-

ence online, that of actually being "there" in the moment, whether that moment is synchronous or asynchronous. Twitter is an excellent example of this concept, allowing multiple communication methods, which have traditionally been separate, to be mashed together into a stream of "presence" with and for one's designated circle of contacts. It's a combination of "I'm online now" information provided by instant messaging's status indicators and the intimacy of feeling a human being on the other end of the connection. It's not something libraries have addressed in the past, but the concept of presence is growing in the online world, and libraries will need to consider how to respond.