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WEB 2.0 IN LIBRARIES: ASSESSING NEW SERVICES

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Each morning's work at the Center for Creative Leadership library involves scanning the internet news sources for stories that affect company clients, particularly new business trends and innovations. Two such trends are Web 2.0 and the idea of "third place." The term "third place" refers to an open, neutral, creative haven for social interaction and collaboration, such as a library or coffee shop. Web 2.0 refers to those new internet technologies that can be used to create virtual "third place" communities through synchronous and asynchronous communication. So it was not surprising to see a new column in the January 2007 issue of *American Libraries* focusing on how libraries can and are using Web 2.0 technology not only to put traditional library services online, but to extend the library's function as a "third place" into the virtual world.¹

According to Amanda C. Kooser in an article in the online journal *Entrepreneur*, Web 2.0 is a nebulous term implying an upgrade of what has been. More than that, however, "Web 2.0 is a people-oriented technology movement. Ease of use, social features, collaboration, fast-loading applications, interactivity, quick development times, and real time updates are all major trends."² Web 2.0 reflects an understanding that the Internet rather than the personal computer is the new computing platform. In addition to familiar social networking sites, such as MySpace, YouTube, and Second Life, Web 2.0 includes web based applications like word processors and spread sheets that are simpler, often free, and because they are web based, completely portable. Web Widgets, small programs that can be embedded into a library or company web page, can help libraries or companies build their own online communities by providing opportunities for social networking and sharing user-generated materials through

wikis, blogs, group calendars, file sharing, podcasts, and the like. Such tools move beyond the limits of e-mail in helping distant workers (or patrons) collaborate on projects and connect to communities of like interests. Many web widgets are available for free from such sites as Widgetbox (<http://www.widgetbox.com>).

YouTube and MySpace have appeared in the library literature recently as public and academic libraries debate whether social networking represents an appropriate use of public library terminals. Even more controversial is the virtual reality game, *Second Life*, in which a player's avatar, or fantasy character, can own virtual property (bought with real cash), spend real money on clothing and cars, and engage in sexual activity with other avatars, including virtual prostitutes. According to a recent article in *The Week* magazine, some 250,000 *Second Life* players spend \$1.5 million in real money each month to outfit their avatars. In addition, scores of companies like American Trends, Nissan, and Toyota use *Second Life* as a marketing opportunity. Reuters news service has opened an "in-game" news bureau focusing on real world *Second Life* stories as well as cyberspace events.³ In addition to marketing, *Second Life* and other "serious games" have been used by companies like Sears and Circuit City to set up virtual show rooms. Insurance companies send new agents to fires and car crashes in *Second Life* for training. IBM maintains a virtual headquarters inside *Second Life* to guide new hires in distant locations through orientation and benefits sign-up.⁴ This past November in Beijing, IBM held a major business meeting where *Second Life* was introduced as a prototype for a planned \$10 million project by IBM to create a "3-D Internet" for entertainment and business collaboration. As of January of this year, over 3000 IBM

employees had *Second Life* avatars and 300 employees were regularly conducting company business inside the virtual world.⁵ While *Second Life* is free, it is restricted to players over 18 years of age because of commercial interests and virtual sexuality. Both these concerns may limit its potential use in public and school libraries, but its potential usefulness for building business collaboration opportunities as well as educational spaces, and its ability to create new virtual communities makes it and subsequent virtual space developments potentially important tools for information delivery and community building by university and business libraries.

In recognition of the importance of Web 2.0 as a library tool, the American Library Association (ALA) recently issued a major report entitled, [*Participatory Networks: The Library as Conversation*](#), and their magazine, *American Libraries*, introduced Meredith Farkas's new column "Technology in Practice." In addition, Librarians' Association of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (LAUNC-CH) held a conference on March 12 entitled "From MySpace to Our Space: Connecting with Millennials." Librarians from Duke University, North Carolina State University, and UNC discussed using social networking sites to enhance library services and entice new users.

Participatory Networks begins by stating that knowledge is created through conversation and that Web 2.0 technology makes it easier to meet the long-standing role of libraries: knowledge creation and dissemination.⁶ A key concept of Web 2.0 is that people are the content of the site—the users provide information that attracts new members to an ever-expanding network. Along with that is the user's expectation that the technology involved is easy to use, flexible, and continually under development with input from the user community. If knowledge is based on conversation, then Web 2.0 becomes a collection development issue for libraries because it holds the potential to expand the library's conversation with its community (and also with other libraries) and thereby deepen the knowledge base of the library.

In their textbook on library collection development, Evans and Saponaro paraphrase a publication of the Library of Congress by stating that "the internet has radically changed" much of the work of librarians. They go on to note how libraries are making ever-increasing use of web resources and that among all forms of electronic resources, web based services are becoming more and more dominant.⁷ The most common forms of web based services, databases and other types of digital collections, are selected and evaluated using four broad categories not unlike those used for evaluating other forms of library materials. The first category, as with most library materials, is content. Cost is another major factor. Particular to electronic products are the issues of access and support. Evans and Saponaro also note how important it is to require at least a thirty-day trial to assess electronic resources hands-on, and they emphasize the importance of talking with other librarians who have the items under consideration actively in use in their libraries.⁸ However, all of these recommendations apply to "conventional" web based resources, or Web 1.0. Collection development models for incorporating Web 2.0 into libraries have yet to be developed.

Participatory Networks looks specifically at the problems and possibilities of applying Web 2.0 in libraries including these collection development considerations. In terms of balancing the benefits of content with costs, they note:

As with any technological advance, scarce resources must be weighed against a desire to incorporate new services. Do we expand the collection, improve the Web site or offer blogs to students? A better approach for making these kinds of decisions is to look at the needs of the community served in context with the commonly accepted, core tasks of the library, and see how they can be recast (and enhanced) as conversational, or participatory tools.⁹

The good news, in terms of cost, is that much of the relevant software is open source and free. The major cost involves training and staff time to set

up, monitor it, and assist patrons in its use. There is also a potential problem with integrating the new systems with currently installed software, particularly where creating integrated catalogs and databases may be a goal. While IP authentication can be used to control access, with open source software, technical support may be limited or non-existent, creating more staffing and training costs. *Participatory Networks* does specifically address these concerns and also Evans and Saponaro's concerns for trial periods and communication with other librarians by proposing a "participatory library test bed" funded by interested libraries. This "participatory test bed" would create an arena for experimentation and discussion within an open source technology infrastructure overseen by a team of researchers and developers. While *Participatory Networks* envisions major possibilities for integrated catalogs within and between libraries including wiki-like user participation opportunities, libraries can begin experimenting with much simpler, existing technologies by using wikis and blogs as virtual meeting spaces for groups that already use the library and by using existing social networks such as MySpace and Facebook to promote them. Toward this end, the second offering in Meredith Farkas's "Technology in Practice" column includes a link to and a description of a "self-paced technology discovery program, Learning

2.0" created by the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County (PLCMC). The purpose of this program is to offer exposure to "23 Things" or competencies needed to navigate Web 2.0. All of the activities are simple, concrete, and available free on the Internet. The program was designed to give the PLCMC librarians hands on experiences with these technologies to help them understand how to use them and implement them in the library. Similar programs are being replicated in other libraries.¹⁰

While most libraries do not have the resources to create major virtual interactive centers in places like Second Life, there are free and/or low cost means for providing virtual "third place" interactions among library users using existing hardware, open source software, and free or low-cost training opportunities for library staff. As long as the mission of libraries remains to get the right information to the right person at the right time, examination of Web 2.0 is a current "must." While fully integrated catalogs within and between libraries remains in the (hopefully) near future, participatory networking opportunities within library communities are here for the taking.

Endnotes

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<http://www.pantagraph.com/articles/2007/02/12/money/doc45d002e10c00c117577653.txt> (Accessed February 12, 2007).
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- ⁷Evans, G. Edward and Margaret Zarnosky Saponaro. *Developing Library and Information Center Collections, 5th ed.* (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2005), 80.
- ⁸Evans and Saponaro. *Developing Library and Information Center Collections, 5th ed.*, 163-173.
- ⁹Lankes, Silverstein, and Nicholson. *Participatory Networks: The Library as Conversation*, 24.
- ¹⁰Farkas, Meredith. "A Roadmap to Learning 2.0", *American Libraries* 38 (February 2007): 26