Chapter 40
Social Software Use in Public Libraries

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ABSTRACT

With the emergence of Web 2.0, libraries have started employing social software applications (such as blogs, tagging, social networking, and wikis) to engage readers, encourage user-contributed content, and connect with user populations in novel ways. However, little research has been conducted on the applications of Web 2.0 technologies within public libraries. This chapter focuses on the applicability of social software in a library setting and examines the use of such innovative techniques as live tagging, social cataloging, and social bookmarking. The chapter evaluates the potential of social software tools for facilitating collaboration between librarians and library patrons; it addresses the concerns expressed by the library and information science community related to the issues of trust, authority, accuracy, responsibility, and ethics in the context of the Library 2.0.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

User-centered philosophies are at the heart of libraries' service and have been in practice long before the emergence of Web 2.0. However, with the advent of the social-interaction technologies, such as blogs, wikis, and social bookmarking, libraries have seen a radical shift as they are now faced with web-users' expectations. These expectations may not be met with less interactive computer technologies, such as library online public access catalogs (OPACs). Libraries have recognized the value that technologies of Web 2.0 can provide to their users and are implementing social software in innovative ways. This chapter provides an overview of social software use in public libraries and evaluates its potential for facilitating collaboration between librarians and library patrons. The author focuses on the applicability of Web 2.0-type technologies in a library setting and presents an overview of social software use in public libraries. Additionally, the chapter addresses concerns expressed by

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60566-368-5.ch040

library and information science professionals related to the issues of trust, authority, accuracy, responsibility, reliability, and ethics in the context of Web 2.0, as well as outlines the directions for future research.

Web 2.0

At the base of all social software use is the concept of Web 2.0. The term itself was coined in 2004 by Tim O'Reilly and John Battelle, at a conference on web technologies (O'Reilly, 2005; Anderson, 2007). O'Reilly (2005) defines *Web 2.0* as:

"the network as platform, spanning all connected devices; Web 2.0 applications are those that make the most of the intrinsic advantages of that platform: delivering software as a continually-updated service that gets better the more people use it, consuming and remixing data from multiple sources, including individual users, while providing their own data and services in a form that allows remixing by others, creating network effects through an architecture of participation".

Abram (2005) expands the philosophy further to include more human aspects of interactivity, such as conversations, interpersonal networking, personalization, and individualism. He explains *Web 2.0* as:

"fundamentally about a transition of the Web site and email-centric world from one that is mostly about information to one where the content is combined with functionality and targeted applications….It's primarily about a much higher level of interactivity and deeper user experiences….characterized by open communication, decentralization of authority, freedom to share and reuse, and the market as a conversation." (emphasis added)

Stephens and Collins (2007) view *Web 2.0* as "the next incarnation of the World Wide Web, where digital tools allow users to create, change, and publish dynamic content of all kinds… to make connections, carry on conversations, and collaborate" (p. 253). They distill Web 2.0 principles to:

- **Conversations:** User participation, discussion and feedback are welcomed and encouraged
- **Community:** Open conversations can lead to a sense of community and belonging
- **Participation:** New information is created via collaboration between users
- **Experience:** Engagement with other users and the community is rewarding and provides some type of fulfillment
- **Sharing:** Users can contribute as much or as little as they like (p. 253)

O'Reilly (2005), Anderson (2007), and McDermott (2007) develop a conceptual framework for the examination of Web 2.0 philosophies and technologies in the context of libraries. For instance, Anderson (2007) emphasizes a need for more serious discussion on Web 2.0 and expands on O'Reilly's "Six Big Ideas" of individual production and user-generated content, harnessing the power of the crowd, data on an epic scale, architecture of participation, network effects, and openness (2005). Anderson suggests a) focusing on both mature social software applications, e.g., blogs and wikis, and new applications, e.g., data mash-ups, which build on earlier applications; and b) investigating web technologies and standards that enable the software applications of Web 2.0, including XML and AJAX (p. 196). McDermott (2007) presents a breakdown of the specific functions of each application as a means to evaluate Web 2.0's potential and uses.

The most commonly used technologies in libraries include:

- Blogs (for example, "What's New" pages; blogs designed for specific user audiences or community outreach programs)