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Being There is Only the Beginning: Toward More Effective Web 2.0 Use in Academic Libraries

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14. ABSTRACT
An increasing number of academic libraries are considering how to expand their presence on the Web, which has led many to adopt the practices of their users, creating accounts with popular social media services such as Facebook, Twitter, and Del.icio.us, and launching library blogs. There is a general acknowledgement among academic librarians, particularly those whose patrons are mainly undergraduate students, that these are now the "places" where patrons can be found. Kroski (2007) likens a handful of Web 2.0 favorites, including YouTube, Flickr, and MySpace (Facebook is probably more accurate in 2009), to "neighborhood hangouts where people convene to chat and express themselves. They provide a social space beyond work and home, where people go seeking a community experience. In so doing, they have helped transform the Web into a true 'third place'" (p. 2011). Though we may not have previously considered the Web in exactly these terms, Kroski's assertion does in fact mirror our experience as library professionals, particularly with our undergraduate patrons. It is just this experience that has led most academic libraries to quickly develop a presence in many of these Web spaces; simply put, we must meet our patrons where they are. Being there is certainly half the battle and most academic librarians now tend to agree that creating a presence is essential, but is it enough? What should we do once we're there? Why should students want to "hang out" with us? Is "hanging out" even appropriate? How can we maintain our professionalism in such a context?

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Introduction

An increasing number of academic libraries are considering how to expand their presence on the Web, which has led many to adopt the practices of their users, creating accounts with popular social media services such as Facebook, Twitter, and Del.icio.us, and launching library blogs. There is a general acknowledgement among academic librarians, particularly those whose patrons are mainly undergraduate students, that these are now the "places" where patrons can be found. Kroski (2007) likens a handful of Web 2.0 favorites, including YouTube, Flickr, and MySpace (Facebook is probably more accurate in 2009), to "neighborhood hangouts where people convene to chat and express themselves. They provide a social space beyond work and home, where people go seeking a community experience. In so doing, they have helped transform the Web into a true 'third place'" (p. 2011). Though we may not have previously considered the Web in exactly these terms, Kroski's assertion does in fact mirror our experience as library professionals, particularly with our undergraduate patrons. It is just this experience that has led most academic libraries to quickly develop a presence in many of these Web spaces; simply put, we must meet our patrons where they are. Being there is certainly half the battle and most academic librarians now tend to agree that creating a presence is essential, but is it enough? What should we do once we're there? Why should students want to "hang out" with us? Is "hanging out" even appropriate? How can we maintain our professionalism in such a context?

What is Web 2.0?

According to Kroski (2007), "Web 2.0 is loosely defined as the evolution to a social and interactive Web that gives everyone a chance to participate – not just those with programming skills" (p. 2011). Much of the current literature on Web 2.0 points to Tim O'Reilly's definition: "Web 2.0 is the business revolution in the computer industry caused by the move to the internet as platform, and an attempt to understand the rules for success on that new platform. Chief among those rules is this: Build applications that harness network effects to get better the more people use them" (O'Reilly, as cited in Liu, 2008, p. 7). And finally, Liu (2008) describes the fact that "in the Web 2.0 era, the relationship between users and information is transformed from stand-alone, separate silos to mutually inclusive, mutually reliant, and reciprocal action-and-reaction entities" (p. 10).

For academic libraries' purposes, Web 2.0 offers a new and fairly easy way to connect with patrons, promote our libraries, and offer our services in a convenient context. Web 2.0 applications are user-friendly, require no specific training or expertise, and are almost always free. These applications offer a variety of forums for self-expression, conversation, and information sharing. Undergraduate students are using them for a wide variety of reasons, but there is no question that they are, indeed, using them. I will argue later that although libraries are now using them too, we are not doing so to their full potential or in ways that actively invite our undergraduate patrons to interact with us in these new spaces. First though, we will examine how academic libraries are currently making use of these tools.

Current Use of Web 2.0

Web 2.0 encompasses a huge number of applications, interactive forums, and new communication styles. Academic libraries have most widely adopted the use of blogs, social

networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, social bookmarking, and wikis. Other Web 2.0 tools used by libraries include podcasting, personalized access to a library's website, RSS feeds, and media sharing. I will address a few of the more popular tools below.

Blogs

Blogs are perhaps the most popular Web 2.0 tool currently being used in academic libraries. Many libraries have them and those that don't probably have plans to start them soon. Having a library blog has nearly become "proper procedure" in academic libraries, but librarians still seem confused about how to use them effectively. Currently, most academic libraries are using their blogs as newsletters, loudspeakers, or library bulletin boards. In other words, blogs are being used to get information to patrons; news and events are publicized, newly acquired materials mentioned, general promotion of the library's services attempted. A 2006 survey conducted by Draper and Turnage gathered responses from 265 academic librarians about their library blogs. According to Draper and Turnage (2008),

> The majority (86%) said that they used their blog to discuss news and events. A large number (70%) also said they used their blog as a way to market the library…One librarian simply said it was meant to build a relationship with users. (p. 19)
> Bardyn (2009) recognizes a problem in the lack of connection spurred by library blogs.

She refers to the results of a 2008 national survey of 22 academic health sciences libraries, when she writes:

> Only one out of 22 blogs surveyed received comments on a regular basis, suggesting that almost all librarian bloggers these days find themselves struggling with the problems of how to integrate content into the enterprise and how to engage users in library initiatives. (p. 12-14)

Allan (2009) suggests using the library blog to create a new type of research guide. He gives some basic instructions:

> You should probably limit yourself to one subject area per blog, keep the posts short, continue to generate new, interesting posts, and do not engage in blog mission creep with current news items or developments in the library information world. Try also to include a summary of your intentions on the front page. (p. 21)

Though Allan may have some unique ideas for the use of academic library blogs, most libraries are using their blogs exactly the way they might have used their paper newsletters ten years ago. The Undergraduate Library at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (http://www.library.illinois.edu/), for example, actually calls their blog the "News and Events Blog" and some recent posts include "Online Catalog Update June 14-17," "Remodeled Café," and "Gaming Career Night." Every blog post announces a library event or alerts students and faculty to an upcoming change or interruption in service. With very few exceptions, the academic library blogs I examined were similar in nature to Urbana-Champaign's. Not only did these blogs focus almost exclusively on news and events, but they also shared the characteristic

of being hidden, or deeply buried on their libraries' websites. In several cases, I only found them after performing a search for the word "blog" on the libraries' sites.

It is worth mentioning here that while many of the smaller colleges' libraries that I examined did not have blogs, they nearly all had frequently-updated "library news" pages that functioned in almost exactly the same way as the larger schools' blogs, with the only exceptions being the lack of space for comments and the lack of an identifiable "author." Hollins University's Wyndham Robertson Library (http://www.hollins.edu/academics/library/libtoc.htm) calls their news page "What's New" and some recent posts include "New Journals in JSTOR and Project Muse" and "The Library Forms Student Advisory Committee." Similarly, recent posts to Hobart and William Smith's Warren Hunting Smith Library's (http://academic.hws.edu/library/) "Library Updates" page include "J. G. Vail Portraits Online" and "Archives Open for Reunion Weekend."

One exception to these general trends is the library at the University of Minnesota (http://www.lib.umn.edu/), which has introduced a program called "UThink," which offers to host both student and faculty blogs free of charge and links them to the library's website. While the goals of this program are totally different than those of a library's own blog, it is indicative of ways in which academic libraries can support the practice of blogging in their communities. In a brief report on the UThink program, Albanese (2004) observes:

> UM officials think blogs may transform the academic enterprise – and they want the library to be part of that. Already, Nackenrud [UM librarian] said, professors have said that they'll use the blogs for specific classes to encourage discussion and debate. (p. 18) Despite such occasional innovation, all evidence points to the fact that, in most cases, users are receiving library blogs in exactly the same way they once received paper newsletters: as passive consumers.

Social Networking Sites

Just a few years ago, when discussing social networking sites, it would have been necessary to address the use of MySpace, Friendster, and perhaps several others in addition to Facebook. In 2009, though, Facebook use has far eclipsed the use of any other social networking site and certainly among academic libraries, there is some recognition that this is where our students are. When Kroski asserts that Web 2.0 tools provide a "third place," it is Facebook that comes immediately to mind. We are aware that students, particularly undergraduates, spend more and more of their time on Facebook, posting photos and videos, writing "notes," commenting on each other's "walls," taking quizzes, and generally "hanging out." If this atmosphere doesn't sound particularly scholarly, that is because it's generally not. So why are academic libraries interested in Facebook? We have the goal of meeting our patrons where they are and much of the time, Facebook is that shared space. In an effort to connect with their students, many academic libraries have created their own Facebook pages, of which their students, faculty, and colleagues can opt to be "fans." The question, again, is what exactly libraries are doing with these pages and how effectively they are using Facebook to reach out to their users.

Kroski (2007) describes academic libraries as "utilizing social networking communities as marketing platforms, tools for outreach, and networking venues" (2019). In the same article, she asserts that "By building a presence within an online community where many of their patrons

currently interact, the library becomes more accessible and highly visible to a large demographic of potential users" (2019).

A 2006 survey conducted by Charnigo and Barnett-Ellis gathered responses from 126 academic librarians regarding their experience with and impressions of Facebook. According to Charnigo and Barnett-Ellis (2007), most of the librarians surveyed felt that Facebook was a distraction and did not have much academic merit, however,

> Some librarians were so enthusiastic about Facebook that they suggested libraries use the site to promote their services….One librarian wrote: 'Facebook (and other social networking sites) can be a way for libraries to market themselves. I haven't seen students using Facebook in an academic manner, but there was a time when librarians frowned on e-mail and AIM too. If it becomes part of students' lives, we need to welcome it. It's part of welcoming them, too.' (p. 30)

In 2006, these more enthusiastic respondents predicted exactly the ways in which academic libraries in 2009 are now using Facebook.

Similar to their use of blogs, academic libraries are using Facebook pages to market themselves and their services and to make announcements. Unlike their blogs however, libraries' Facebook pages are clear about how their librarians can be reached (for the most part, via phone, chat, text message, email, or in person), often include photographs both of staff members and interesting aspects of the collections, and occasionally post notes that might be helpful to their patrons. Hollins University's Wyndham Robertson Library's Facebook page, for example, has begun posting numbered "Info Tips" with titles such as "Subject Headings Demystified," "Google is Our Friend," and "Plagiarism 101." Also unlike the hard-to-find blogs, many academic libraries, including both Hollins University and Urbana-Champaign, include large Facebook logos on their homepages, inviting patrons to "Find us on Facebook." Clicking on these logos takes patrons directly to the libraries' Facebook pages.

Whether or not they feel that it serves as a major distraction, most academic libraries have recognized that their students spend a vast amount of time on Facebook. And wisely, they've realized that going to the place where their patrons are is one of the most significant ways of serving them. Currently, academic libraries' Facebook pages seem more alive and three dimensional than their blogs; continuing to keep these pages fresh and relevant will likely become more of a challenge with time.

Twitter

The most recent addition to the array of Web 2.0 services, Twitter enables what is referred to as "microblogging," or in other words, Facebook status updates, sans the rest of Facebook. Twitter updates are typically no longer than a single line of text and personal Twitter updates might read "Writing about Web 2.0 in academic libraries" or "At the beach, soaking up some sun." Many users update their "tweets" from mobile devices, creating a near-constant stream of short dispatches from their lives, whether personal or professional. As a Twitter-user, one "follows" a list of other Twitter-ers; updates from these chosen users appear in one's ever-growing stream of visible "tweets." Twitter also allows users to track all "tweets" relevant to a given topic. Twitter is used, not only by individuals, but by businesses and institutions as well.

Academic libraries are no exception and in fact, Mansfield, in a 2009 *University Business* article, claims that "Simple and powerful, Twitter is a must for higher education" (¶ 2).

The question, of course, is how to best use yet another Web 2.0 forum to promote the academic library and/or build relationships with its patrons. Mansfield (2009) specifically cautions Universities against using Twitter for news in her article's second tip: "Don't use Twitter for RSS or publish "News"….No offense, but new releases are not that interesting to read. That's why Twitter profiles that are simply RSS have very few followers" (¶ 5).

There is very little agreement in the field as to whether, and if so how, to use Twitter in libraries. In his 2009 article "Higher Ed Wakes Up to Twitter," Bell (2009) wonders whether Twitter makes sense as a tool for academic libraries. He writes:

> I'm on the fence about the value of Web 2.0 technologies for academic libraries. The effectiveness of our blogs, Facebook profiles, and promotional YouTube videos is questionable, and whether a critical mass of college students is even using Twitter is a topic of debate. (¶ 3)

And in a 2009 *Computers in Libraries* article titled "Twitter for Libraries (and Librarians)," Milstein is clearly at odds with Mansfield's earlier point when she describes that "Short messages can tell people about events such as readings, lectures, and book sales; newly available resources; or changes in the building hours" (p. 17).

Though not as heavily used as blogs or Facebook, academic libraries who are using Twitter at all are most often using it for news, regardless of Mansfield's warning. Both Dickinson University's Waidner-Spahr Library (http://library.dickinson.edu/library/) and the University of Vermont's Bailey/Howe Library (http://library.uvm.edu/) have Twitter accounts that appear to be used strictly for news. A few recent "tweets" from Dickinson include "On July 3rd, the library will be open from noon to 4:00 PM" and "The Belles Lettres Literary Society is sponsoring a poetry reading in the library this Thursday at 7:30." Dickinson's Twitter account currently has 282 "followers" and Vermont's account has 280. Though Urbana-Champaign's Undergraduate Library "tweets" the occasional news item, their account is generally used a bit more creatively, attempting to use library resources to deliver interesting facts and draw patrons into the library. A recent example is the following "tweet," which was posted on July 31: "Jimmy Hoffa disappeared today in 1975. Read about the famous Teamster President's life and mysterious death: [link to catalog search results on Jimmy Hoffa]." Urbana-Champaign's Twitter account has 475 "followers."

Academic libraries are embracing the use of Twitter, but the majority seems to view the medium as simply another way to transmit library news items to their university communities. If blogs are treated as Web-based newsletters, Twitter accounts are treated as campus flyers, used to make brief announcements. After examining quite a few academic libraries' Twitter accounts, I began to wonder if bright paper flyers themselves are being used to alert students and faculty to the existence of these accounts. Though Urbana-Champaign features their most recent "tweets" on their homepage and links directly to Twitter, neither Dickinson nor Vermont promote their Twitter accounts on their websites at all. In fact, I was only able to find both accounts by searching Twitter, rather than the libraries' websites. While many academic libraries are using Twitter, more or less effectively, as another way to communicate with their patrons, there seems to be a disconnect in the realm of promoting or marketing this new technology itself. Perhaps,

given the fact that these accounts have "followers" at all, the libraries are using less technological methods of spreading the word, but a link from the homepage would be a helpful and obvious addition.

Suggestions for More Effective Use

A wide array of Web 2.0 services offers academic libraries new and exciting ways to serve their patrons. The boundaries of place that once tied us to the limited formats of bulletin boards, newsletters, and flyers has disappeared, but much like prisoners who have become so accustomed to the confines of our cells, we have not yet taken advantage of the fact that the doors and windows have been thrown wide open. We may recognize that Web 2.0 tools offer us new ways of reaching patrons, but we're using these tools in the same old ways. Blogs, Facebook, and Twitter invite interaction, personality, and innovation. Yet academic libraries persist in using them to post library hours, changes in service, and event times. Certainly our patrons still need this information and the web is now our forum for information dissemination. However, our patrons are increasingly using Web 2.0 services with much greater ease and fluency than we are. Going to their spaces is not enough; we must also learn their language.

What does it mean to learn the language used by our patrons? First, it means gaining an understanding of how they use virtual spaces like Facebook. Much more than a place to read about upcoming events or new library materials, Facebook is a forum for self-expression. It provides a fluid user experience and though users do gather and share information here, they do so in a way that is very far from dry and institutional. Mansfield (2009) suggests that universities find a way to participate in much the same fashion:

> Put authenticity before marketing. Have personality. Build Community. Colleges and universities that are most successful at utilizing social networking websites like Twitter, Facebook, and MySpace know from trial, error, and experience that a 'marketing and recruitment approach' on social networking sites does not work. Simply put, it comes across as lame to the technologically hip users of social networking sites. Traditional marketing and development content is perfectly fine for your website, e-mail newsletters, and print materials, but Web 2.0 is much more about having personality, inspiring conversation, and building online community….Relax, experiment, let go a bit, find your voice, be authentic. (¶ 4)

Of course academic libraries are institutions, not individuals, and as such, have a responsibility to remain professional, informed, and often objective. These constraints, however, do not prevent us from developing personalities as institutions, using our web space to project those personalities, and occasionally having some original thoughts or a sense of humor. Our patrons are looking for signs of life and too often, they're not finding them. What does this mean for the practical purposes of academic libraries looking for ways to enhance their Web 2.0 presence and make it more relevant? Depending on a library's goals, it could be a simple as offering a librarian with a particular interest the chance to blog about that topic, developing funny and interesting ways to promote your library staff and materials through frequent "tweets," or simply creating obvious and inviting links to these services from your library's homepage. Speaking the language of your library's Web 2-0-savvy patrons is really just about replacing institutionalism with authenticity, in whatever unique way that makes sense for your library.

Web 2.0 is not going away and the more we're able to use its strengths to benefit our libraries, the more relevant we will remain to our students, faculty, and communities.

The Future of Web 2.0 in Academic Libraries

Currently, there is a focus among academic libraries on Web 2.0 tools themselves, rather than on the changing forms of communication and collaboration they enable. While this approach is understandable given their relative "newness," it is one that is quickly growing irrelevant. While libraries are still focused on "having" a blog or "getting" a Facebook account, their patrons have moved on to using these tools effortlessly, almost as extensions of themselves, with little care for or awareness of the tools themselves. As Beard and Dale report in their 2008 article, "Redesigning Services for the Net-Gen and Beyond:"

> In 2006, Martin and Madigan observed 'The virtual world does not sit 'out there' like a parallel universe…it invades and conditions the real world….' The university library is uniquely positioned at the congruence of the real and virtual worlds and librarians need to seize the opportunities presented by [this] shift…. (p. 111)

All signs point to the fact that the use of Web 2.0 in the future will be very different from its use in academic libraries today. The tools that we know as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc. will to recede into the background of our awareness and experience, as we shift toward a reality that encompasses both our physical and virtual experiences. Academic librarians will become increasingly disconnected from our patrons if we persist in adopting new technologies, only to repeatedly return to outdated modes and methods of communication.

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