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## The Making of a Social Librarian:

### How Blogs, Wikis and Facebook Have Changed One Librarian and Her Job

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#### **Abstract**

According to Technorati (<http://www.technorati.com>), the blog search engine, there are over 660 "library 2.0" blogs. The blogs range from the well-known Tame the Web and Shifted Librarian to library students attempting to sort out the deluge of information on blogs, wikis, RSS feeds, social networking services and how these applications and services help, hinder, harm or haunt libraries and librarians. As libraries and librarians make decisions about how to reach out to patrons and communities, increasingly, the decisions we make involve social software applications.

In 2006, the author graduated from library school with an under-used laptop and the ability to create static HTML documents, but with a strong aversion to all things "computer-y" and little interest in or understanding of technology and its relationship to libraries. A two-year residency at a community college, free range to explore any and all avenues of librarianship and the pressing need to create a final "project", however, created the opportunity for her to explore social software in its many variations and applications. With an introduction to creating wiki research guides, free posting reign on the library blog and chances to create workshops on any subject of her choosing, the newly tech-dorked librarian jumped head-first into what has widely touted as Library 2.0. She now subscribes to technology blogs, teaches workshops on using wikis in the classroom, instructs colleagues on establishing del.icio.us accounts and has dozens of other social software projects going at once.

This paper will explore the evolution of the author's identity as a librarian, from a tech-ignorant/tech-phobic library school graduate to a librarian teaching faculty, staff, students, community members and administrators the value of collaborative software.

#### **Introduction**

This past summer I received a small yellow button with the words "Social Librarian" printed on it. The button was a gift from two former colleagues who, as part of a library school project, were studying MySpace and the role of the librarian in social networking. At the

time, I had a MySpace page and profiles in a few other social networking sites: Shelfari, iLike, LinkedIn. But none of these were directly related to librarianship or my identity as a librarian. I pinned the button to my bag, but it really indicated that I was social and, incidentally, a librarian.

The link between social software and librarians is quite strong: as of March 12, 2008, Technorati, the internet search engine for blogs, lists 661 blogs that concern themselves with libraries and social software or "Web 2.0" technology. The integration of social technology and libraries is so pervasive that many use the term "Library 2.0" to indicate the shift in library service toward a more social, user-created model. And while the term and the concept have their critics, the shift is clearly evident as academic and public libraries add blogs, RSS feeds, podcasts and more to their menus of services in efforts to connect to their patrons and discover new users simultaneously:

Library 2.0 simply means making your library's space (virtual and physical) more interactive, collaborative, and driven by community needs. Examples of where to start include blogs, gaming nights for teens, and collaborative photo sites. The basic drive is to get people back into the library by making the library relevant to what they want and need in their daily lives...to make the library a destination and not an afterthought. (LibrarianInBlack.net)

### **Why Social Software?**

What does social software do for libraries and why would a librarian want to be involved? There are more than enough 2.0 wonks exhorting the absolute necessity of you and your library immediately getting involved in "X" social software innovation. "X" has revolutionized the way someone's library interacts with their patrons and it will do the same for you. Prescriptivity abounds where libraries meet social software, and the truth, as one already probably suspects, is that these revolutionary innovations are not a necessity for anyone. For those who are willing to try, to play around and to experiment, however, there is a lot to be gained.

In many respects, investing a little time and effort in understanding social software can result in saving time and effort in other ways. A library blog, with regular updates, can replace a time-consuming newsletter that requires editing and formatting. A wiki can serve

as a scheduling tool, replace that ubiquitous Binder of Important Information at the reference desk or stand in for the emails sent back and forth and back again while collaborating on a project with colleagues. Even a potential time-sucker such as Facebook can be put to efficient ends when you take advantage of the strengths of social networking.

Certainly, there are reasons to maintain a certain level of skepticism with these technologies. Used without reason, social software can be a time waster, a nuisance and a bore. The fanciest blog to which no one contributes is far worse than the shabbiest of printed newsletters, and the wiki forced upon unwilling participants will not accomplish a thing, efficiently or otherwise. While there is nothing to fear in social software that practice and perhaps a little research won't remedy, I will not accuse anyone of being a Luddite who does not embrace new technology whole-heartedly. Creating a Facebook profile is not for everyone.

But for those of us who are hesitant, not out of resistance or a dislike of new technology, but out of unsureness, confusion or fear, I offer my own experiences, the story of a librarian who, in the space of a year and a half, went from avoiding any Library Science class that had the faintest whiff of technology about it and, who, at the age of 33, had never used PowerPoint before, to someone teaching workshops on social software and using wikis in the classroom.

## **Wikis**

There is more to wikis than Wikipedia. At its most basic level, a wiki is a website that is easy to create, easy to edit and easy to share with others. This ease makes them a fantastic collaborative tool for libraries. Libraries, such as the University of Minnesota Library, use a wiki as their staff home page, a repository for all manner of information (<http://wiki.lib.umn.edu/>). The Escondido Public Library created a wiki "intranet" to store the important, but frequently-changing documents that had previously been stored in any number of folders on a network drive ([DIY Intranet](http://www.library.escondido.org/wiki.ppt), <http://www.library.escondido.org/wiki.ppt>). At the College of Dupage Library (<http://www.cod.edu/library>), our website is a wiki, powered by MediaWiki-- the same folks behind Wikipedia. Because of the skill of our webmaster, however, the average patron would never know that her or she is on a wiki site. The users, however, reap the benefits that this wiki-based website provides. The most immediate benefit, for both patrons and librarians, is the ease and alacrity with which

the website can be updated. This manifests itself most clearly in our research guides-- a librarian can create a research guide, add content and publish the guide from any computer with an internet connection. She can make changes from the reference desk, her office, from home, or on the road. These changes are immediate and available instantly for users.

Since the wiki is the primary platform for our website, I was immediately initiated into the ins and outs of wikis-- understanding the advantages and the drawbacks as I created content for the library. But librarians don't need to adopt wikis on such a large scale-- free individual wikis are available at any number of "wiki farms" including PBwiki ([www.pbwiki.com](http://www.pbwiki.com)), Wetpaint ([www.wetpaint.com](http://www.wetpaint.com)) and Wikispaces ([www.wikispaces.com](http://www.wikispaces.com)). What do you need to know to create a wiki? Not much! Generally, if you can create a word document, you can create a website using a wiki. The software is out there, it is free, and there are large communities of users offering advice and encouragement.

If you're interested in experimenting with wikis, I recommend creating one for a committee or task-force group. Put your minutes into a wiki (or type them directly into the wiki during the meeting, if you can); create documents that need to be edited by multiple hands within the wiki to save yourself from emailing multiple versions between group members; post comments and concerns to the wiki for everyone to view in between scheduled meetings. When used for a collaborative project, wikis can be time savers.

## **Blogs**

Blogs have supplanted the newsletter for many libraries, public and academic. They are used publicly as a way for the library to communicate with its patrons and they are used privately as a means of internal communication behind the scenes.

The blog is the perfect tool for disseminating timely information to interested parties. It's "newswire" format, where the latest information rises to the top, can keep patrons up to date with programs, new materials or important announcements about services. Several libraries maintain multiple blogs, each with its own unique purpose, transmitting valuable information to select audiences. Moraine Valley Community College Library (<http://www.morainevalley.edu/Library/>), in Palos Hills, Illinois has blogs dedicated to library news, research and search tips, sustainability, and even a blog about the blog development process for the meta-interested. A defunct blog, which chronicled a recent construction project, remains available as an archive of the remodeling process. The

Fauquier County Public Library (<http://www.fauquiercounty.gov/Government/Departments/library/>) in Virginia maintains four blogs: eResource News, Kiddosphere, Library Lounging, and Shelf Scene; each blog reaching out to a different audience.

I began blogging at my library in a very simple way-- posting announcements to the Library's News feed. For the most part, the Library's blog consists of instructions for taking advantage of new services (how to access an updated database), announcements (holiday hours), upcoming events (library workshops) and the occasional newsflash (the orange print station is out of order). Posting a "news" item to this blog, therefore, is hardly intimidating. The best blogs, however, offer their users a little more. The blog at Arlington Heights Memorial Library ([www.ahml.info](http://www.ahml.info)) provides patrons with highlights of upcoming programs, announcements of services and readers' advisory suggestions, but in video format. The LibVlog (<http://www.ahml.info/vlog/vault.asp>) was the winner of the Computers in Libraries' 2007 Info Tubey Award.

### **Flickr**

A library isn't a library without an archive of photos of past events or former incarnations of space and design. Documenting our patrons and our programs is a library tradition, but how we display these images and share them with our communities has become even easier. Online photo-sharing software applications like SmugMug, Photobucket and Flickr allow users to upload digital images to the web and make them available to others. Libraries have a solid presence on Flickr, creating profiles and organizing their photos in "sets" which may represent phases of a remodelling project, a speaker series or programming events. In Web 2.0 & Libraries: Best Practices for Social Software, Michael Stephens encourages libraries to use the serendipitous nature of Flickr to their advantage:

Another benefit of using Flickr at your library and tagging your photos with your library's name and location is that it gets you found in the great pool of all of the photos in Flickr. Maybe someone is searching Flickr for his or her hometown and discovers images of the local library and learns of services or programs he or she didn't know about. (58)

Flickr makes it easier for libraries to share their photos, too. Not only can you create a direct link to your library's Flickr site, but you can also easily add dynamic Flickr badges to

any web page. This small addition will pull images from a Flickr site and display them in an eye-catching space that will, in turn, link users back to the library's Flickr photostream.

Groups like the 365 Library Days Project (<http://www.flickr.com/groups/365libs/>) foster a sense of community, not only within the participating libraries who are chronicling the mundane along with the sublime, but among the many libraries who have opportunities to view their colleagues and their workspaces from all around the nation (and, indeed, the world). As Flickr is a social site, users can make contacts, communicate via comments, participate in group discussions, and make friends.

Flickr can also be a great tool for user engagement. At the College of DuPage Library, we created a Flickr page and wanted to share it with our community, but the site was populated with stock footage-- "here's our reference desk" and "here's someone using a computer". In a combined effort to fill the page with dynamic photos and to generate an interested and invested audience, I created a promotion called Picture Your Library. Picture Your Library invited students, faculty, staff, and community members to take pictures in the library and submit them for display on the library's Flickr page.

## **Facebook**

Facebook's recent (November, 2007) admission of organizations into its wildly popular social networking site opened the gates for libraries to do what MySpace has allowed them to do for years: create profiles and network with users in a fun, casual online environment. Currently, there are over 500 "Library/Public Space" Pages in Facebook, with a wide range of public libraries, academic libraries and special libraries. While Facebook Pages do not allow for the same flexibility as the individual user profile pages, a great number of useful applications have been developed to meet libraries' needs for attracting and engaging their tech-savvy users. Many libraries add search widgets, which allow users to search online catalogs from within Facebook. Widgets can be library specific (like those for Hennepin County Library and the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign), but there is also a popular WorldCat search widget. Other popular applications include RSS feeds of library blogs, Flickr, Plugoo for instant messaging, and Events.

While the time and effort needed to set up a Facebook Page are minimal, creating a dynamic and engaging page can take some dedication. Even the most popular library pages (the British Library, with 254 fans, Iowa City Public with 179 fans) offer minimal services and do not seem to be updated all that frequently. While one of the advantages of having a

Facebook Page is the ability to market directly to Facebook users, the results tend to seem less than spectacular<sup>[1]</sup>. Similarly, many pundits question the usefulness of having a library presence in a space where we are not wanted. On the other hand, it certainly doesn't hurt to try!

### **Library Secrets!**

Later this spring, the College of DuPage Library will be launching a project called Library Secrets! This project, designed to fulfill a requirement for the Library's Residency in Community College Librarianship, incorporates multiple social software applications, but is, at its core, a tips, tricks and hints column. I have created Library Secrets! as a way of both engaging and attracting Library users. The social aspects of the project, I hope, will allow patrons to interact with librarians and other patrons in a freer, more casual manner. Additional, I hope the information that will be shared in the Library Secrets! column will bring little-known library services to the attention of existing library users.

The project will begin as a regular column in the Library's blog-- each post a new tip or trick. The content of the posts will range from promoting library services (laptop rental, availability of group study rooms) to both general and specific research tips. I would like to focus on many of the points of instruction that get lost in a typical 50-minute instruction session-- useful tidbits like "how to use a wildcard in a search" get short shrift in a classroom, yet in one-on-one encounters, students are glad to learn such shortcuts. Similarly, I would like to bring to the students' attention online resources outside of the library's databases and catalog. Are students aware of resources that can be added to Facebook? Do students know how Firefox extensions can make bookmarking easier?

Library Secrets! has been designed to evolve and incorporate other social software options as well-- the blog posts may become a podcast (in the manner of Grammar Girl [www.grammargirl.com](http://www.grammargirl.com)) or even a videocast. Library Secrets! will have a presence in Facebook and Twitter and have its own website with a MeeboMe widget for instant messaging.

As with all social software applications, the participation of others will greatly determine the success of this project. The College of DuPage already has a presence in Facebook and Flickr, as well as an established blog. These existing tools can be used to promote Library Secrets! and generate buzz among those already present in the Web 2.0 environment. Traditional marketing will be key in attracting new users. Ultimately, it may be the "1.0"



methods-- emails, college newspaper ads, radio spots, poster campaigns-- which will help launch the project.

### **What You Can Do Right Now**

While getting your entire library on board with an extensive social software project may not be easy or even possible, there's no reason why individual librarians cannot take advantage of these easy to use problem solvers. Similarly, librarians should not feel intimidated by the applications already in use in their libraries-- opportunities to jump in and get your feet wet are always available. Here are a few ways to get started or get familiarized with the technology:

1. **Create a Wiki for a group or committee-** Even if you don't get people to participate the first time, you'll learn how a wiki works and you'll remember the technology when the perfect use comes along
2. **Contribute to your Library's blog-** Start small, if you're wary of jumping right in. Ask a regular blog poster to send ideas your way and get a feel for the tone and style of contributors' posts.
3. **Start a Flickr page-** Populate it with photos from library events and programs or use it as a place to show off those old photos of your building from a couple decades ago. Encourage staff, patrons and the community to contribute.
4. **Get in Facebook-** Browse through some of the hundreds of library pages for inspiration. How are other libraries and individual librarians using Facebook for outreach? What's possible?
5. **Play around-** Most importantly, have fun exploring these technologies. Social software applications are designed with pliability in mind-- click around, push buttons, upload a picture, create a profile, link to other sites-- you can always delete later if you change your mind!

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**[1]** See: "64310 imprints, 67 clicks and 15 fans" <http://www.flickr.com/photos/kjane/2195853552/>