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Article Title: Web 2.0 - Help or Hype? – Social softwares and their value to libraries

Year of publication: 2008

Link to published version: Not online elsewhere

Web 2.0 - Help or Hype? – Social softwares and their value to libraries

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Introduction

Over the summer of 2007, as Service Innovation Officer at the University of Warwick Library, I was asked to write a report on Web 2.0 technologies, and I spent some time investigating different technologies and social softwares. The only way to explore these social softwares is to use them. Make friends on them, install applications, get content and try to use them to their limits. I investigated a number of different technologies all labelled as “Web 2.0”, and the ones with most potential for libraries are discussed here.

Facebook

Facebook is a true social software. It is a place online where individual people create profiles to give out information about themselves, and where many people interact with messages that are both public and private. Facebook enables people to play games and share trivial communication in a way that keeps them in touch with far more of their friends and contacts than they might otherwise have done. Which is pretty much what other sites like MySpace, Bebo, Ning and even LinkedIn do, to some extent or another. But Facebook seems to have the highest profile in the academic sector, perhaps because it grew out of networks based around Universities.

Facebook is used by students: it’s their space, they use it how they want to, and if we try to get involved then we’re in danger of just looking a bit silly. However, there were more than nineteen thousand members on the University of Warwick network within Facebook, as of December 2007, which is about four thousand more than when I first investigated in July. With so many students on Facebook, are we missing out if we don’t try anything? And are there ways that we can use Facebook professionally?

I registered for a Facebook account with my work e-mail address. That means that I can be part of the University of Warwick network, so I can see what our students are doing and I can be seen by them. I’ve made “friends” on Facebook with some of my colleagues, and with other library and information professionals I’ve networked with. A Facebook friend is someone who can see information about you. This information appears on your profile page (that is the page with information about you), but also in their news feeds on their home page. My Facebook home page tells me news about my Facebook friends: when they change their profile pictures, when photos of them are uploaded, when they change their status lines, when they install new applications and so on.

One feature of Facebook is the status line. You can edit it as often as you like. It starts with “Jenny is...” and then you fill in the rest. One day I filled it in with “going on Second Life this afternoon” and I got a message from another librarian who was

planning to investigate Second Life, so we were able to arrange to meet in Second Life, and we learnt far more about Second Life by exploring together than either of us would have alone. Similarly, I have found out about other librarians' interests from their status updates on Facebook, so it can serve a purpose for our professional networking.

Another feature of Facebook is the Group: I set one up with a colleague, and invited contacts across my institution to join. We use it to arrange a visit to the pub after work on a Friday from time to time, and to discuss tips on using Facebook itself. It is useful in facilitating informal networking, but it's not especially active. I had thought that the Events feature might be useful as a way of inviting people to workshops and professional events, but that would require more of my target audience to be members of Facebook. Lots of students are members of Facebook, and there have been attempts to set up Groups as places where students discuss their academic work, to varying degrees of success. Certainly active groups like this would be a place where a librarian could attempt to offer advice to students, but monitoring the existence of such groups is an extra burden of effort, and presumably the students are using Facebook and not the University discussion forums precisely because they don't want official involvement.

It wasn't long before my real life friends found me and befriended me on Facebook. And then photos of me started to be uploaded by my friends, and tagged with my name. So I began to investigate the privacy settings, and created a category of friends who don't get to see everything about me on Facebook, in order that my professional contacts are not getting photos of me drinking cocktails in their news feeds! Even though I try to control what information there is out there about me, my real life friends are getting news about my repositories conferences and my professional interests, and for that reason I think it would be easier for anyone just starting with Facebook to create a personal account and a professional one, and keep the two separate.

There are actually quite a lot of settings that you can edit on Facebook, both to control what you say about yourself to your networks and your friends and so that you can control what type of news you want to hear about: photos of your friends or status updates, and which of your friends it is more important to you to hear news about than others. There are lots of tips that I have learnt about how to manage your information intake on Facebook, and the information output about you: this is a kind of information skill.

But what about creating a library profile on Facebook? Well, lots of libraries have done it, and apparently those who have actively promoted their account have had some success with making friends and using their account as a way to contact students. I found that out through [Ning](#), another social software.¹ At the time that I investigated Facebook, the terms and conditions prohibited me from signing up for an account on behalf of an organisation, so I was not keen to create an account on behalf of my library. One pitfall of an official account is that you may need to have a number of staff nominated to maintain it, and those who make friends with such profiles don't actually know who is able to then see information about them. I heard of a cautionary

¹ <http://library20.ning.com/>

tale where one member of staff learnt something personal about another member of staff because she had been given the login details of the official account, which the other person had made “friends” with on Facebook.

There are other ways of getting your library into Facebook. I experimented with creating an advertisement on the marketplace in Facebook. “Free: Library Resources” with a link to the library’s home page. It didn’t lead to anyone following that link in the first month of my having created it. I also experimented with the “Librarian” application that can be installed onto any individual’s profile. I installed it on mine, of course, and other library staff did, too. I’m set up as the official contact, should anyone have an enquiry, but I’ve not received one! Other libraries have written their own applications, so that catalogue search boxes can be installed onto Facebook profiles, such as The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

A [University of Michigan survey](#)² indicated that Facebook users do not want to contact their librarian through Facebook. Only 1 out of 200 respondents said that they would prefer to contact their library through Facebook. It is important to note that the Facebook poll that they used to carry out this survey only allows one option to be chosen: more users might have selected Facebook had there been the option to choose multiple methods of contacting the library. Most respondents (59%) prefer to contact their library in person.

So Facebook might be an interesting software with some potential for professional networking but its certainly not a quick and easy way to get in touch with your students, nor is it necessarily the best way to get in touch with your students. Knowing about Facebook certainly helps you to be in a position to help your students become aware of their online profile and helps you to understand their interactions with each other. We’re not missing out by not actively participating, yet, however.

RSS feeds

RSS feeds have been around for a long time, but have taken off in the Web 2.0 arena, which is all about the sharing of content. RSS feeds are essentially a way to package updates about the content of a resource (eg a web page, a blog, a catalogue) in order to incorporate it into another web page or blog or resource. They are especially useful for sharing the content of a blog with others, and useful for those who wish to keep up-to-date (eg researchers) when they use tools known as RSS feed readers/aggregators. RSS feed readers such as [Bloglines](#)³ and [Google Reader](#)⁴ amalgamate the feeds from a number of blogs, websites, etc that the user subscribes to, enabling the user to watch just one page, thus saving time.

You can tell if a website has an RSS feed by looking out for an icon or text telling you that it has one: often an orange logo is used. Libraries are creating such feeds through their websites and blogs, and also are advising researchers about how to use feed readers and how to find feeds in their subject areas. RSS feeds are increasingly

² Online at: <http://userslib.com/?p=74>

³ Online at: <http://www.bloglines.com>

⁴ Online at: <http://www.google.com/reader/view/>

offered by databases, repositories and library catalogues in the same way that e-mail alerts work, and are potentially very useful information resources, both for librarians to use for our own professional awareness, and for us to advise others on how to use.

One feature of RSS feeds that I learnt the hard way is that it is very difficult to search for RSS feeds to subscribe to. There are directories such as Technorati's directory of blogs, through which you will find RSS feeds. But feeds are very much the kind of thing that you come across and add to your own personal collection, rather than the kind of thing you can start a collection of instantly.

Another pitfall of RSS feeds is that you may feel that you have to read everything that you subscribe to in your aggregator: you don't! They aren't like e-mails, personally addressed to you, for your attention. RSS feeds are more like a newspaper that arrives at your door every day. Some days, you just won't have time to read it at all, and it's OK to put it straight in the recycling pile! And there will be many articles that you won't read any more than the headlines of in your feeds.

Del.icio.us

Just as Facebook is only one social networking software amongst many, [Del.icio.us](http://del.icio.us) is only one social bookmarking software amongst many. Another one I've used a lot of is now called [Faves.com](http://faves.com), although it was once known as Blue Dot.com. Some people will be used to using one such bookmarking software, whilst others will be used to using another, but generally you can import and export your collections between the different softwares.

What they all basically do is allow you to build up a collection of websites, just like your bookmarks or favourites on your web browser, but which is hosted online and is therefore accessible to you from anywhere you are online, rather than only accessible from your profile as your browser bookmarks are. And they're better than your browser for another key reason: rather than you filing the websites into folders, you give them keyword tags to retrieve them by, which means that you can assign more than one tag to each website, to help you to find them again from amongst your collection. I've got over 200 websites tagged in my Del.icio.us account now, and I never could manage that many in my Explorer favourites as efficiently.

In Del.icio.us, I can assign tags like "Web_2.0" and "to_read" and "Facebook" to the websites and blog entries that I come across. As I tag a new page, Del.icio.us even suggests tags that others have used, or that it thinks might apply from my previously used tags. I can then find those websites again by searching my own collection for tags or combinations of tags.

I can also build a network on Del.icio.us of like-minded people, so that I can search their collections for the same tags, too. Although I can add items to my collection that are private, just for me and no-one else to see, so people in my Network might also be hiding things from me! I can even open my search out to everyone's public material on Del.icio.us, and use it as a resource discovery tool. Of course, lots of people will be tagging with "Web2.0" rather than "Web_2.0" so I'm probably going to miss a lot if I only use Del.icio.us for searching.

There's also a Facebook application for Del.icio.us, so I can display on my Facebook profile the tags that I am using most frequently, and the websites that I have recently tagged. I can put such information into the news feed that goes out to my Facebook friends' home pages.

Similar tagging facilities are increasingly being added to Library Management Systems, allowing students to add keyword tags to books for their own reference, and [Intute](#)⁵ has a "[MyIntute](#)" function that also allows users to add tags to the websites that it indexes.

It is the social aspect of the tagging in Del.icio.us and other such social bookmarking technologies that has enormous potential, in my view. It is something that students could use to recommend resources to each other in study groups, and that librarians and academics could also use to recommend websites to such groups. Faves.com allows you to comment on resources in other peoples' collections, which is proving to be very handy in my latest role, working on a JISC project, where my programme manager has seen what I have tagged and commented that I might like to get in touch with someone who can help me with that particular interest.

Second Life

This is a virtual world online, and it gets a mention here only because I investigated it and it was fun! I think that if our students are in Second Life for their studies, then we as libraries could and should have some presence in there too. But there is a big hurdle to getting started as a Second Life resident that I just would not expect our library users to overcome, purely in order to use library services. Just learning to walk and talk can take a long time, and becoming confident at flying, teleporting, meeting new people who weirdly change into hedgehogs is something that is not really going to help anyone find the information they need. Unless, of course, they need information about Second Life. In which case there are some librarians in Second Life who are blazing a trail that others of us can follow. Visit Info island in Second Life, and you will get plenty of help from friendly librarians.

Conclusion

It seems to me that there are enormous, practical applications for the Web 2.0 and social softwares available to us. These are just a few that give you a very basic flavour of their capabilities. There is much more for us to explore. We should update our users about how to find and use RSS feeds (especially those relating to search alerts on our databases, especially to researchers); we should advise students about how their Facebook profiles and online activities reflect on them and others and we should investigate further the possibilities of social bookmarking softwares for sharing information about quality information resources. Some libraries are already doing these very things, and we can learn from their experiences using social networking software too.

⁵ Online at: <http://www.intute.ac.uk/>