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Web 2.0 and the Academic Library

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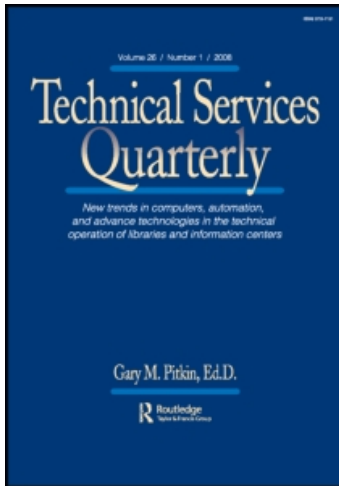
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Guest Editorial Web 2.0 and the Academic Library

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Guest Editorial
Web 2.0 and the Academic Library

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In this guest editorial, the author examines one of most provocative mantras of the past few years, "information wants to be free," and ask whether it odds with our professional values—the belief in the right to privacy, the commitment to provide accurate and verifiable information, a respect for copyright law, and a wariness toward the commercialization of information.

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One of the most provocative mantras of the past few years, "Information wants to be free," bears examining because it is at odds with so many of our professional values—the belief in the right to privacy, the commitment to provide accurate and verifiable information, a respect for copyright law, and a wariness toward the commercialization of information.

Part of this is due to generational differences. Unlike our clientele, the majority of academic librarians did not and do not participate in a gaming culture or (except peripherally) in online social networking. We grew up in a society in which information was valued for its scarcity and more often its exclusivity. Today, the value of information is precisely the opposite, a result of its sheer volume and the myriad ways it can be repackaged and sold.

It is particularly ironic that this notion that information has a life of its own independent of its producer is largely a result of the open-access movement, which began nearly twenty years ago when Paul Ginsparg started the Physics e-print server, arXiv.org. Ginsparg and other early innovators dreamed of "liberating" scientific information so that it could be accessed by many, rather than just a few. The open-access movement continues to be defined in a number of ways, but it is fair to say that its principal focus is on the migration of academic resources from print to digital format. It also focuses almost exclusively on disrupting the cycle of scholarly communication. As in the case of ArXiv.org, a scientist may publish his article as a pre-print that has a more immediate impact on the scholarly community than the peer-reviewed article he later will publish in a journal. Authors have the possibility of avoiding conventional publishing methods entirely—they can self-publish or place their work in societal or university digital repositories. That being said, the academic library has played an enormous role in the development of the open-access movement. It is perhaps the most important of all the communities that are involved because it has so much control over the process.

Unlike the open-access movement, which resembles other counter-cultural movements of the twentieth century, the movement, which I referred to earlier as "information wants to be free" for want of a better term, is a twenty-first century phenomenon. This is evident by the vast number of online communities, known as social networks, which reside on the Web and use the Web as a platform for their activities. These communities have exploited Web 2.0 technologies to change the way information is collected and used.

Tim O'Reilly notes in "What Is Web 2.0: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software" that the creation of Web 2.0 was a direct result of the dot.com crash of 2001. Only those companies that had certain "core principles" in common were able to survive. According to Reilly, these companies sold a "rich user experience" to their customers. The success of these companies (i.e., Google and eBay) in turn led to very different business models for the Web. Underlying these business models was a genuinely new concept, what has come to be known as "radical trust."[1] Radical trust is the implicit relationship that exists between a website site developer and his users. It is based on the premise that people are inherently good and most of the time will behave in a reasonable fashion. They want to contribute to activities that matter to them and are willing to expend their time and energy to do so, often without monetary compensation. This quasi-volunteerism, quasi-libertarian approach works very well in a Web 2.0 environment. Radical trust forms the basis of community-building activities on the Web. Because the collective action of the many outweighs that of the few, user engagement is not only a positive, but a necessary thing—the force that makes these sites successful.

The open-access movement, however, deals, mostly, with copyrighted materials. Web 2.0, as a medium, appears to have little concern for the ownership of information. And while the open access movement focuses on the digitization of print media—journals and books—social networking centers on communicative technologies. There is, for example, Wikipedia—a complex, user-generated encyclopedia; Flickr, a photo-sharing Web service; YouTube, a video-sharing Web service; and Facebook, a social networking website.

This latter movement has no particular affiliation with libraries or with the methodology of scholarly communication that is the backbone of the open-access movement. Nor does it support the premise that personal data should be kept private, one of the fundamental principles of librarianship. In fact, open access to personal information constitutes the business model of Facebook. That is why these communicative technologies are seen as both a dilemma and a promise for the academic library community.

In a recent *Wall Street Journal* blog, "The Facebook Generation vs. the Fortune 500," Gary Hamel made various assumptions about information and its behavior in a Web 2.0 world. Some are that:

All ideas compete on an equal footing
Contribution counts for more than credentials
Groups are self-defining and -organizing
Resources get attracted, not allocated
Power comes from sharing information, not hoarding it
Users can veto most policy decisions[2]

If Hamel's observations are right, the accuracy of information in a Web 2.0 environment is not as important as its acceptance by a particular community—all ideas are equal after all. There is no one authoritative voice here; rather many people collectively contribute to a knowledge basis. Whatever one thinks of this non-hierarchical approach, only consider how it has changed our understanding of how information is created and disseminated. Information may be used and reused multiple times without attribution. It may be altered or rewritten at the behest of the community or even discarded. Information is never static, as it was in a print-based world or even a Web 1.0 world. Its value is in its mutability.

While in the beginning, at least in the academic world, Wikipedia was seen as an outlier—not to be trusted because of its non-peer viewed content. Today, it is generally accepted as a legitimate research tool. In part this is because of the educational level of the authors of the entries at this site—many of the more complex ones are written by experts in the field. Indeed, in some fields, such as history, academics in the U.S. have embraced Wikipedia. There is perhaps no real peer review, but because of the ability of users to challenge or change any entry, there is a mechanism in place for

evaluation. Perhaps more importantly, Wikipedia is considered a first source of information on the Web.

So how and why does this have an impact on libraries?

Richard T. Kaser, the former Executive Director of the National Federation of Abstracting and Information Services, made an interesting observation in *D-Lib Magazine* a few years ago. He noted that the overall expectation in the U.S. has been one of unfettered access to information:

When you go to the library, you expect to check out a book for free. When you turn on your radio, you expect to listen to music for free. When you turn on your TV, you expect to watch network programming for free. You, like everyone else, have come to believe that information is free.

Still, there's a double standard. If you want to personally own a copy of that book you checked out of the library, you are willing to pay for a copy. If you want to personally own a copy of that song you heard on the radio, you are willing to pay for the CD. If you want to personally own a copy of the movie you just watched, you are willing to buy the video.

I conclude from this that, as a society, we pay for the medium and not the message. As a society we perceive that the value resides in the copy, not in the content ... which is free ... free to use again and again and again, free to reuse (say, if we want to quote something or lift a fact) ... and free to give away to a friend or resell once you are done with it. All of this is ingrained in our thinking. It's not new.[3]

In Kaser's view the premise that "Information wants to be free" is well-rooted in American culture and indeed in U.S. library culture. It has only been made more visible and perhaps more controversial by the Web.

Although many academic librarians are troubled by the restrictiveness of copyright law—and this is obvious in their approach to the Google book digitization project that still has not been settled in the courts—few, I believe, share Kaser's opinion that the value of information resides in the container or format it is presented in, rather than in its content. Unlike companies such as Wikipedia or Facebook, which are corporations in the business of making money, university libraries are part of the non-profit, educational community. Their academic mission is to provide credible, accurate, and verifiable information that can be used by students and faculty in the creation of new knowledge. Although individuals may collaborate in an academic environment—particularly in the sciences—they are rewarded individually. The basis of copyright law is that information is tethered to an individual or individuals. This is at odds with the premise of Web 2.0 that knowledge is a collective endeavor.

Because of this, academic libraries have sided with universities in their support of academic integrity and against an information liberation philosophy. This includes issues like academic plagiarism by students, the fair use of copyrighted educational materials by professors, digital piracy, and so forth. In regards to these issues, academic librarians appear to be using

Web 2.0 technologies primarily to educate—whether it is by providing online instructional tutorials that rely on streaming media, or making citation tools like RefWorks or EndNote available to users through mashups, Web-pages that amalgamate different online resources, or by advocating that universities purchase subscription services to companies like the now-defunct Ruckus that provided campus-wide access to copyrighted popular music or anti-plagiarism tools like Blackboard's SafeAssign. Again, the use of Web 2.0, in this regard, appears to be an extension of instructional services that already existed in a Web 1.0 world or even a print-based world. And this approach appears to be largely prescriptive—that is to say, it runs counter to Web 2.0 principles of unmediated access to information.

The second approach that academic libraries are taking in regard to Web 2.0 involves the marketing of services to users. Librarians are using social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook to promote library af-filiation and community building; the virtual environment, Second Life, to create alternative library spaces; and RSS feeds, wikis, and blogs to post announcements and other information. Generally these attempts have not been fully realized, mainly because of the cost of proprietary information and its restriction to a particular user community—students and faculty of a university or college. Subscription-based information services are just the op-posite of social networking sites. Academic libraries are unable to give away their information and thus can only take advantage of the most superficial aspects of these technologies—such as marketing and self-promotion. They also have an additional problem, which is that users of academic libraries do not consider themselves part of a library community—rather, libraries are a suite of collections and services they access in order to do research or fulfill assignments.

The third approach has been the creation of new services. Perhaps academic libraries' most successful use of Web 2.0 technologies in this regard has been the transformation of reference services, which only a few years ago were asynchronous and depended on email correspondence. These have migrated to synchronous virtual chat sessions. This is probably because reference is a value-added library service and lends itself to this kind of technology. Other examples are the use of mashups and the inclusion of so-cial tagging in library catalogs. The latter has been remarkably unsuccessful, probably because our antiquated cataloging systems are rooted in a pre-Web 1.0 technology.

So far, academic librarians have not embraced the basic tenets under-lying the philosophy of "Information wants to be free." These tenets are simply at odds with our fundamental notions about intellectual property, the ethical use of information, and the right to privacy. Nor is it certain that there is a clear path for librarians to follow in this new world of communicative technologies, the way there was twenty years ago at the start of the open-access movement. The open-access movement was to a large extent defined

and shaped by the academic community; Web 2.0 is a product of the business sector and represents a blending of corporate and community interests and cultures. What is obvious is that knowledge organization, the structure of information, and even basic library services are being fundamentally challenged by Web 2.0 technologies—whether our professional values are being changed as a result is perhaps the thornier question.

NOTES

1. Tim O'Reilly. (2005). What Is Web 2.0: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software. Retrieved September 30, 2005, from http://oreilly.com/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html
2. Gary Hamel. (2009). The Facebook Generation vs. the Fortune 500. *Wall Street Journal Blogs.* Retrieved March 24, 2009, from http://blogs.wsj.com/management/2009/03/24/the-facebook-generation-vs-the-fortune-500/
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