

2007

Library 2.0: Overcoming a flawed concept and selective implementation

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Academic disciplines need, even demand theories and conceptual frameworks that can give them shape. Literary criticism has post-modernism and its implications, political science gets neo-conservatism, the concept of the “revolution in military affairs” has played a key role in international relations, or at least the way international relations is seen in America, since it was first expressed in the early 1990’s. The world of business and management has been presented with similar revolutionary milestones. And really, it is not surprising at all that library science (and library practice) has been searching for an overarching theory of this type as well, especially since, as numerous scholars have argued, the development of alternative information conduits (i.e. the Internet) is making the concept of the “library” as it has been defined for decades face a unique, essentially existentialist crisis.

Over the last two or so years, as library science theorists and practicing librarians have been searching for such frameworks, one concept that has been thrust to the forefront is “Library 2.0.” – an adaptation of the idea of the “Web 2.0” that has recently gained currency in the computer science and human-computer interaction discourse. Because of this relationship, before examining Library 2.0, it is important to look at Web 2.0, its definition, its implications, and its shortcomings.

What is Web 2.0? O’Reilly (2005a), who essentially introduced the concept, immediately problematizes it by first offering a list of “features”, rather than a definition. However, as presented in his frequently-reproduced (2005b) “Web 2.0 meme map,” Web 2.0 is a combination of strategic positioning, user positioning, and several set core competencies.” And, pushed further, he then presented (2005c) a more formal definition of the concept.

“Web 2.0 is 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," and going beyond the page metaphor of Web 1.0 to deliver rich user experiences.”

Looking at this definition, as well as the subsequent extended discussion (O'Reilly, 2005b), two things immediately leap out. First, Web 2.0 is by design and by concept basically a technological solution to what are effectively technological (or software-based) issues. Second, and far more importantly, the concept of Web 2.0 is also by design myopic, or simply ignorant, of the social (and, as has been recently demonstrated, political) implications of the use of technology.

O'Reilly talks about Wikipedia and BitTorrent as two particularly successful examples of Web 2.0 thinking – except you cannot discuss the benefits of Wikipedia without also mentioning the controversies (Bates, 2006; Nicholson, 2006) that it has presented in the academic and political spheres. He praises BitTorrent for “[taking] a radical approach to internet decentralization,” but does Web 2.0 consider the level of both social and legal resistance (Helton, 2006) to even the basic concept of the way BitTorrent operates? Similarly, moving beyond the sites specifically named by O'Reilly, Facebook was for a while the darling of those praising the Web 2.0 concept and looking forward to the effect it would have on society at large (Cohen, 2006). Except, of course, now, Facebook is more frequently mentioned within discussions (Read, 2007; Robson, 2007) of the problems that arise from a site that is essentially based upon allowing easy access to users' photographs and personal profiles, or of the influx of commercial interests into sites originally meant for individual participation.

Having said that, O'Reilly's original diagram includes one component that is absolutely crucial. As first presented, "Web 2.0 is an attitude, not a technology" – thus, while the features of Web 2.0 specifically are technological, those features are examples, not definitions.

Taking all of that into account, and moving from Web 2.0 to Library 2.0, it is flat-out distressing to see how a definition that is appropriate for one environment has been forced into one that is altogether different. It is, of course, almost self-evident that not just Web 2.0, but even Web 1.0, which – much like libraries as we think of them, "takes people to the information" (Miller, 2005) – presents a very viable threat to the library as both concept and institution. But at the heart of it, the Internet is based on a technological framework, whereas a library is an organization and a physical entity first and foremost. However, far too much of the recent writing on Library 2.0 focuses solely on a one-to-one transfer of Web 2.0 tools to a new environment, rather than looking at the feasibility of transferring the actual meaning of Web 2.0. Thus, for example, Abram (2005) limits Library 2.0 to "a conversation that creates the next generation of library websites, databases, OPACs, intranets and portals" (and moreover, also proposes a 'Librarian 2.0', who would presumably be able to operate these technologies effectively.) Cohen (2006) also talks about Library 2.0 primarily in terms of embracing specific tools. Casey and Savastinuk (2006) make an effort to present a more inclusive definition, calling the concept "user-centered change", but they too link Library 2.0 directly to Web 2.0's applications, rather than to its ideas.

The error of this approach is two-fold. First of all, it implies that Library 2.0 is essentially a checklist. Second, it attaches some level value to each of the factors on the list. A library either is 2.0 compliant, or it needs to spend more money on the technologies it needs to become 2.0 compliant. From this follows the assumption that the issues a given library is facing can be solved simply by throwing technological solutions at them, and that if they haven't been solved yet, they will be in due time, and with enough expense.

The kinds of traps that this very narrow approach invites should be obvious. A library is a social institution that operates along a particular business model. In fact, because of the model, the library may not in all cases be the most efficient provider of information. In others, the most efficient way of providing information may be simply beyond the information-processing capability of its users. For example, several recent papers (Atwater-Singer, Sherill, 2007; Maness, 2006) on Library 2.0 focus significantly on the relative shortcomings and benefits of various virtual reference tools – even as research has also shown that virtual reference is still used by a very small proportion of library users. One can only imagine the negative effects of a library buying into 2.0 hype, spending money on the necessary technologies (and, by implication, not on something else), and then realizing (or really, accepting) that a majority of the residents in its service area lack not only high-speed Internet, but computers in general. Another shortcoming is that the Library 2.0 concept calls upon its subjects to be all things to all people. In fact, some of the propositions of Library 2.0 come up against many of the very basic questions that underlie the practice of library science. Casey and Savastinuk (2006), for example, call on Library 2.0 to be “a model for library service that encourages constant and purposeful change, inviting user participation in the creation of both the physical and the virtual services they want.” – assuming, of course, that users’ explicit and implicit wants are easy to determine and act upon.

However, this should not in any way discredit the actual theory of Library 2.0, just its very narrow application. Just as O’Reilly’s idea of Web 2.0 can be crystallized into a graphical representation, Library 2.0 is best described in a graphic, Biancu’s (2006) *Library 2.0 meme map*. User-centricity is the goal of Library 2.0, not the means of getting there; the means themselves can be an application of technology, of management, of architecture, of budget allocation, of politics, of education. And it is perhaps not even a surprise that a “mission statement” for Library

2.0, or simply, for the library in the twenty-first century, was derived a lot earlier than anything 2.0 existed as such.

Writes Saeteren (2002):

“The library must:

- Offer ample possibilities for collecting and processing knowledge and information,
- Make the necessary facilities, resources and information accessible to groups and individuals, and act as a gateway to other services and sources,
- Provide a stimulating arena for meeting, working and learning - a laboratory for creative teamwork and dialogue
- Function as a meeting place for integration and diversity, and be a literary venue in the capital city,
- Be an important node within the city’s cultural life and network of knowledge.”

This is a description that is, in spirit, very close to what is included in many of the more conventional writings on Library 2.0, but it makes sure to move away from a narrow focus on the “how”, while embracing the “why.” Dove, in her recent (2005) profile of a Swedish library that has been designed from the ground up with 2.0 principles firmly in mind without ever using the term, views Library 2.0 as a marketing concept, a combination of vectors that will allow libraries to successfully compete with other entities or agencies. The vectors she lists include “place, product, promotion, participants, physical evidence [or physical plant] and process.” And perhaps, a true Library 2.0 is not one whose website merely loaded with the latest software applications, but one that recognizes best who its competitors and clients are and what they expect. A 2.0 library will also keep in mind what it is actually expected to do, and also, what it is actually able to accomplish without compromising its institutional mission and actual existence. No library is exactly like another, and Library 2.0 is not an all-size-fits-all kind of concept. What is appropriate and even desirable in one place may be utterly irrelevant in another. Recognizing

that is probably the one way in which the Library 2.0 moves away so much from the purely technical dimensions of Web 2.0.

Of course, going forward, the debate over Library 2.0 is not likely to go away or disappear. But it is heartening to know that a debate is in fact ongoing. An excellent example is a proposal presented (2006) by Chowdhury, Poulter and McMenemy to promote libraries as clearinghouses for “local community knowledge,” a task where they can compete on scale with global-level information service providers. How this could be accomplished would use Web 2.0 tools, but the actual end goal cannot be imagined except within a library context. Ultimately, at least for a while, the easy answers to competition between libraries and the many factors that are causing some to proclaim their irrelevance will be competition. Conceivably, libraries will seek to utilize the tools and techniques of Web 2.0, but in competing, they will always be constrained by outside factors: budgetary, social, ethical. In this competition, the libraries that will be truly successful, that can hold their own and thrive in a Web 2.0 and beyond environment, will be those that are able to compete on something other than the brute application of technology. The kinds of lending and community services a library provides, how it interacts with patrons, even where it is located are all as much part of the Library 2.0 idea as the bells, whistles, and other technological aspects of a much broader whole.

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