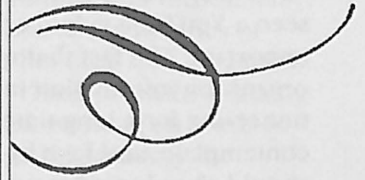# WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL ABOUT WEB 2.0?

by Lynn Hoffman

isclaimer: This article will have been accurate and up-to-date for about five minutes after I have finished writing it, which means that by now, fifteen more new technologies will have emerged to learn about. This is not a problem. If you are already on the Web 2.0 train, you can take this time to find those new technologies and play with them, or get all your Flickr photos tagged and mapped, or post to your blog about this article you skimmed in *Indiana Libraries* that was ridiculously rudimentary. If Web 2.0 is not your milieu, then don't worry about those fifteen new technologies: the nature of this technology is that no person can be caught up on it. More important right now is getting you a little more familiar with what this Web 2.0 stuff is all about, and why you should know about it.

In his 2007 book, *Everything is Miscellaneous: The Power of the New Digital Disorder*, David Weinberger describes three orders of organization of information. The first order involves the arrangement of actual things. When you get home from the grocery store, for example, you arrange your purchases in whatever way makes sense in your kitchen – sugar with your other dry goods or baking ingredients, cheese in the refrigerator, thyme in the spice rack, perhaps in alphabetical order with the other herbs and spices, or perhaps by how frequently you use thyme. In any case, these are physical objects that can only be in one place at a time, so once you have picked your arrangement, you are stuck with it until you decide to rearrange your kitchen cabinets. We usually pick one arrangement for shelving material in our collections. If you know what that arrangement is and know exactly what you are looking for, you can go right to the shelf and find it.

If you do not know what that arrangement is, you need the help of the second order of organization: metadata. For instance, a catalog entry contains metadata – author, title, subjects – that help you figure out where to find what you are looking for in the physical arrangement on the shelf. You can use many pieces of metadata to get to that information in different ways, but those pieces are fixed at the outset. In the physical card catalog, we could only search using one search field: author, title or subject. While the OPAC has expanded the number of search fields available to us, giving us things like publisher, description, and ISBN, and allowing us to search more than one field at the same time, it is still limited since there is nowhere in a MARC record to put the color of the cover, or a note about how many readers liked a particular book, or other such information.

This brings us to the third order of organizing information – miscellany. To librarians who are used to imposing order on information, the idea that it is easier to access information when it has no big organizational scheme seems entirely contradictory at first, but makes more sense when you think about it in terms of the nature of the information itself and who is doing the organizing. The third order in general, and Web 2.0 technology in particular, deals with digital information. Digital information does not have to live in just one place at a time, and it carries its own metadata right along with its content.

A big box full of miscellaneous vacation photos is not terribly useful when you are looking for something specific. A big pile of miscellaneous digital photos, on the other hand, can be very useful. Each digital photo has certain metadata embedded in it, like the time and date on which the photo was taken and what camera was used. The right application (Flickr, for example) allows you to add your own metadata, whatever you think will be meaningful to you when searching. You may tag it with words that describe the subject of the photo, the predominant color, how it makes you feel when you look at it – whatever you want. You may also use a map to indicate where you took the photo and associate coordinates with it. Then, when you are looking for that picture you took of a blue house on your European vacation but can't remember what country it was in or when you took it, you have a way not only to find the photo, but to get back that other data. The third order lets each user decide how to organize information in whatever way it makes sense. And because the information can be accessed in many ways at the same time, the third order also allows each

user to make whatever sense they like of the big miscellaneous pile.

The purpose of all this miscellany talk is to demonstrate that even if you do not blog or have not ever seen a YouTube video, understanding Web 2.0 is still important. The fact that many different people are organizing information in all sorts of unusual ways is unnerving for a long-time library professional to contemplate, and I am by no means suggesting that we should abandon what we do, and have done, so well. But our customers are using these tools. They are using them more and more, and they have discovered the pleasures of interacting with other users, creating their own content, and customizing their organization and search experiences to suit whatever needs they have at that moment. Web 2.0 is booming because it works. Our customers may not understand why it works or why they like it so much, but they can tell there is a difference between it and our catalogs, and they can – and will – tell us which they prefer. It is important for us to understand that preference, not dismiss it.

Stepping down from my soapbox, let's talk about the categories of Web 2.0 tools you should be most familiar with and look at some of the ways libraries are getting on the bandwagon.

BLOGS

Technically, there is nothing really special about blogs. They are just websites. They happen to use software that makes it ridiculously easy for people with no Web development or HTML experience to publish information on the Web, and they also happen to arrange new information in reverse chronological order, so that the newest is always at the top of the page, but they are still just websites. In fact, you may have read one without even knowing it: they come up in basic Web searches, so you may have found one while sifting through results.

Some people update their blogs very, very frequently (i.e. several times a day), and others add new material on a more sporadic basis, depending on when there is something new to add. Update frequency often depends on how they use their blogs. Some people use blogs as Web logs (Weblogs, blogs: get it?) – they see or read something cool on the Web, and they take note, either so that they can remember it and come back to it later on, or so that they can share it with other people who might be reading their blogs. Some people use them as journals, talking about their lives in general (what I had for breakfast, cute pet photos) or about some more specific aspect of their lives. For example, I have a blog that is nominally random but in practice is predominantly about knitting.

You can easily create your own blog. Two popular free sites are Blogger (http://www.blogger.com) and Wordpress (http://www.wordpress.com). After signing up for an account, you will get to a page that looks like a basic word processing window. Write whatever you want to say, hit "Post" (or "Publish," or whatever it says in your blogging tool), and you are a published blogger.

If you like to read more than a few blogs, you might want the help of a feed reader or aggregator. Most blogs automatically generate an RSS feed which alerts other tools whenever something new is posted. The RSS feed itself is in XML, a computer language that isn't very user-friendly, but if you have a feed reader to interpret, it becomes quite useful. Free Web-based feed readers, like Bloglines (http://www.bloglines.com) and Google Reader (http://www.google.com/help/reader/tour.html) will keep track of multiple RSS feeds at the same time, making them an easy one-stop destination for reading a number of favorite blogs (instead of going to each one individually to find out whether there is anything new). Other non-blog sites that have frequently-updated content – like news outlets and some research databases – also generate RSS feeds.

Libraries are blogging, and folks are blogging about libraries. There are hundreds of examples of library blogs at the Blogging Libraries Wiki (http://www.blogwithoutalibrary.net/links/index.php) and you may easily add others to the list. You might also consider adding blogs about libraries to your feed reader: Michael Stephens' *Tame the Web* (http://tametheWeb.com/) and Jenny Levine's *The Shifted Librarian* (http://theshiftedlibrarian.com/) are good starting places; from their posts they link to dozens of other hot spots in the biblioblogosphere.

PHOTOS

Photo sharing tools give you something to do with your digital photos other than storing them on your computer and never looking at them again. There are several popular sites, including Photobucket (http://www.photobucket.com) and Kodak EasyShare Gallery (http://www.kodakgallery.com), but my personal favorite is Flickr (http://www.flickr.com). Upload your digital photos and add all kinds of data to each one, including tags to help describe and search for your photos and geographic coordinates (thanks to Yahoo's mapping function). You can share your photos, add friends (other Flickr users), comment on other people's photos, and make cool things out of your own photos.

VIDEO

In the same vein, YouTube (http://www.youtube.com) is similar to Flickr but for video. YouTube has become sort of ubiquitous: even mainstream presidential candidates are using it to make

announcements and screen campaign commercials. If you have not poked around on YouTube yet, you might start by searching for the key word, "library," to see what some of your colleagues have done.

MAPS

You have probably used online mapping tools, like Mapquest (http://www.mapquest.com), Google Maps (http://maps.google.com), and Windows Live Local (http://local.live.com). They are incredibly helpful. However, these three providers are constantly adding new features that bring them into the Web 2.0 realm. For instance, Google Maps will allow you to create a customized map, complete with your own notes and places of interest, and save or share it with other people. You can also use tools like Community Walk (http://www.communitywalk.com) and Wayfaring (http://www.wayfaring.com) to search other users' maps and find everything from local sites of interest to someone else's suggested jogging route at a vacation destination.

DIGITAL PRESENCES

More sites keep cropping up that allow you to have a veritable home on the Web. MySpace (http://www.myspace.com) and Facebook (http://www.facebook.com) are both friend networks and, through a variety of plugins and widgets, allow you to share all sorts of aspects of life with your friends. Facebook has gone through some recent changes – its membership had been limited to college and university students, but it has opened up to the world at large, and is growing very robustly. On Facebook, I can share photos, video and sound files, keep my friends posted on what I'm doing on a moment-to-moment basis, carry on private conversations or make public statements, tell people where I'm going and where I've been, let them know what books I'm reading, connect with other people who went to my library school or who have worked at my library, and much more. Some users make MySpace or Facebook their Internet starting point and have it running whenever they are online.

Another form of digital presence is what is sometimes referred to as a microblog. Twitter (http://www.twitter.com) allows you to make very short (140 characters or fewer) frequent posts via their website, instant messaging and text message, and allows other people to follow what you are doing by receiving those updates. And then there are life casting sites, like Dandelife (http://www.dandelife.com), that create a window into your life by pulling information from many of the tools already discussed – Flickr, blogs, RSS feeds, YouTube, etc.

Digital communities increasingly focus on a particular interest or type of user. For us library fans,

LibraryThing (http://www.librarything.com) allows you to create a catalog of your personal library, using both defined metadata like ISBN, Library of Congress subject headings, and Dewey call numbers, and personal information like tags, reviews, ratings, and recommendations. From there, you can look at the libraries of other people who have similar holdings and communicate with other readers. LibraryThing provides a catalog platform for small libraries and is working on a way to combine their user data with existing catalogs for libraries to provide a more Amazon-like experience for users.

LEARNING 2.0

Would you like to learn more about Web 2.0 and how it applies to what we do in libraries? Check out Learning 2.0 (http://plcmclearning.blogspot.com), a term coined by Helene Blowers from the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenberg County to describe a self-guided Web 2.0 discovery program for her library's staff. Since its inception in August 2006, libraries worldwide have adopted the Learning 2.0 model for helping library staff members get up to speed with emerging technology and for fostering an environment in which exploration and experimentation are the norm. There are a variety of programs for all types of libraries and most have been made available for sharing by their creators, including one at my own library (http://www.acpl.info/acplilb2/). If you do not have the resources to create a training program yourself, there is probably one already out there that fits your needs.

When it comes down to it, the revolutionary thing about Web 2.0 isn't the technology; it's the way people use it. It introduces collaboration and communication to activities that were formerly solitary ones. It allows individuals to make whatever sense they want of the digital information that surrounds them. We might not use these tools in our jobs every day, or even at all, but it is important for us to know about them, even if it is just so that we know what people are talking about when they ask us how to get a MySpace page or why we put pictures of library activities on Flickr or what our username is on MSN.
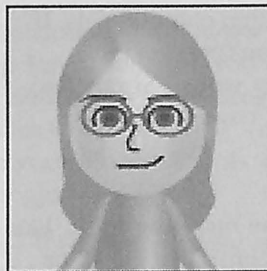
Be aware, too, that exploring Web 2.0 tools can be fun, and that's okay. You may experience a certain amount of guilt because you are "playing on the Internet" instead of doing serious work, but try to remember that "fun" and "useful" are not mutually exclusive: the experience gained while having fun will serve you well as the miscellaneous spreads further into our libraries and into our patrons' lives.

REFERENCES

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lynn Hoffman has worked at the Allen County Public Library for over ten years and is currently Information Services Coordinator. She also chairs ACPL's Digital Collaborative, a committee made up of frontline and information technology staff who explore emerging technology and the ways it can enhance patron service. Find her on the Web at http://giveitawhirl.wordpress.com.

The author's Avatar "photo."