

Biography

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Legal Information Management, 8 (2008), pp. 270–273

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doi:10.1017/S1472669608000650

Who's *REALLY* Computer Savvy? Web 2.0 Technologies and your Library

Abstract: What are Web 2.0 applications and which ones will you be implementing in your library? Do “Baby Boomers” fear change and rely too much on email? Are “Gen X-ers/Gen Y-ers” more computer savvy in today’s rapidly changing environment? Can social networking technologies enhance our productivity, or are they time-wasters in a professional environment? In this article, based on his paper given at the 39th Annual BIALL Conference held in Dublin in June 2008, Stephen Weiter attempts to answer these questions.

Keywords: social networking; internet; law librarians

Introduction

For the past few years I have heard presentations and read numerous articles on Web 2.0 technologies and specifically, social networking sites and their applicability to law library services. There seems to be unanimity of opinion that social networking sites and other aspects of what we call “Web 2.0” offer great opportunities for reaching our patrons and for expanding our services. Many of these articles and presentations also attest to the “technological savvy” of younger professionals in our field, and contrast that to the stale, unbending “baby-boomers” who have come to represent the staid institutional “fear of change”

group among legal information professionals. The professional literature, blogs, and forums all seem to indicate that “we should all be using these tools but we aren’t and we can’t figure out why.”

Rather than provide an overview and catalog of Web 2.0 social technologies, this article will explore the current adaptations of social networking technologies and their uses. I will also discuss who will (or will not) implement these technologies, and why (or why not), in a professional legal information setting. I will also discuss the supposed generational divide in an effort to uncover attitudes about these technologies and what types of institutions/information centres will likely be early adopters of new technologies, and which types are likely to lag behind. I will also

explore institutional experience and how it affects the rate at which we embrace changing technologies and integrate those technologies into our workflows.

What is Web 2.0 anyway?

Is Web 2.0 a concept for collaboration? Is it a collection of technologies? Is it something else? Scanning the literature we really don't seem to have much unanimity on the definition of the term. According to Murley, the term was coined in 2004, and led to a conference on Web 2.0 the following year.¹ A compact definition was put forth by Tim O'Reilly – a participant in that conference in 2005:

“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...”²

According to Wikipedia:

Web 2.0 is a living term describing changing trends in the use of World Wide Web technology and web design that aims to enhance creativity, information sharing, collaboration and functionality of the web. Web 2.0 concepts have led to the development and evolution of web-based communities and hosted services, such as social-networking sites, video sharing sites, wikis, blogs, and folksonomies.³

World-wide Web inventor Tim Berners-Lee questions whether the term even has any meaning at all:

Web 1.0 was all about connecting people. It was an interactive space, and I think Web 2.0 is, of course, a piece of jargon, nobody even knows what it means. If Web 2.0 for you is blogs and wikis, then that is people to people. But that was what the Web was supposed to be all along.⁴

If Berners-Lee is correct, then in essence “Web 2.0” is not much more than marketing jargon, akin to terms such as TQM (Total Quality Management) which are no more than the re-packaging of old concepts so that they can be more easily sold in today's market. In this case, some of the technologies - or at least their uses are new. Yet the core concept of allowing broad collaboration via the Web is not. Fichter describes Web 2.0 culture as “social” in attempting to promote “social media optimisation.”⁵ Yet I find this description to be somewhat facile, and not very helpful. The “old” culture was social as well, tracing usage back through Usenet and Pine Mail. We were using the web as a way to communicate and collaborate long before there were graphics and html.

For the purposes of our discussion, I will adopt something close to the Wikipedia definition, and view Web 2.0 as a collection of technologies that allow collaboration over a broad spectrum. This definition encompasses

social networking technologies and the uses of those technologies in law libraries at the heart of this discussion. That is not, however, a dismissal of Berners-Lee. I believe his comments are particularly germane to our understanding of “savvy” uses of this technology.

Change, risk, and reason

I keep reading that my generation (Boomer's) is afraid of change and unwilling to adapt new technologies and it sounds suspiciously like the same complaints we had about our parents. Are we afraid of change? Does age make one wary? After all, it was the Boomer generation that created the web, and built many of the technologies that are out there now.

I question the assumption that older librarians are afraid of change, or that we are less savvy than our younger counterparts. We embrace change all the time. We have bought homes, changed careers, gotten married, had children, perhaps gotten divorced and re-married. We've listened to our music on 78s, LPs, 8-track tapes, cassettes, CDs, and lately MP3 files. In our profession we have seen uncountable changes from print to fiche, to CD-ROM and online databases. We went from “While you were away” memos, carbon and mimeograph copies to voicemail, photocopies and email. What we do NOT do is embrace change without reason, nor do we take unnecessary risks. Collins and Yates cite Urgo in extolling the “risk-taking” skills of Gen Xers.⁶ However, risk taking isn't a skill. Risk taking is a propensity, and sometimes a strategy. Risk management is a skill. And the best managers are those who effectively strive to MINIMIZE their risks. Boomers don't leap to the “cutting edge.”⁷ We wait to see what will work and best suit our users' needs. We test, try, edit, and revise before we post information. We ask ourselves how accurate and effective that information – in a specific format - is going to be before we make it available to our users. We effectively manage our risks and our resources.⁸ We are cautious with our time, institutional resources, and institutional reputation. Institutions by definition are mature entities. Perhaps our decision-making processes as regards the adoption of Web 2.0 technologies are mature as well.

Law libraries, beyond their own institutional histories and needs, are most often parts of larger institutions (courts, universities, law firms) with their own institutional needs and tendencies. Consider the old saw: “Institutions stand to be challenged and toppled by radical ideas, which in time become institutions to be challenged by new radical ideas...” Institutions are large, settled and slow to change. Institutions do not fear change but are cautious, due to a long history of experience. Institutions prefer slow, stable, evolutionary change, not rapid, unpredictable, uncontrollable change. Evolution, by definition is not radical change, but a result of paced growth and development. Evolutionary processes arise in order to meet a need (i.e. survival). Most new technologies of any sort are initially seen as time wasters and distractions. The telephone was once seen as an

extravagance. Similarly, many social networking sites are blocked by the IT departments of parent institutions, as those entities do not want to face the loss of productivity they fear, or worse, the embarrassment of finding out that its employees have spent all day in an online brothel or gambling den (among many other potential distractions).

Adapting Web 2.0 technologies is not likely to happen overnight, but will happen more quickly if a need, an accomplished efficiency, or another desired result can be demonstrated through adaptation of those technologies. How many million dollar/pound sterling retainers are out there to be found on Facebook? If we start a Podcast, who will we reach? Can you try cases and present evidence in Second Life? Can you even really have meaningful interactions with avatars? What are the privacy and security issues? How much will it cost? Email, with its spam, misuse, overuse, poor threading and other faults, is certainly a broken system. Yet in order to move the institution to Twitter or SMS messaging, there has to be the belief that it is more efficient, will save money, won't require expensive rounds of training, and will be a stable, secure, traceable form of communication.

Who's using Web 2.0?

According to Nielsen/Netratings there are 78 million American "Baby-boomers" (born between 1946 and 1964) online out of 208 million total US users, 144 million of whom can be considered active users.⁹ By comparison, according to the CIA Factbook, there are 33 million users in the UK, and 1.4 million users in Ireland. The UK and the US have roughly comparable population age structures in terms of the percentage of the population over 65, (between 15–64 years of age, etc.)¹⁰ We can reasonably assume that the same percentage of "boomers" are actively using the Web.

Facebook is one of the more popular Web 2.0 social networking applications available today. Although Martine reports over 10,000 librarians as members,¹¹ searches for law and law library related members as of April 2009 showed the following usage in our field:

- 23 matches for law firm
- 32 matches for law librarian
- 27 matches for law school
- 10 matches for law library (531 total fans)
- 4 matches for courthouse
- 500 matches for lawyer (30 as "professional service")
- 10 matches for Supreme Court - 9 justices and 1 rock band.¹²

A quick browse at the profiles on Facebook, Second Life, Ning, and LinkedIn shows a definite dominance amongst academic law librarians, as opposed to those who work in courts and law firms. In fact all ten of the law library pages on Facebook were academic. This makes

sense in light of the discussion above regarding institutional behaviour. Academic institutions, because of their educational and research missions are more disposed to be early implementers of information technology.

Library Thing provides another snapshot. Out of 390,574 members, 4,177 (1.07% of the total membership) are identified as "Librarians who Library Thing."¹³

Although some libraries have done some very useful and wonderful things using these and similar technologies, the numbers are not very impressive as a percentage of those who are online. Although the low numbers could reflect a failure to identify ourselves as legal information professionals, our usage in the legal information field seems from these examples to be limited.

What are we using it for?

Among the primary library uses of social networking technologies are: chatting and conversing with our users and colleagues; promotion of our libraries and our services in the places our potential users are; storing and tagging information for use by ourselves and others (i.e. links to our catalogues, Google Books, Open Worldcat, etc); providing electronic/virtual reference services, and answering any question in any format it is asked (i.e. IM, email, Questionpoint etc). The belief is that the more forms of communications or more access points made available, then the more effective we will be at providing core services to our users who have moved to the online environment. But are we reaching them?

My personal usage might provide some insight. I have logins on Facebook, Ning, LinkedIn, Flickr, Library Thing, Google, and Yahoo. I have participated in blogs, wikis, podcasts, and use SMS messaging regularly. I am identified as a law librarian on each social networking site where I have a profile. Yet very little, if any, of my communications on these sites is with library patrons. Rather, most of the communication is with friends and colleagues within the profession, regarding conferences, collaborations, and professional organisation business, as well as for personal recreation. There have been some terrific first efforts. We are reaching each other, not our intended audience (i.e. library users).

It is interesting to note that the implementation of social networking technologies such as Facebook, Second Life, and other networking sites is not listed among the top legal technology trends for 2008, according to LLRX.com. Although the death of email is forecast, and the use of RSS, IM, news readers, other online collaborative tools such as google docs, online calendars, phone calls, and face-to-face meetings are projected to increase,¹⁴ the temptation to point out that phone calls and personal face-to-face interactions are two of the older of social networking technologies is just too great for this author.

Challenges

There are several challenges we need to consider in implementing any new technologies in the library, and

these have been consistent throughout the information age. How do we communicate effectively? How do we balance the time and effort required to integrate new technologies. What is the value and gain from implementing Web 2.0 technologies? What are the costs for doing this ineffectively? What are the measures of effectiveness? What has been effective and what hasn't? Why don't we use Web 2.0 more than we do? Which of those uses are "savvy" uses? For virtual reference to be effective it has to be staffed and monitored. If you put up an electronic storefront, someone must work the counter. We need to consider the impact of enhancing our virtual services on our existing services and users. Where is the research that says this is effective at driving people to our doors, our electronic services, or our websites? Unfortunately, it's not there yet. We don't really have any consistent reliable studies that indicate success or failure in the use of these technologies at this point.

Conclusion - who is technology savvy?

Being technology savvy is not defined by how many social networking sites you're on, whether you take the bar exam electronically, or how many MP3 files are on your

ipod. It also doesn't mean mistrusting sites such as Wikipedia merely because they are web-based. Being computer savvy involves knowing what tool to use when, how to use it, when not to use it, and the potential benefits and/or consequences of using that particular tool. A journalist used Twitter early this year to alert friends that he had been seized and detained in an Egyptian jail and his friends were able to free him. That's savvy. Teens knowing how to send nude pictures of themselves to their boy/girlfriends over their cell phones and choosing to do so is not. In the end, in spite of the potential value of social networking sites, I don't want to read your profile and learn about who you "hooked up with" last night or how drunk you got last weekend. It's a huge distraction. Similarly, knowing how and when to use bear skins and stone knives might qualify as technology savvy under the appropriate circumstances, as might the proper implementation of social networking sites.

However, we must remember that a multiplicity of tools and options is not conducive to productivity all the time. If I spend all day trying to navigate through my plethora of online networking sites in order to have an online meeting, I am no more productive - and no more savvy - than if I spend all day answering email and deleting spam. This is especially true if I can't remember which of the 19 passwords I have goes to which site. That's not terribly savvy either.

Footnotes

¹Diane Murley, What is all the Fuss about Library 2.0? *Law Library Journal*, 100(1) p. 197.

²Posting of Tim O'Reilly to O'Reilly Radar http://radar.oreilly.com/archives/2005/10/web_20_compact_definition.html (Oct. 1, 2005)

³Wikipedia entry for "Web 2.0" http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2.0 (Sept. 21, 2008)

⁴developerWorks Interviews: Tim Berners-Lee (2006-07-28). (May 12, 2008).

⁵Darlene Fichter, How Social is Your Web Site? Top Five Tips for Social Media Optimization. *Online*. 31(3) May/June 2007. p.57.

⁶Lauren Collins & Elizabeth Yates, What's in a Name? A Gen Xer and Gen Yer explore what it means to be members of their generations in the workplace., *AALL Spectrum* 12(7), May 2008. p. 24.

⁷For an example of a failure to properly manage risk see the posts at <http://www.teknoids.net/node/8309> regarding the "tech savvy" Gen-Yers who insisted on taking the New York bar exam via untested software on their computers. One could argue that the truly "tech savvy" are the ones who opted for pen and paper. **See also** Software Snafus Upset Test Takers During First Day of State Bar Exams *New York Law Journal* July 26, 2007 p. 1.

⁸Adopting glitzy new tools simply because they are new and glitzy is insufficient. Marydee Ojala, *Managing Social Network Tools*, *Online*. 32(3), May/June 2008. p.17.

⁹Randall Stross, Boomers on the Web: Eons, a Facebook-like site for those over 50 finds Boomers are most interested in social networking. *The Syracuse Post-Standard*, Sunday February, 10, 2008 p. A-10.

¹⁰<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/uk.html>

¹¹Cindy Martine, Facebook for Professionals, *Information Today*, 25(4), April 2008. p. 48

¹²Search results are from 9 April 2008.

¹³Search results are from 10 April 2008.

¹⁴<http://www.llrx.com/features/techtrends2008.htm>

Biography

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