

Patron 2.0:  
Blogs and RSS Feeds in Libraries

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### **Abstract**

This paper looks at the current state of research on the use of blogs and RSS feeds by libraries. The research though focused primarily on the United States does also cover the United Kingdom, Australia, India and Israel. Blogging and RSS research is typically included in larger research projects under the umbrella heading of either "Web 2.0" or "Library 2.0." This paper though looks only at blogging and RSS, two of the most popular Web 2.0 technologies in use at libraries.

Missing though from the discussion of Web 2.0 technologies as it relates to Library 2.0 implementation is the patron. Patron reception, interaction or acceptance of Web 2.0 technologies on library websites was noticeably absent from the peer reviewed articles read for this paper. It is this absence of the patron from the equation that has inspired the paper's title: "Patron 2.0."

*Keywords: Web 2.0, Library 2.0, Patron 2.0, blog, RSS*

My background is web design and web production. I first started building websites in 1995 and began my own site in 1997. My first attempts at a blog, being mostly pages of static links of interest and divided up by topics was a typical late 1990s blog (Rosenberg, 2009). In 2004 I revamped my website and began presenting my content as a blog with each entry dated, accessible by a permalink and the archives posted in reverse chronological order. In 2006 I began offering an RSS feed and switched to primarily blogging about books. A few years after that I discovered library blogs amongst the book blogs I was reading and sharing links with. I have been reading the library blogs as a library patron, not as a librarian. This paper has given me an opportunity to begin bridging the gap between patron and librarian blogger.

This paper will cover the state of research on blogging and RSS feeds in libraries, looking specifically at the patron. The current research trend in library blogging is a focus on the technologies needed for blogging and rates of implementation. What seems to be missing from the research is a discussion of how these initial blogging efforts are being received by library users (patrons).

The types of libraries covered will be primarily academic libraries with some discussion of public and school libraries. Special and corporate libraries will not be discussed in any great detail as their usage of Web 2.0 technologies tends to be done on intranet, firewall and password protected networks. These password protected networks prevent discovery by the typical method of following links of registered library websites on a Wiki or catalog.

Patron 2.0 will begin with a literature review. Sixty-eight articles as well as a few books were read. From that initial list, one third of potential references were rejected either for being

off topic or not peer reviewed. Sources were limited to English language but country of origin was not.

Web 2.0 and Library 2.0 will be defined and their histories outlined. When discussing these two terms, technological pieces of both will be highlighted such as instant messaging (IM, Wikis, social media) but these other technologies are not the focus of the paper. They will be presented to put blogs and RSS feeds into context. I will end the paper with a brief survey of the library blogs I read on a regular basis to compare to the descriptions of library blogging in the articles read for this paper.

### **Literature Review**

Sixty-eight articles were selected based on the search terms "Library 2.0", "library blog, "Web 2.0", "library RSS," and "patron." From that set, forty-two were kept for note taking and potential references. The papers divide into two subjects: lengthy discussions of terminology and available technology (Chua and Goh, 2010; Xu, Ouyang and Chu, 2009; ) or lists of libraries that have implemented at least one Web 2.0 technology (Draper and Turnage 2008; Harinarayana, and Raju, 2008; Linh, 2008; Liu, 2008; Tripathi and Kumar, 2010).

The papers missed chances to do content analysis, to discuss the scholarly merits of blogging, or to look at the effectiveness of the Web 2.0 technologies currently being used on library websites. From my marketing background, corporate websites are under regular scrutiny to measure it's ROI (return on investment) by tracking website usage by customers and by doing user testing seminars. In no paper did I find this level of scrutiny of the Library 2.0 implementations.

Hendricks (2010) briefly mentions the scholarly potential of blogging (p. 470) but uses a quote from William Savage Jr: "Does it have a place in the area of learned discourse? Probably? Is it an acceptable alternative to traditional academic publishing? Probably not" (Hendricks, p. 470; Savage, 2006 p. 49). The question of blogging's scholarly merits is at the heart of the problem with the current state of Library 2.0 research, a too narrow focus on one piece of the overall potential library blog audience. Arnold (2007) comments on the time and effort it takes to build and maintain a well-written blog and concurs with Savage that blogs won't take over the "peer-reviewed journal market" (p. 176). If blogs are aimed at patrons (users of library services) then the research should be on the effectiveness of blogs to communicate with the patronage, not on the scholarly merits of blogs or blog posts, per se.

Manness (2006) notes that librarians are "only are only beginning to acknowledge and write about it, primarily in the 'biblioblogosphere' (weblogs written by librarians)" (p. 2). The articles I found supports his observations. Most of the papers I found are about the technology of Web 2.0 and the numbers of libraries adopting or choosing to not adopt Web 2.0. Meanwhile, my Google Reader account is full of hundreds of personal blogs written by libraries, either for fun or as a side project for their library. These very personal blogs, though written by librarians, are not included in the academic research on blogs and RSS and other forms of Library 2.0.

Kern (2008) brings up important issues of accessibility that can arise in poorly or hastily implemented Web 2.0 sites. With the heavy reliance on AJAX (asynchronous javascript and XML) Web 2.0 websites might not be usable by users who can't, or don't, have javascript enabled on their machines. Kern's paper though was the only one I found that specifically addressed accessibility issues. Sites can be coded to degrade smoothly so that content and navigability aren't lost when viewed in browsers that can't use javascript, images and so forth.

These techniques though are not included even in the how-to books and articles read for this paper.

A small subset of the articles read, discuss the theory behind Library 2.0 implementations. Here the blogs and other technologies are seen as extensions of communication theory and a democratization of power. Winston (2009) notes the sense of community that blogging creates among librarians, but doesn't extend that observation to patrons who may or may not be reading the blogs (pp. 11-2). Stephens and Collins in their 2007 article note the dearth of discussion on the participatory nature of blogging and other social networking tools. They note that the "hyperlinked library is human" and that it should extend and encourage communication "externally and internally in a human voice" (p. 256).

Future research therefore needs to be done on the patron interactions blogs. Do the blogs and RSS feeds as they are created fit the needs of patrons? How well are library blogs and RSS feeds address accessibility issues for the blind, the non-English speaker or those with slow internet connections, for example.

### **Terminology: Web 2.0, Library 2.0 and Patron 2.0**

The computer networks and software, whether installed on local computers or shared via an internet connection that make up the "Web" have a firm underpinning in computer science and software development. As software updates are so often numbered for each new release with a whole number increment being reserved for significantly large number of changes, Web 2.0, Library 2.0 and Patron 2.0 try to show similar evolution with the inclusion of the 2.0.

Web 2.0 was coined by Darcy DiNucci in 1999 and popularized by Tim O'Reilly in 2004 (Miller, 2005; Miranda, Morris & Del Bosque, 2010; Gualtieri & Coccia, 2010). Much of the literature mistakenly attributes the term to O'Reilly (Miller 2006; Linh, 2008; Pienaar & Smith, 2008). While O'Reilly made challenge to web creators to put make Web 2.0 a reality, he was not the creator of it.

Web 2.0 is a turn from static web pages and pamphlet style sites to dynamic and interactive sites that foster communication between the writers and readers of the site. Web 2.0 is a 'space that allows anyone to create and share information online — a space for collaboration, conversation, and interaction; a space that is highly dynamic, flexible, and adaptable (Coombs, 2007; Harinarayana & Raju, 2008). Put more simply, Web 2.0 is "user-centered, multimedia, socially rich and communally innovative" (Xu, Ouyang & Chu, 2009, p. 324).

Web 2.0 implementations resemble applications more than web pages in browsers even though they are built using the same programs as the Web 1.0 web pages (Kern, 2008). Dashboard applications (for Macintosh OSX) and iPhone applications for example are built with HTML, CSS and javascript. They can pull information in using RSS feeds. While they look very different from their Web 1.0 predecessors, they are essentially the same technologies.

Kroski outlines eleven tenets of Web 2.0. The web is the platform. All number of tasks can be accomplished through an internet browser either on a computer or a web enabled device. Web 2.0 is a network of machines and users. It fosters collective intelligence. Data (or content) is the driving force of Web 2.0, or as Kroski puts it the "next 'Intel Inside'" (2008, p. 4). It should be the end of the software release cycle, or as Habib (2006) describes it, a perpetual beta. In other words, Web 2.0 is about regularly updating and improving one's site, not building it and letting it sit with the same unchanging content for its entire lifecycle. Simplicity in form and

function should be the goal of every Web 2.0 site. Content should be reusable and accessible across multiple platforms. The experience should offer a rich user experience and foster social interactions. Finally, Web 2.0 realizes the long tail phenomena where there are many more small, niche sites than large, all encompassing sites.

Habib's master's thesis has a lengthy discussion on the importance of not conflating the mimicked software production cycle with the changes of attitude towards technology as reflected in the numbering of evolutionary cycles (2006). Web 2.0 and Library 2.0 do not mean a completely different set of technology, nor a completely different way of using technology. Rather, both are reflections of changes in focus from static, one-sided web presences to dynamic, two- or even multi-way web based communication via blogs and other technologies. The 2.0 implies including the audience in the equation and in the context of Library 2.0, that audience would be the patrons. Following the metaphor, the connected, interactive and participating patron would be Patron 2.0.

Besides blogging and RSS feeds, Web 2.0 includes technologies not covered in this paper, specifically: social networking sites (such as Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn), photo sharing (such as Flickr), instant messaging (IM), tagging/folksonomies (such as delicious) and mobile phone technologies (Xu, Ouyang & Chu, 2009). When I began this project I started with the assumption that blogging would be the most popular Web 2.0 technology. The papers I read though, have found that instant messaging and RSS feeds are the most popular (Winston, 2009).

Lévy (1997) while not specifically writing about Library 2.0, has three tenets of communication in cyberspace that apply directly to the Library 2.0 and Patron 2.0. First, intelligence is constantly enhanced. By being on a network and connected with other knowledgeable users, access to, and quality of information increases. Secondly, the internet

allows for real-time coordination of intelligence. Finally, the internet allows for an effective mobilization of skills; people with remote skills can be pooled together into a virtual group without the cost of transportation.

Blogs are a method for accomplishing Lévy's tenets. Blogs can be set up to allow for more than one contributor and they can allow for comments. Comments foster communication amongst readers and with the author. For example, a post could be made with a list of recommended books. Readers could then reply via comments with their own suggestions. These suggestions could even be debated via comments between readers without having to meet in a physical space to partake in a lively discussion.

In looking at the "2.0" as a paradigm shift, rather than a completely new set of technology tools, theorists have proposed future iterations of web and library technologies: calling them Web 3.0 and Web 4.0. Miranda, Gualiteri and Coccia (2010) use the numbering system to outline decades of progress internet technology, with Web 1.0 being the years 1990-2000, Web 2.0 being 2000-2010, Web 3.0 being 2010-2020 and Web 4.0 being 2020-2030. Their predictions for future changes are centered on smarter technology, software that is able to self customize to provide more timely and relevant information with less user input.

The early days of Web 3.0 can be seen in Smart Phone applications and the use of web technology on cell phones. Needleman though, dismisses undue concerns over possible paradigm shifts, saying "it is impossible to predict what might happen over the next five to ten years and what a possible Web 2.0 (or maybe even Web 3 or 4.0) will look like" (2007, 202). Rather than trying to predict how applications of technology will change over time, I suggest focus be put on providing services to the end user (or patron for Library 2.0). Rather than providing cutting edge technology, provide reliable, usable and desired services using the technology at hand. Learn and

adapt as patron needs evolve. If as the Miranda, Gualiteri and Coccia paper suggests, collaboration between website owner and website user will increase, perhaps then Patron 3.0 will be an active developer of Library 3.0 technologies.

### **Types of Libraries, Types of Patrons**

Kane in her essay "Careers and environments" outlines four types of libraries: academic, public, school and special (2008). Using her framework, I labeled the libraries covered in my research by those types. The majority of the libraries described in research on Web 2.0 technologies were academic. The remainder were primarily public libraries with school and special libraries being mentioned in passing but not given the level of coverage and study as academic and public libraries. Linh notes that corporations use blogs in conjunction with their libraries as an internal communications device, rather than one that is open to the public (2008, p. 642). For this reason, corporate library blogs would not be open for discovery by researchers using the internet as their primary hunting tool. I have not found a similarly compelling reason for why my research failed to pick up more information regarding school library blogs; it could be a lack of time or simply the few papers written on them might be drowned out by the large numbers of papers on Web 2.0 technologies in use in academic libraries.

Kroski (2008) suggests three ways that Library 2.0 can serve the needs of the patron. First, blogs and other Web 2.0 technologies foster patron interaction. Patron 2.0 would be a connected patronage, able and willing to give feedback to the library staff via offered Web applications. Secondly, Library 2.0 should give rise to "knowledge communities" (Kroski, 2008, p. 8). Imagine if Reference Librarians could draw on local community based knowledge sources to enrich the reference experience for patrons. Currently websites like eHow.com use paid

subject experts to write answers to frequently asked questions. While it's not feasible for libraries to budget monies to pay patrons answer other patron questions, it could be set up as another method of library volunteerism. Finally, Library 2.0 should foster collaboration with the library website as the virtual meeting center for these projects to take place.

The different types of libraries would have a different range of patrons, with some overlap of course. People do not fall easily into single categories. Blogs should cater to their patronage. An academic library will draw most of its patronage from students, faculty, staff and alumni; public libraries from the surrounding communities; schools from the students enrolled, their teachers and possibly parents. Special libraries is an umbrella term covering law libraries, medical libraries corporate libraries, for example (Kane, 2008, pp. 56-7). and their patrons will have specialized and focused needs.

Most of the research on Library 2.0 technologies focuses on one specific type of library, in one specific location or taken from one specific list of libraries either presented on a webpage or wiki. This disjointed approach to Library 2.0 research, while convenient for finding a list of candidates for study, fails to capture the current state of Library 2.0 in terms of universal trends, practices and implementations.

Bar-Ilan's 2007 paper, though, surveys across library type. She found that from her set of libraries (all in the United States), academic libraries were the largest group adopting Library 2.0 technologies, coming in at 62.2%. The next largest group was made up public libraries at 29.2%. The remainder consisted of school libraries (4.8%), special libraries (2.4%) and government libraries (1.4%) (p. 14). She compares these findings to the National Center for Education Statistics from 2000; school libraries out numbered public libraries 10 to 1, and public libraries out numbered academic libraries 3 to 1 (Bar-Ilan 2007; Carey & Williams, 2003; Holton, Bae,

Baldrige, Brown & Heffron, 2004). Xu, Ouyang & Chu (2009) suggest that academic libraries are at the forefront of Library 2.0 implementation for their strong IT (information technology) tradition, and their focus on education and research (p. 224). The research suggests that academic libraries might be first adopters of Web 2.0 technologies with public libraries being secondary adopters. From my own experience working on corporate library blog sites, I would argue that Bar-Ilan's results for special libraries could be under represented if she missed intranet (employee only) sites.

Beyond allowing the patron to comment on library blogs, the other way in which libraries are facilitating Patron 2.0 is through folksonomies. Patrons are asked to tag things they search for in the library catalogue (Draper & Turnage, 2008). My local library recently started included a folksonomy option but it's buried in a beta version of the catalogue and isn't something that is well advertised on the library website. Social tagging though is beyond the scope of this paper but I include it as one example of Patron 2.0 currently being adopted.

### **Blogs:**

Blogs and RSS feeds both have their origins in the late 1990s but weren't widely adopted until the mid 2000s (Rosenberg, 2009). Originally blogs (or weblogs as they were first called) were lists of links, sometimes with commentary, presented in reverse chronological order (Bar-Ilan, 2007). Blogger, by Pyra Labs (and later purchased by Google) was the first remotely hosted database driven service that allowed anyone to blog without having to set up a website or work directly with the HTML (Rosenberg, 2009). The inclusion of the database allowed the content to sit separately from the webpage displaying it. Once the content was freed from the constraints of static HTML, it became easier to repurpose that content and share it across

different websites and in different formats. The dominant method for sharing content is the RSS feed.

Sodt and Summey (2009) suggest that blogs work well in academic libraries to reach students, staff and faculty. They cite the informal way in which information is shared as the primary reason for blogging's success in the academic setting. Secondly, blogs are easy to maintain and third, they are easy to access as they are web based.

Kroski outlines nine ways which libraries use blogs. The most basic use is to replace the static website with a dynamic site that is easier to update. Nearly all the Library 2.0 literature read for Patron 2.0 highlight the importance of dynamic, regularly updated websites to replace brochure style of website popular in the mid 1990s.

The second usage is as a replacement or supplement to the subject source guides or reader advisory (R.A.) services. Winston (2009) did her masters thesis on Library 2.0 implementations of R.A. and found blogs are replacing traditional annotated lists of suggested reading. Beyond Winston's research into blogging as a means of providing reader advisory services, I did not find other examples in the peer reviewed articles I read.

The third way in which blogs are being used according to Kroski is for collaborative training. Peer to peer collaboration and remote training in lieu of conference attendance are two popular uses of blogging and RSS in the academic library setting (Arnold, 2007; Balas, 2010; Draper & Turnage, 2008; Goodfellow & Graham, 2007; Hendricks, 2010; Miranda, Gualtieri & Coccia, 2010).

The fourth use is teen and youth outreach. Coupled with teen outreach is the posting of class materials. A quick search on Google for "class blog" will return hundreds of examples of

class run blogs and sites that outline how to set up a class blog. Class blogging though was not well covered in the articles I read and could be an area that needs greater research.

Book reviews is the sixth method listed by Kroski. Book reviews are not typically posted on academic library blogs (Wusterman, 2004 cited in Linh, 2008) but are popular on public library blogs (Arnold, 2007) and blogs run by individual librarians (hobby blogs). For this paper I did not research blogs written by individual librarians as these are primarily blogs done for fun and not in the context of their profession or place of work.

The seventh item on Kroski's list, library news, is the most often mentioned use in the literature I read. Current and upcoming events posted in blog form or fed directly to an RSS feed has replaced the static calendar on library websites (Draper & Turnage, 2008; Harinarayana & Raju, 2008; Shoniwa & Hall, 2007; Wu & Li, 2007, Xu, Ouyang & Chu, 2009).

The last two items on Kroski's list, library leadership and discussion groups were not something I found supported in the literature. Library leadership, though, could be something done on an intranet blog and therefore be invisible to web based research. Likewise, there is software unrelated to blogging software available to run web based discussion groups (or forums). With the exception of the 14 Days to Have Your Say Project (Peterson, & Haulgren, 2010) I did not find examples of blogging being used to facilitate discussion groups.

### **RSS:**

The RSS feed began as a Netscape project, headed by Dave Winer, as a way to allow users to customize their "My Netscape" pages. There are multiple versions of RSS as a result of separate development paths in the early days of technology but they all are specially formatted

XML (extensible mark-up files) files. Put more succinctly, RSS is a lightweight XML format to share content. (Çelikbas, n.d.). Contrary to some of the literature read for this paper, RSS doesn't stand for anything (Hammersley, 2005), although Really Simple Syndication and Rich Site Summary are the two dominate proposed meanings (Bar-Ilan, 2007). Atom, another variant, was developed to break away from the on going disputes over earlier versions of RSS but it is essentially another dialect of RSS.

For blogs using a blogging software platform, either remotely hosted (such as Blogger) or self hosted (such as WordPress), RSS feeds can be set up to be automatically generated and updated whenever a new blog post is published. Although RSS feeds are now considered a standard feature of blogs, they are not limited to serving blog updates. In the Library 2.0 studies I read, RSS feeds were found to used twice as often as blogs (Harinarayana & Raju, 2008; Linh, 2008; Shoniwa & Hall, 2007; Winston, 2009).

Koski (2008) outlines nine ways to use RSS for Library 2.0: news and events, tracking of library materials, subject guides, journal articles, library subscriptions (such as podcasts), book reviews, new acquisitions, workshops and catalog searches (pp. 30-2). If the majority of library blogs include an RSS feed, the remaining feeds must be coming from nonblog sources. Just as database driven blogs can be programmed to automatically update an RSS feed, so can any other database with an internet connection. Libraries use RSS feeds to send out updates when new books are catalogued, to publish news updates and to disseminate other time sensitive material (Wu & Li, 2007). The Lamson library at Plymouth State University has found a way to turn RSS feeds and blog posts out of each and every search done through their online catalogue (Wallis, 2007).

## Conclusion

While most of the literature I read for Patron 2.0 focused on counting different types of Web 2.0 technologies used on library websites, there is less discussion of content analysis. Those articles that do discuss specific uses of blogs or RSS feeds are typically written by the implementors of the websites mentioned in the articles. For example, Widdows (2009) describes how she set up a Facebook account for the University of Warwick library. Goodfellow and Graham meanwhile describe how they used a blog to facilitate peer to peer communication during an annual Australian library conference. Finally, Peterson and Haulgren's 2010 paper outlines how a blog open only to students, faculty and staff of Western Washington University was used to assess the current state of library services.

Unfortunately most of these direct descriptions of Library 2.0 implementations are published in nonpeer reviewed journals and magazines or are written anecdotally on blog posts. Here then a large gap in research on Library 2.0. More needs to be done on specific implementations with emphasis on content analysis and response from users. From the current state of anecdotal descriptions of blogs and RSS feeds, Library 2.0 implementations seems to vary by type of library more so than location of library. Academic Libraries tend to be focused on peer-to-peer communication. Public libraries tend to use blogs and RSS for news updates, calendar of events and new books. K-12 school library blogs tend to have the highest level of patron participation, using the blogs as teaching devices where students are either required to or encouraged to post book reviews (Arnold, 2007; Bar-Ilan, 2007; Winston, 2009)

I hope I have shown how patrons might be evolving along side with the web and library services offered to them. Just as Web 2.0 is a paradigm shift from the early static days of the Web, Library 2.0 is a paradigm shift that in theory provides more methods for the patron to

interact with the library and its website. I suggest that the patron is undergoing a similar paradigm shift into Patron 2.0.

Future research needs to be done to assess how Library 2.0 implementations are serving the patrons. The current research on the topic can be divided into two groups: articles that assess different available technologies for their ease of use and articles that attempt to count libraries using Web 2.0 technologies. Few articles though go onto to analyze posted content or how the content is used by patrons.

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