

Chapter 31

Application of Web 2.0 Tools in Libraries in Africa: A Reality Check

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of Web 2.0, the read/write social web, has prompted a momentous change in the way library users seek information, communicate, and collaborate. This trend is affecting the usability and relevance of libraries as the epicentres of information and knowledge. It is essential, therefore, that libraries adopt this technology to fit their services and products as closely as possible to the emerging lifestyles of the users. The application of Web 2.0 tools to conceptualise and deliver library services in developed countries is widely documented. In Africa, however, literature on this subject remains scanty. The authors conducted a reality check of the current status of the application of Web 2.0 tools in libraries, assessed the current impact of Web 2.0 on library services, identified the challenges African libraries face while adopting Web 2.0, and proposed ways to use Web 2.0 tools effectively in libraries in Africa.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the Internet and its related technologies has prompted a momentous change in the way library users seek information, communicate and collaborate (Limb, 2004; Casey & Savastinuk, 2006; Miller, 2006; Rothman, 2006; Courtney, 2007). Similarly, the scope and depth of what library users are able to do with the emerging information and communication technology (ICT) applications are growing by the day. For instance, the new tools and techniques have the potential to enable the users to search, identify, select, manipulate, use, communicate and store more information easily, instantaneously and inexpensively (Ramana, 2006; Casey & Savastinuk, 2007). Thus, the tools offer a new and versatile means of satisfying the information needs of library users (Ramana, 2006; Chaddha, 2009). As these

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users become more aware of the possibilities of using technology and find it easier to go to Google than drive to a library, libraries face immense challenges on how to offer services to such users effectively.

The above challenges and emerging possibilities have triggered new conversations about how to discover, invent and share knowledge in this age (Casey & Savastinuk, 2007). These emerging applications, possibilities and conversations are rapidly altering the fundamental concepts of librarianship (Smith, 1990; Underwood, 1990; Miller, 2006; Casey & Savastinuk, 2007), further complicating the situation. They have also created new expectations for better usability, faster response to customer needs with better products (Casey & Savastinuk, 2007) and have exposed the limitations of library services available at a physical building with limited opening hours (Shuman, 2001; Chad & Miller, 2005; Rothman, 2006), strict membership requirements, limited information resources and inadequate user involvement in influencing the services they get (Cohen, 2006).

As the pace of this change accelerates, the greatest challenge now is how to keep up (Courtney, 2007). Indeed the latest library usage statistics show that there exists a dissonance between the environment and content that libraries provide and the environment and content that information consumers want and use (OCLC, 2005; Miller, 2006). Preferences for self-service, greater levels of satisfaction and seamlessness have been identified as some of the indicators of this dissonance. Therefore, library service characteristics that support self-service or disintermediation (Downie, 1998), user satisfaction and seamlessness such as ease of use, and convenience are now as important to the modern library user as quality and trustworthiness of the products (OCLC, 2005).

According to a report by the Online Computer Library Centre (OCLC) (2005) the perceptions of the modern library user of the library and its resources in the light of the digital revolution have changed drastically. The change in perceptions has led to a number of changes in library use. Some of these changes include:

1. A large number of users now begin their information searches with search engines, not librarians or catalogues;
2. People who have used both search engines and librarians for information searches admit that both approaches yield results of more or less similar quality;
3. Libraries are about the provision of outdated, dirty, bulky and often unavailable books, not information;
4. The library is not the first or only stop for many information seekers, and although this is not an entirely new finding, the situation is worse now because more alternatives to the library exist; and
5. Information seekers are not satisfied with the library experience and desire that it should stretch beyond books, crowded noisy reading areas, limited parking, bureaucratic limitations on the use of resources, need to travel, as well as unfriendly, unavailable and inadequate library staff.

Libraries struggle to cope with these new demands and challenges and a report by OCLC (2005) and other statistics (Aiken, 2006) indicate that they are rapidly relinquishing their place as the top sources of inquiry (Chad & Miller, 2005; Campbell, 2006). Indeed a sizable number of current library users indicate that they will reduce their library use in due course (OCLC, 2005). This change can be attributed to the constantly shifting expectations of users, especially those revolving around the time and convenience of use of library services and collection (D'Elia *et al.*, 2002). Fundamentally, modern library users simply expect to be able to access any information they want anytime anywhere (Blyberg, 2006; Crawford, 2006). They want the library service to fit their lifestyle and not vice versa (OCLC, 2005). They easily

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