

Chapter 10

The Effect of Social Software on Academic Libraries

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the results of a survey of Dutch and Italian academic libraries conducted to identify how academic libraries deal with the growing adoption of social media for professional purposes, and how they consider this adoption as the only possible way for them to reposition themselves among an audience that is more and more involved with social media. The results, surprisingly, show that although the interest and the need for such an adoption are felt rather strongly, the complete conversion to a library 2.0 is still not in reach. Many respondents, especially in the Dutch context, were interested in the outcome of this study to help them decide which direction they should take.

INTRODUCTION

Academic libraries are striving to reposition themselves in the digital environment and to re-define their role and expertise in a more complex informational context, where users have mostly become remote and where information retrieval and discovery tools have not improved library strategies to attract new users and to facilitate access to information. To advocate for, promote, and raise awareness of library collections and services, to win back former users and attract new ones,

academic libraries have been experimenting in the last years with several strategies: organizational changes (e.g., embedding the librarians' activity in academic departments to better support the research workflow), adoption of mobile technologies, and implementation of Web 2.0 tools.

Since 2005, manifold libraries have adopted different types of social software: wikis, blogs, and microblogging; social reference tools; sites that use RSS feeds to syndicate and broadcast content; widgets; virtual worlds; social bookmarking and social networking tools; and media sharing platforms have all been widely adopted and experimented with, with mixed results and

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varied levels of uptake by users. However, since the beginning, RSS, blogs, wikis, and social networking platforms have been some of the libraries' favorite tools.

Among the social networking platforms, Facebook (FB) seems to be one of the most popular used so far. Several studies on the use of FB in academic libraries (Calvi, Cassella, & Nuijten, 2010; Charnigo & Barnett-Ellis, 2007; Ellison, 2007; Evans, 2006; Farkas, 2007; Hendrix, Chiarella, Hasman, Murphy, & Zafron, 2009; Powers, 2008) point to the changes that this adoption enforces on the library and how it affects the library's changing role. Charnigo and Barnett-Ellis (2007), for instance, indicate that for 54% of their interviewees FB is not useful for academic purposes; Hendrix et al. (2009) point out that only 12.5% of them have created and maintain a FB page; Calvi et al. (2010) outlined that what seems to be lacking is a well-defined and systematic strategy to attract and keep new users; Bietila, Bloechl, and Edwards (2009) support the idea that more research is needed before libraries and other academic institutions can become full (and appropriate) participants in spaces like Facebook.

Whatever strategy is followed—the so-called aggressive Friend and Feed approach (Ellison, 2007) or the simple promotion of the library's services on the library FB page, giving users the freedom to decide whether or not to become “fans” of that page—academic libraries and librarians have seen their role change. Their expertise is less recognized now than in the past and they need to redefine the way in which they can transfer their knowledge to their audience.

In this chapter, we intend to explore this issue further. In a previous paper (Calvi et al., 2010), we analyzed the FB pages of a selected number of academic libraries. Now we will present the results of a survey we conducted among library staff to verify how they envision the use of FB not just for marketing the library but also to requalify themselves as professionals.

WEB 2.0: DEFINITION AND FEATURES

To date there is no authoritative definition of Web 2.0, a term coined in 2004 in San Francisco during a brainstorming conference session between Tim O'Reilly and MediaLive International. In 2006 O'Reilly attempted to clarify the concept and to give a broad definition of what he meant by the neologism.

Web 2.0 is the business revolution in the computer industry caused by the move to the internet as platform, and an attempt to understand the rules for success on that new platform. Chief among those rules is this: Build applications that harness network effects to get better the more people use them. (This is what I've elsewhere called “harnessing collective intelligence”). (O'Reilly, 2006)

O'Reilly's definition shows us two of the most innovative features of Web 2.0 that help us to understand what Web 2.0 is. The first feature is the concept of the Web as a platform which essentially refers to the possibility of developing applications that run in a Web browser. As Web services need to be constantly updated, the concept underlying Web 2.0 is that every social tool and service is implemented in a beta environment. “Experimentation” is de facto the key word to characterize this “perpetual beta.” The second feature of Web 2.0 is the use of the read/write tools that allow users to interact with the Net, to collaborate, to create and share content, and to build in a bottom-up approach to communities of practices.

O'Reilly also introduces the concept of “business revolution” in his definition. Being a platform that holds together huge communities of users and data on users, Web 2.0 is primarily a market that is different from, for example, the Semantic Web which, at the moment, still belongs to the sphere of pure academic research (Meschini, unpublished).

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