Blogs and Online Social Networks as User Centric Service Tools in Academic Libraries: An Indian Library Experience

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Abstract
Modern academic libraries cater the information needs of a more demanding and tech-savvy new generation user group that prefers to reside in an open, self-generated online environment largely supported by Web 2.0 technologies. To reach the users where they are, the libraries should revamp their service strategies by incorporating tools like blogs and online social networks. Blog is a handy technology for library professionals which can be reshaped as an information and publicity tool, as a feedback instrument, as an interactive and collaborative learning medium and as a facility for library promotion. Online social networks connect like minded people who share information, ideas and feelings. The unparalleled growth of user bases of these networks presents an opportunity before academic libraries that may be harnessed by making the library an active member of these communities. The experience of an academic library in India shows that reaching the user at their own time and space is more easy and productive when we adapt new web technologies.

Keywords: Academic Library services, Web 2.0, Library 2.0, Blogs, Online social networks.

Introduction
The impact of Internet and related web technologies on the delivery of library services is evident in the first decade of this century. The conceptual shift from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 and its real life implications affects modern libraries and information centres in such a way that make them to reinvent their online resources and services and become a part of the updated version of library code named as Library 2.0. The users of the web who could only “see” the static pages with limited or no interactivity are now armed with revolutionary gadgets and connected to myriad networks that changes the way they think, communicate, share and experience. A large number of Web 2.0 tools or technologies can be incorporated into academic libraries as services to reach out and engage with the new generation users those are conversant with and like to live in the new era of communication, information sharing, interoperability and collaboration.

The open source initiatives (e.g. OSS, Creative Commons), always “beta” versions of software (e.g. Google, Amazon, E-bay), user generated content systems (e.g. Blogs, Wikis, RSS, etc.) and online social networks (e.g. Facebook, Myspace, Orkut, Twitter, Hi5) are some of the main visible components of Web 2.0. This updates from Web 1.0 generated many debates for and against. But the impact of these tools on various fields gets more strong and area specific avatars of web 2.0 sprang up such as Internet 2.0, Business 2.0, Learning 2.0, Library 2.0 (variants such as Academic Library 2.0, School Library 2.0), etc.

The modern academic community constitutes students and teachers those are more oriented towards web generated or online information resources. Since a large part of academic knowledge is now freely available on internet (the size and non-accessibility of quality information located in deep web still remains a problem), the users tend to spend more time on the web. To meet these digital natives at their own hideaways and redirect them to the authentic and high quality resources available online and also that kept in libraries (save the time of the user), new service models should be designed. The knowledge about Web 2.0 tools and its applications in web based library and information services are more relevant here.

The future (present also) of libraries lies in making them a platform for conversation, collaboration and sharing. Openness towards user needs and ability to talk to them on their own language (whether it is conventional or web based) makes the modern libraries more up to date (library 2.0) and the real facilitators of knowledge.

Libraries in India are slowly catching up with the paradigm shifts that resulted by the impact of Web 2.0 on web based library service in developed countries. The basic concept is that Library 2.0 is an update but not a replacement of Library 1.0. This makes our libraries more social, human, participatory
Blogs and online social networks are best examples for these services.

**Blogs and Social Networks**

One of the Web 2.0 tools which has become a truly global phenomenon is a blog. According to Wikipedia (itself a famous Web 2.0 creation), “A blog (a contraction of the term weblog) is a type of website, usually maintained by an individual with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or video. Entries are commonly displayed in reverse-chronological order. “Blog” can also be used as a verb, meaning to maintain or add content to a blog.” (Wikipedia, 2009) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog)

The blogosphere (collective community of all blogs) grows in size and influence in the last decade. According to the “State of the Blogosphere 2008” (http://technorati.com/blogging/state-of-the-blogosphere/) study conducted by Technorati which referred Universal MacCann, there were more than 184 million blogs and 346 million blog readers worldwide by March 2008. The significance and impact of blogs as a technology having a greater share of user-generated content and as a medium which allows users to comment, share and analyze what they care have lead marketers and libraries to make use of it. They incorporated blogs into their developmental strategies and redesign them according to their needs. Blogs are easy to create, maintain and at the same time costless. This Web 2.0 tool is having all characteristics that can be manipulated in many ways to enhance the Library 2.0 experience. Library blogs are now become an essential component of online service profile of modern academic libraries. A large number of libraries worldwide are now using blogs.

Online social networking websites are becoming a rage among people below their forties and also getting fast acceptance among other age groups. A social network service focuses on building online communities of people who share interests and/or activities, or who are interested in exploring the interests and activities of others. Most social network services are web based and provide a variety of ways for users to interact, such as e-mail and instant messaging services. Social networking has encouraged new ways to communicate and share information. Millions of people have made their profiles on these social networks and interact with others regularly. There are more than 140 active social networking websites (Wikipedia, 2009) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_social_networking_website) with different types of users. Facebook, Myspace, Orkut, LinkedIn, Twitter, Hi5, Friendster, Ning, Bigadda are some general social networks which are open to all. Some are intend to a particular group of people such as CafeMom (opens to moms and moms to be) and Pinksta (open to internet experts). Myspace (263 million) and Facebook (250 million) (http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics share the first two positions based on the number of registered users worldwide.

**Blogs as an Academic Library service**

The adaptation of blogs in the service profile of an academic library can be viewed and discussed in two perspectives, user’s and librarian’s.

Technorati’s State of the Blogosphere 2008 (http://technorati.com/blogging/state-of-the-blogosphere/) report shows that about 73 percent of Asian bloggers are between the age of 18 and 34. And this is the age group at which the academic libraries focus. This can be divided into three sub groups. The young adults (15-18) who at their schools and catered by school libraries are the first sub-group (entry points). The students of graduate and post graduate (19–25) level of studies are the second sub-group catered by college (including professional institutions) libraries. The third sub-group comprises of researchers, professionals and teachers (26 and above) who are the main users of university and research libraries. The optimum penetration of this Web 2.0 tool (blog) among academic library users (of age group 18–34) give a qualified approval for its adaption as one of the library service to reach out the patrons.

In the librarian’s perspective, a blog is an easy to create and maintainable tool which can be added as one of the online services of the library. Any library professional with a basic knowledge in computer and internet can quickly create a blog using the free and ready made space and templates provided by websites such as Blogger, Wordpress, Live journal, etc. A library blog enhances the visibility of the library as a more tech savvy, social and live entity in the academic sphere. The features of the blog support two way communication, interactivity and sharing of library resources and services with the users.

How libraries can use blogs as a service tool? Here we are examining the blogs created and maintained by an Indian school library, Kendriya Vidyalaya (KV) Pattom, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala.

**Blog as an information and publicity tool**

The blogs are blessings to the libraries which do not have enough requisites to launch a website. And for those already having a library website it is an added library 2.0 service. The library blog can be used as a medium to inform the users about the resources and services, such as new arrivals, library timings, borrowing information, fine/loan details, etc.

Publicizing books, exhibitions, displays, fairs, competitions, talks, author visits and other programmes on the library blog attracts a niche audience of current members and people in the outside world. The library blog of KV Pattom (http://librarykvpattom.wordpress.com) launched in September 2007 on wordpress platform. (Fig. 1)
490

ICAL 2009 – LIBRARY SERVICES

Upto 20th July 2009 received more than 4,00000 hits and 750 comments

Listed in national and international library blog directories

Blog as an interactive communication and feedback medium

The comment and track back facilities on the blog help the visitor to interact with the library staff and ask reference questions. The user can start a discussion on a post which may be about a book or on a particular topic.

Blogs can be also used as a feedback tool to evaluate the effectiveness of a library services. The users are free to express their views with the library staff through the blog and that will help the later to improve their services.

The library blog of KV Pattom receives comments from the users regularly and utilizes that to respond reference queries and reshape the services (Fig. 2).

Blog as a collaborative learning tool

The role of the library in the academic achievement of the students can be supported by the use of Web 2.0 applications. Collaborative learning practices in an academic institution are incomplete without the library component. The library can carry this as an added service and increase its reach among students and teachers.

Main features

- Acts as a portal to web resources to students and teachers
- Regularly updated information on library resources and services
- New book alerts and announcements regarding exhibitions, competitions and other activities
- “Downloads” category contains study materials, previous question papers, e-books, on line text books, etc
- Book of the week, author of the week, article of the week, website of the week categories
- Videos of writers, interviews, art forms and school programmes
- Library instructional videos and links
- A subject directory of websites
- E-mail subscription service to updates
- RSS subscription facility
- Chat reference and E-mail reference services
- ‘Ask the librarian’ and ‘Suggest A Book’ pages
- Comment facility to ask reference questions
- Facebook and Twitter updates
- Receives more than 950 hits per day (on an average)

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The library at KV Pattom launched a blog \textit{Homeworks and Assignments Online} to provide students access to their daily class homeworks and assignments online (Fig. 3).

The students can download the homework from the site and submit the same to the teacher on the date of submission. E-mail subscription and RSS feeds help the user to get quick updates. The archiving feature of the blog gives access to previous homework. They can also interact with the teachers through email and by using the comment facility provided. Information regarding the examination time table and other academic activities are also given on the blog. The site is linked to other library blogs and has been visited by a number of students and parents from and outside the school.

\textbf{Blog as a library promotional tool}

Promotion of reading and books in different ways is one of the main activities of an academic library. Blogs are fantastic tools for this purpose.

\textit{LibZine (Library Magazine)}, the e-magazine of KV Pattom promotes student’s creative talents by offering them a platform for publishing online. (Fig. 4)

Students and staff members send their contributions (poems, short stories, book reviews, articles, paintings, write-ups, etc.) to library e-mail and after editing that are published on the blog.

My Dear Book is a blog exclusively for publishing student’s book reviews of the books they have read from the library (Fig. 5). This site gives the students an idea about the books available in the library and kindles their interest towards them. This may end in a library visit. All these four library blogs are linked together and with the school’s website.

These blogs try to reposition the library into a more interactive, reachable, open, and collaborative working place which promotes the creation and sharing of knowledge where students, faculty and the library system are the main components.

\textbf{Social Networks as a library reach out medium}

The reach and impact of online social networking websites are far and big more than we think. Online communities of persons with common interests are fertile grounds to find potential library users or supporters. The age range of active users of these networks (and of academic libraries) demands preparation of specialized user profiles that consider strategies to reach them at their online hideouts such as facebook, myspace, orkut, twitter, etc.

KV Pattom library opened a facebook account (Fig. 6) with general information, photographs, events and notes about its resources and services. Many people including students and teachers became the friends of the library and post their comments and sent

**Fig. 2: Comments by visitors on posts**
Fig. 3: Home page of Homeworks and Assignments Online Blog

Fig. 4: Home page of LibZine
Fig. 5: Home page of My Dear Book Blog

Fig. 6: Facebook page of Library KV Pattom
messages. A number of libraries from around the world share their ideas and information on latest happenings through this network with KV Pattom library.

The facebook network account acts as an online interface to reach out the users where they are. For the digital natives the presence of the library on their home turf as a friend may be delightful and enthusiastic.

Twitter is the other online network that the library has joined. This is a free social networking and micro-blogging service that enables its users to send and read messages known as tweets. Tweets are text-based posts of up to 140 characters displayed on the author’s profile page and delivered to the author’s subscribers who are known as followers. (Wikipedia, 2009)(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twitter)

The library uses Twitter to convey short messages regarding its resources (new book alerts, etc) and services. Many students joined the network and became followers. The library also follows useful tweets from others.

![Twitter profile page of the library](image)

**Fig. 7: Twitter profile page of the library**

*Impact of Library Blogs and online Networks*

The online visibility of the library increased many fold after including blogs and social networks in its service profile. Since this was the first initiative of its kind in the country, many school libraries followed the idea and became the members of biblioblogosphere. ‘Home work and assignments online’ was a novel concept which has been benefiting the teaching and learning community in the school and outside. The incorporation of these Web 2.0 tools makes the library’s presence felt on internet and become acceptable to younger generation of core users.

**Conclusion**

Blogs and online social networks are two leading Web 2.0 technologies that can be adapted as a part of online services in academic libraries. Blogs can be used as library information, publicity and feedback tool. Reshaping the library into a more open, interactive, communicative and collaborative place for teaching and learning activities can be supported by these tools or services. The emergence of online social networks and its expanding user base demand immediate attention from the side of academic libraries. The library’s profiles on these networks facilitate the reaching out strategy to the new generation users at their own space and time. The example of library blogs and online social network profiles created and maintained by an Indian academic library shows that Web 2.0 is an opportunity that should and can be harnessed for the academic achievement of the students and make the library an entity that matters.
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