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ACADEMIC LIBRARIES AND LIBRARY 2.0: ARE WE GETTING THERE?

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Abstract

Internet's and World Wide Web's emergence as every day tools for the management of information systems contributed in the change and, mainly, in the possibility for change with regard to the development of user services strategies in academic libraries. The modern systems for the dissemination of information even if they maintain, to a large extent, the structure and, substantially, the form of previous decades – regarding, of course, the services offered within library walls – can, and should, demonstrate new techniques of exploiting and distributing information. The level of exploitation and integration of modern technological innovations in the informational environment that a library creates is an interesting point for investigation. Integration that should serve the needs of library's personnel and users locally and, at the same time, advances its role through a worldwide system that exchanges and distributes information. This paper aims to examine the level of integration of the, so called, Web 2.0 (or Social Web) in today's user services system within an academic library, better known as Library 2.0 (or L2). The web sites of 200 academic libraries worldwide were examined in order to document if those academic libraries offer any "Library 2.0 services". Additionally, a research that involves 38 Greek academic libraries is, also, presented.

Keywords: Academic Libraries – User Services – Library 2.0 – Web 2.0

1. INTRODUCTION

The, so called, Library 2.0 (or more generally the Web 2.0) is a development where the integration of modern technology with the services already offered by a library might lead to a dynamic environment. An environment where the library will be able to re-direct its services in order to have a better understanding of user needs and, eventually, will help the library to better interact with and adjust to the informational environment in which users exist, act and work.

However, the term "Library 2.0" should be considered improper and temporary. Perhaps, eventually, we will agree to the fact that Library 2.0 is nothing more than the evolution of services already existed in traditional libraries (in most cases) and that those services were evolved with the help of technology. It is, of

course, interesting and, in certain cases, essential to coin new terms. But, what happens when we insist to coin new names for services that already exist and we choose to ignore the simple truth; that this is the evolution of traditional processes through technological improvements, within an information environment that is permanently changing?

The development currently known as Library 2.0 can advance the services offered by modern academic libraries. In order to achieve that, a thorough study of the scientific, vocational and individual users needs must be conducted. What we shouldn't, perhaps, forget, though, is that any new service should be considered an innovative development when it upgrades, evolves and broadens the "area-effect" and the dynamics of the service it is supposed to replace or improve.

**2. ACADEMIC LIBRARIES AND
LIBRARY 2.0**

The web sites of 200 academic libraries were examined from December 2008 to January 2009. The selection was made based on the list published by QS, *The Times Higher Education - QS World University Rankings*¹. The services offered by the libraries of the top 200, according to that list, academic institutions of the world for the year 2008 were examined. Those academic institutions, pioneers in their field of practice and research, can be a valuable source of data, as it is safe to assume that the services they offer, including the ones by their libraries, are of the highest standards from a scientific and technological point of view.

"Library 2.0 services" were divided into six categories: RSS Feeds, Instant Messaging, Streaming Media, Web Blogs, Tags and Social Networking. It should be pointed out that this categorization was made based on the opinions of L2 supporters (like Casey, Savastinuk, Miller and Maness) as to what constitutes L2 services.

¹ QS: http://www.topuniversities.com/university_rankings/results/2008/overall_rankings/fullrankings.

It should, also, be taken into consideration that each academic institution is divided into different schools and departments, with a corresponding division of libraries offering user services; therefore, this study analyzes the data collected from the main library web site of each institution. An exception was made in order to identify the use of social networking web sites, as it was realised that in some cases, while the libraries use applications like Facebook, they do not provide any direct links to them through their official web pages. Therefore, Google's search engine was used as an additional tool to discover the use of social networking sites. RSS Feeds were read with Sage 1.4.2, a Firefox add-on.

The results of the study shows that Library 2.0 doesn't have the social dimension that the supporters of Library 2.0 allege it has, with regard to, of course, the level of incorporation of relative public services into the working frame of the academic libraries in the sample. Therefore, although there is a wide use of RSS technology, the human contact in a social level, a contact that would replace or, at least, substitute the personal contact within a digital environment, with the use of social networking applications, appears that, at least at this point, has not reached any satisfactory level of acceptance. This is stated in combination with the analysis that follows later that many of the "Library 2.0 services" are not actually Library 2.0, neither they are innovative.

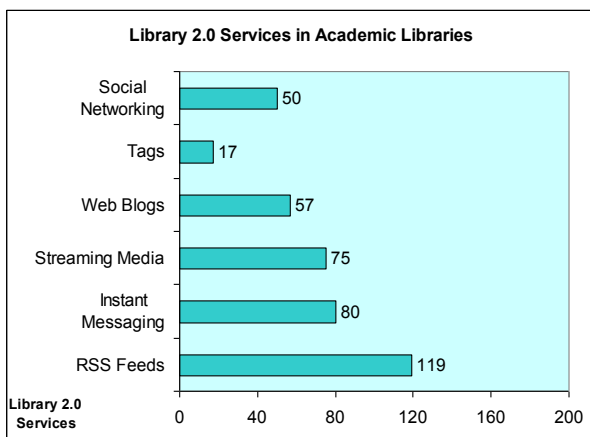


Figure 1. Library 2.0 services in Academic Libraries.

Fig. 1 shows how many "L2 services" are offered by the 200 academic libraries of the sample. Fig. 2 demonstrates the total number of "L2 services" offered within each academic library. Most libraries offer one of the six services mentioned above, while few offer more than four. Only one library was found that offers all of the services studied in this paper (Brandeis University Library).

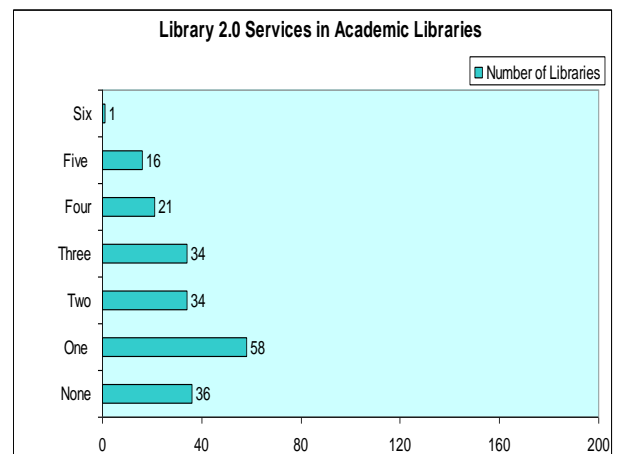


Figure 2. Academic Libraries offering Library 2.0 services.

2.1 Social Networking

Fifty academic libraries from the sample use social networking pages. Facebook appears to be the main choice (Brown University Library), but also YouTube (Shanghai Jiao Tong Library), Second Life (Groningen Library), Wikis (New York University Libraries) and Bookmark and Share (Penn State University Libraries). We can assume that this is an effort on behalf of some academic libraries to become members of a growing community that uses "social web" applications. It is, certainly, difficult to predict the future course of this development, but we should doubt its usefulness to fulfil any academic library's goals and, basically, to draw the attention of new users in the use of library systems.

2.2 Tags

The use of tags, in order to – as reported by L2 supporters – allow users to participate in the development and management of library's collection is another L2 service. The study showed that only 17 academic libraries allow their use through their web site. Their purpose is, mainly, to tag subject heading in library catalogues, e.g. University of Hong Kong Libraries, or to tag other services offered by the library, like their guides, e.g. Brandeis University Library. We should keep in mind that any attempt to change an academic library into something more like Facebook should be considered an erroneous one to an actual need for change. The problem, if there is any, of catalogues that lack the terms and key-words that would correspond more properly to what users search, should be discussed and resolved by professional librarians and not by an undefined, professionally and scientifically, group of users.

2.3 Web Blogs

Research showed a relative limited use of web blogs, with 57 academic libraries using them as a tool to promote their services to library users. Web blogs as a library service fits under what Deschamps describes when he says that “we asked for 2.0 Libraries and we got 2.0 Librarians” (2007). We should, of course, consider the contribution that web blogs have to Scholarly Communication and Research when used properly like, for example, with University of Minnesota’s web blogs UThink. However, if we ask ourselves about the contribution of web blogs to library user services, then we can come to the conclusion that the web blogs helped some librarians to become well known among their colleagues. The creation of the, so called, biblioblogosphere, was, indeed, a good marketing tool for some librarians, but not an equally effective one for libraries.

2.4 Streaming Media

Seventy five libraries of the sample use this “L2 Service” which is, essentially, an evolution of one of the most important services offered by an academic library; user education in the use of library collections and services. Developments in technology allow academic libraries to enrich texts tutorials with sound and motion in order to create an even more effective learning environment. This service, however, will fulfil a “traditional” purpose, to educate users in the use and utilization of all information systems offered by the library (like with the use of relative technology to create a virtual map – tour in Texas A&M University Libraries).

2.5 Instant Messaging

Relative to Streaming Media’s effect into the development of library user services is the possibility that librarians and users have to exchange, primarily, text messages using computers. This service existed before the “birth” of Web 2.0 or Library 2.0. And in this case we should not consider this a new development of any kind, but, rather, a notable upgrade of a user service through the use of technology, as shown in this study, since 80 academic libraries offer instant messaging applications through their web sites or with the use of software like Yahoo! Messenger.

2.6 RSS Feeds

The level of integration and exploitation of RSS Feeds technology by academic libraries proved to be an important element of this study. 119 academic libraries of the sample use it and it has the highest percentage of use among all “Library 2.0 services”. What would be even more important to discuss is whether RSS Feeds is a development that constitutes an essential intervention and differentiation in the way that user services operate in any academic library, since, this is, actually, a technological breakthrough without any interference by the librarian. Therefore, based on this, we should ask ourselves about the extent of technology integration inside the libraries, and, basically, the limits that define and determine what really is new and innova-

tive. In any case, this service should be considered one that really exploits technology on behalf of library’s user service and, perhaps, as an essential upgrade, or, better, differentiation in the whole “we offer the following new services to our customers” hype expressed by some librarians. And here lies a paradox. While RSS Feeds should be consider a successful technological integration into library services that upgrades its organisational and scientific capabilities, it is, at the same time, among the six “Library 2.0 services” discussed in this paper, the one that requires less, if any, participation on behalf of the librarian.

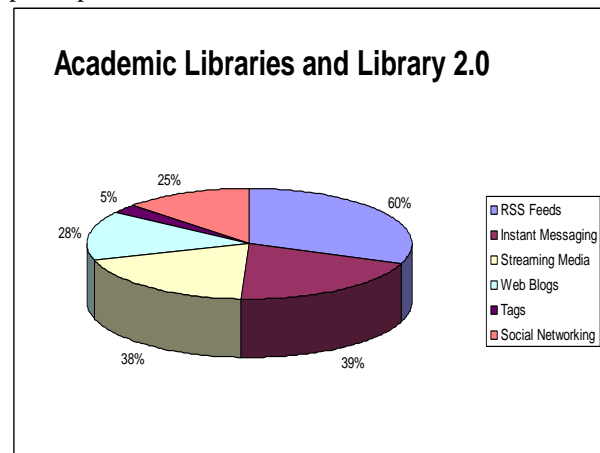


Figure 3. Library 2.0 services in Academic Libraries. Percentages.

3. GREEK ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

In March 2009 all of Greece’s academic libraries² sites were also investigated in order to record the use of the same six services as presented above. The purpose was to document the use of relative services and technologies by Greek academic libraries and to compare it with the data already gathered worldwide. A total of 38 academic libraries were examined.

It is beyond argument that academic libraries in Greece are not “Library 2.0” oriented at this point as shown in Fig. 4. Very few had any services identified in this paper as L2 (11 libraries), while, with the exception of two, none had more that one. Twenty seven libraries do not include any of the tools and services examined in this paper. RSS technology seems to have attracted the interest of some academic libraries, but at the same time, there is no Greek academic library that uses web blogs or tags as a part of its user services. It should be pointed out that there are four Greek academic libraries without a web site.

² The list of Greek Universities and Technological Education Institutes was retrieved from the Greek Ministry of National Education web site: http://yppepth.gr/el_ec_category131.htm.

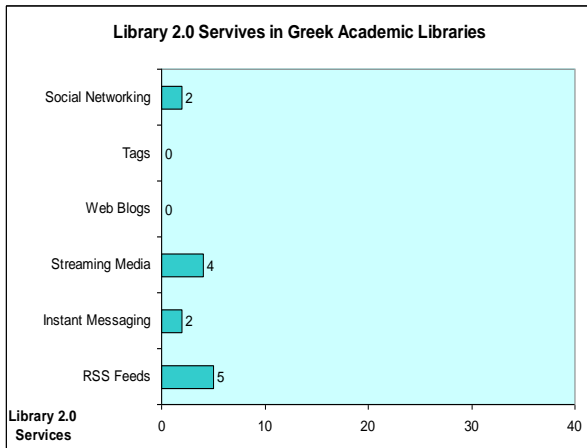


Figure 4. Greek Academic Libraries offering Library 2.0 services.

Fig. 5 compares the use of “L2 Services” in academic libraries worldwide to the ones in Greece. Data from Fig. 1 and 4 were regulated in order to compare the implementation of services such as streaming media and instant messaging into the web sites of Greek academic libraries to the ones from academic libraries around the world. The equation for the regulation is $S_k = S_{orig} / S_{max}$,³ where S_{orig} are the data from Fig. 1 and 4 and S_{max} is 38 for the Greek academic libraries and 200 for the academic libraries around the world.

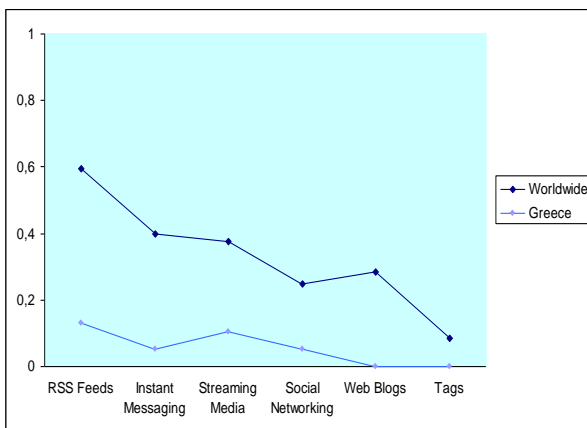


Figure 5. Use of Library 2.0 services in Greek and Worldwide Academic Libraries. A comparison.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The results of the research show that academic libraries do not implement new services without consideration. It appears that they invest more into “new” services that are, actually, “old” and that they understand those services will help them essentially to sufficiently upgrade and expand their user services. It is, undoubtedly, important to continuously explore the

possibilities that new technology, both digital and non-digital, has to offer to a library. However, it is, probably, even more important to adopt a policy that will not allow the unadvised use and implementation of technology that, although, seems to be widely accepted by a large audience throughout the World Wide Web, can not serve the needs of any academic library to provide users with well structured services that will advance Research, Scholarly Communication and Education.

The ongoing discussion about Library 2.0 and its effects on today’s (academic) library should be, perhaps, considered the delayed reaction of a community of colleagues that is constantly losing ground in vocational and scientific level. A community that was, almost exclusively, managing information within various information centers few decades ago. However, it, also, constitutes a base for discussion through which useful ideas can be developed in a reality more harmonised with the technological and social developments of modern information community.

If we were, indeed, adding a number next to a service each time we had a technological or operational upgrade inside a library, then today we would be talking, for example, about “OPAC X.0”, a library tool that has been upgraded many times to offer more services to library users. However, there was an essential difference in the way librarians perceived their work in the previous decades, which was, rather, the result of the absence of “competition” with other professionals involved in the process of information managing of that period. Librarians were not called upon managing technological developments of the size that their colleagues face today, and, more importantly, they didn’t have to face the certainty of many users and computer specialists that machines can replace, sufficiently, the work of any librarian.

Casey and Savastinuk (2007, p. 20) say “the desire to keep up with our customers changing needs led librarians to the Library 2.0 discussion”. However, what it’s described as an innovative action that led to an innovative solution is nothing more than the reaction of a community of professionals that act, work and interact with the rest of the world. A world influenced by multiple exterior social and economical factors. Therefore, instead of trying to understand (or even predict) changes in libraries (and perhaps more in academic libraries), based upon our own perception regarding the organisation of knowledge into collections, it would, perhaps, be better and more efficient if we tried to understand the changes in the structure of human knowledge, as those are recorded through the collections of libraries. Consequently, instead of trying to interpret changes that are natural and, to some point, inevitable – and what is more natural than the need for change in a technological and vocational environment that changes radically – perhaps we would become more effective if we tried to comprehend the changes around us that, inevitably, influence our profession.

Library 2.0 – and hopefully this term will be abandoned soon – is an example, where on the one hand we

³ Robert Baldwin and Martin Cave, *Understanding Regulation: Theory, Strategy and Practice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

are unable to realize that the developments are already on our door step, and, hence, we do not need to “re-invent the wheel”, and on the other, if we do not run into “we try everything new ”wagon but we examine thoroughly and methodically what serves the best our library’s goals then, it is possible that we will have made one more step to evolve user services successfully and, perhaps, a smaller one to secure the survival of our profession.

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