

Interaction: Anything goes 2.0

The phase of social development that we currently find ourselves in has been described in different ways by different people with different perspectives on society. Some talk about 'the post industrial society' or 'the service society' - concepts which are related to an economic-historic perspective. Others talk about 'the communication society', 'the information society' or 'the knowledge society' - labels which indicate that the focus is on the spread of knowledge and information. Another describes the times we live in as 'post modern' referring to ideals of freedom which became predominant in the 1970s supplanting the ideals of security upon which the growth of the Scandinavian welfare state - as we know it today - was based.

I prefer to describe our current society as 'the interactive society'. In my opinion the interactive society is characterized by a desire for participation that involves, on the one hand, citizens, workers and customers and on the other, politicians, decision makers and entrepreneurs - irrespective of whether this occurs in the public or the private sectors. The same ideal informs successful projects such as IKEA where the basic concept is to let the customer do the work, or Toyota in the United States where assembly line workers are invited to participate in the development of future car models. This mutual desire for interaction has proven to be a successful concept for corporations, geographic regions and social groups. It contains a set of values that challenge older ideologies and dictatorial techniques and provoke

existing power structures. Support for a radically interactive society is not to be found in older ideologists such as Karl Marx, even less in new liberals such as Milton Friedman or Henri Lepage. Radical thinking in 2008 is to be found in intellectuals such as Manuel Castells (*The Rise of the Network Society*), Richard Florida (*The Rise of the Creative Class*), dana boyd, Thomas L. Friedman (*The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*), Donna Haraway (gender studies, cybernetics) and Larry Lessig (copyright).

Swedish public libraries, with their roots in popular religious, temperance and labour movements, have often adapted to the needs and desires of their patrons. It was an interactive initiative when, at the beginning of the last century, books were made available for the public on open shelves. The idea that ordinary folk could freely choose their reading material from open shelves was so radical that even today there are libraries that seem to think their main purpose is to protect collections from their owners.

Interaction is simply a division of labour. If existing resources aren't enough to get the job done the way it's always been done, then it's possible to choose between working longer and harder or working smarter. Accordingly, interaction allows producers to relinquish control to consumers. Everyday examples are self-service facilities at supermarkets, petrol stations and restaurants. Mutual trust between

service provider and consumer is, of course, an important factor. The introduction of ATMs in the 1980s meant that bank customers were entrusted with withdrawing those funds they'd deposited with the bank. It took roughly 10 years before public libraries allowed their patrons a similar level of trust regarding loans of library materials.

Interaction 2.0

Another way of explaining the interactive society can be found in the concept of 2.0. The term web 2.0 was used by Tim O'Reilly in 2005 to explain the way in which a new generation of web functions - file sharing, wikis, blogs new applications - differed from earlier web tools.

According to this view web 1.0 solutions are based on one-way communication where experts present their material to an audience they conceive to be expectantly captive. Information and knowledge are spread hierarchically - from the top downwards. Branch standards and licensed computer applications are the norm. It is significant then, that the term 'portal' was used as a metaphor for a source or place of knowledge; knowledge is to be found within the portal. A key is needed to enter the portal; the key might be language, a set of values, or a frame of mind. "You must be able to speak the same language as we do if you want to come in and participate." "We hope that you understand that participating won't be easy, after all, we're the experts - and don't you dare question our competence or expertise!"

... knowledge originates from meetings, conversation, and dialogue – even experts have something to learn



Peter Alsbjer

The concept of web 2.0 encompasses the idea that we humans are each others' teachers; that knowledge originates from meetings, conversation, and dialogue – even experts have something to learn. It's a question of a roots perspective that allows participation and interest for a particular issue or line of development to grow. There's an open invitation that encourages active cooperation and contributions from all participants.

A natural result is an increasing confidence in solutions such as Open Access, Creative Commons and Copyleft rather than the limitations inherent in copyright and licensing. The development of free web applications has followed in the areas of file sharing (YouTube, Flickr) and word processing (Google Documents, Open Office). Further exciting developments can be exemplified with so-called mash-ups where techniques from one area, e.g. a map database, are combined with the contents of another database resulting in an entirely new service, for example The Swedish National Heritage Board's Cultural Heritage catalogue.

A consequence of the web 2.0 perspective is that consumers of services are invited to participate in the production of those services. The accumulated information on Internet searches has a sales value for Google and Yahoo, not to mention the online bookshop Amazon.

Wikipedia is currently the world's most successful knowledge project; it wouldn't work without its collabora-

tors. Del.icio.us and StumbleUpon are examples of how accumulated knowledge about web sites creates a higher common value where, together, ordinary people create keywords as alternatives to expert definitions.

If the metaphor for Knowledge 1.0 was 'a portal', then the metaphor for Knowledge 2.0 is the digital community, net culture or the social web.

Library 2.0

Libraries must relate to web 2.0 in the same way they related to web 1.0. The key is to identify the possibilities that the new techniques offer. Perhaps this might even mean daring to terminate web 1.0 projects that no longer seem relevant. Among these are online reference services that shun genuine interaction, preferring instead to present the library as an omniscient reference expert; or comprehensive link directories that can easily be replaced by del.icio.us; or pretentious library portals that patrons have no use for. For libraries it is a matter of establishing a powerbase in relation to the web 2.0 functions that can contribute to further development. The library catalogue, for example, might be better if it emulated LibraryThing. Perhaps a chat function like MeeBo should be integrated with the library's OPAC. Perhaps the library should create its own wiki or blog or start podcasting. It's simply a matter of relating to public needs and expectations regarding library services and understanding what is possible with the new technology.

To a large extent it's a matter of using social platforms as tools – internally

and externally. Presuming of course that the library does want to be where people are, where citizens are, where patrons are.

A year ago we established an online community for library staff in the County of Örebro. We use Ning for this. There are 250 library employees in the County; around 70 of them are participants in the community. Arenas for upper secondary school librarians and interesting web sites are only two of the groups and sub-groups the community offers members. Ning has functioned as a multi-communication tool where participants can exchange information in others ways than e-mail and static websites.

Most interesting, of course, are the web sites libraries develop for their own patrons. Currently, two interesting examples in Sweden that are worth a closer look are the Umeå Regional Library's web site, minabibliotek.se and the Stockholm City Library's, biblioteket.se.

Umeå's website is the result of long term collaboration between public libraries in six municipalities surrounding the City of Umeå in Västerbotten in Sweden's far north. The project has received the European Public Sector Award and is in the running for the United Nations Public Service Awards 2008.

Both of the above solutions are built on a platform for library web sites, 'Content Studio Library 2.0' developed by Teknikhuset AB. Axiell, a leading



supplier of IT systems and services to libraries has plans to launch their own library platform, Axiell Arena. Both platforms feature interaction between patrons and the library where the focus is on the patron's needs and wishes rather than the library's, even if the level of interaction is subject to the scope of the library's resources and activities. There are functions featuring 'My pages' and discussion forums that allow patrons to meet one another digitally.

The degree to which this type of library web site is attractive for library patrons remains to be seen. If libraries want loyal, active patrons then they have to ensure that their web sites contain interesting material; content that isn't available anywhere else. Users want some sort of reward for taking the time and trouble to log on to a site. This is the library's chance to showcase attractive services such as special databases, invitations to cultural programs, information on new purchases, etc. Failure to offer premium content will almost certainly result in fewer visits from library patrons. Once logged onto minabibliotek.se patrons have direct access to most of the library's databa-

ses; they can award points, assign tags (i.e. suggest key words) to catalogued material, manage loans, discuss and comment library-related issues, give each other advice on new books or authors, etc.

It is essential then that libraries remain well-informed about their patrons' behavioural patterns. A good start can be made by using established social community platforms such as Facebook or MySpace. The advantage for patrons is that they don't need to change places; the library shares the arena with its users; the same conditions applying to both.

The library's resources and activities are adapted to the needs of patrons and limited only by the possibilities of the platform – for example, technical requirements such as access to the library catalogue's API (Application Programming Interface).

Among Scandinavian libraries, the Danish Royal Library and the Danish portal 'bibliotek.dk' have, for example, developed services based on the premise above – in this case Facebook. There is no corresponding service in Swedish libraries at the present mo-

ment, but it's only a question of time – and, perhaps, money

Just as libraries can choose to develop their own arenas or establish themselves on existing social networks, they can also choose to present themselves in socially thematic communities. What could be more natural than library service for members of a foodie community? Or for a network of dog lovers? And of course librarians should be able to contribute book tips and other information on the country's largest youth community. These types of communities are global, i.e. they are accessible from all over the world. This might present a local library with some problems in justifying a decision to participate in thematic communities. There is the real risk of shouldering a national responsibility when the focus should be on local conditions. At present there is nothing in the Swedish library structure that can help with managing this type of problem. Perhaps this is the kind of task that might revitalise the national 'Ask the library' service.

It isn't unreasonable to believe that further individualisation is the next

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step in the development of web applications. Platforms like Netvibes, Pageflakes, iGoogle and the Swedish site Superstart contain elements that can be developed into tools for libraries. Interesting representatives of such developments are the Dublin City Library which uses Pageflakes as a platform for site visitors and the Christchurch City Library in New Zealand which has created a number of widgets for, among other things, literature tips as well as blogs for Netvibes users.

The Future 2.0

A glance in the crystal ball tells us that mobile services will be a strong contender for future development. The alternative – to follow established platforms like Facebook and MySpace – could prove to be a wise strategy when libraries develop their social webs for mobile phones. Technical solutions and upgrades occur centrally and simultaneously on a global level. Solutions are based on applications that are progressively standardised. Developing functions for mobile phones in library webs like 'minabibliotek.se' or Axiell's 'Arena' can certainly be done, but someone has to pay the cost of developing these functions.

One can only speculate as to what will happen with social platforms when they meet the semantic web. There are a few interesting experiments taking place with semantic search engines like Rollyo or Oamos, but things really start to get exciting with projects like Jonathan Harris' and Sep Kamvar's project

'We Feel Fine'. A project that affects me and awakens my curiosity. How can all the experiences, feelings and meetings that occur in libraries and virtually on libraries' web sites be integrated in a form that is as beautiful as it is exciting?

How can library patrons and library staff work together on an equal basis to create mutual experiences and reciprocal learning situations?

The answers lie in the ability of library staff to make the mental shift from being answering machines to becoming guides. The answers lie with library directors who place greater store on the staffs' social competence, their entrepreneurial skills, their creativity and playfulness rather than their cataloguing ability. The answers to these questions involve a shift in power where libraries release their hold on knowledge, information and experience – without this necessarily being a negative or threatening occurrence; these are things that don't disappear when they're divided.

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Link to url.addresses: See www.splq.info

Recommended reading

The Interaction Society: *Practice, Theories and Supportive Technologies*.

Manuel Castells: *The Information Age. Economy, Society and Culture*.

Manuel Castells: *The Internet Galaxy – Reflections on the Internet, Business and Society*.

Richard Florida: *The Rise of the Creative Class*.

Howard Rheingold: *Smart Mobs*.

Thoms L Friedman: *The World is Flat*.

Michael E. Casey and Laura C. Savastinuk: *Library 2.0*.

Meredith Farkas: *Social software in libraries*.