Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Academic Library Websites Show Heavy Use of Web 2.0 Applications

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Abstract

Objective – To explore Web 2.0 application use in academic libraries through determining: Web 2.0 applications used, the purpose of using these applications, and how the use of Web 2.0 is changing.

Design – Exploratory survey of academic library websites using content analysis of websites, blogs, and social networking service platforms.

Setting – Websites of academic libraries in the United States, blog platforms, and social networking services.

Subjects – 100 academic libraries.

Methods – The researchers based their selection of academic library websites on the *US News & World Report's* 2013 list of the top 100 best colleges in the United States. The authors created a checklist to determine which Web 2.0 technologies were used by the academic libraries on their websites and for what purposes. The researchers searched for Web 2.0 applications on the main page and one subpage down from the main page. The researchers also used keyword searches on the library's website to find Web 2.0 applications and searched blog platforms and social networking sites.

Main Results – The authors found that Facebook and Twitter were the most popular Web 2.0 applications and that all of the libraries analyzed used social networking services. Blogs were the second most popular Web 2.0 tool at 99% participation rate, followed closely by RSS (97%) and instant messaging (91%). Libraries used these Web 2.0 tools for information sharing including: outreach, promotion, providing online reference services, subject guides, tutorials, highlighting resources, and posting announcements.

Conclusion – The academic libraries analyzed in this study use Web 2.0 applications to a much greater extent than previous research had shown. The researchers expect to see increased use of Web 2.0 applications by academic libraries in the coming years. They suggest that future research focus on Web 2.0 use by historically black colleges in the United States and on collaboration between academic libraries and other academic units when offering Web 2.0 services.

Commentary

As Web 2.0 and social networking tools become more commonly used in libraries, more studies are being published on the trends of usage and attitudes surrounding these tools (Chu & Du, 2013; Del Bosque, Leif, & Skarl, 2012). This study provides an overview of Web 2.0 and social networking usage in academic libraries, similar to other contemporary studies (Chu & Du, 2012), and could be used as a basis for comparative studies of Web 2.0 use in academic libraries in other countries and best practices for community engagement through Web 2.0 tools.

Overall the study's methodology is clearly outlined, but more details about how the checkpoints were constructed and details about which blog platforms were searched would allow easier replication of the study and assessment of the results' reliability. The study is valid according to the EBLIP Critical

Appraisal Checklist by Glynn (2006) in part because it provides information on the sample population and the checklist used to evaluate Web 2.0 usage. However, more information about how the researchers ensured reliability in the content analysis of the websites – for example, the resolution of inter-rater disputes and greater clarity on the procedure for browsing the libraries' websites – would strengthen the article.

The study's design allowed it to answer two out of the three research questions posed, namely of which Web 2.0 applications are in use and how the academic libraries are using them. However, information about the third research question – the direction in which Web 2.0 use by libraries is developing – remained largely undiscussed. Additional research is needed to answer this question through a longitudinal comparison of libraries' use of Web 2.0 applications, something the authors do not suggest as an avenue for future research.

Furthermore, it would be of great value to undertake a study that looks into whether the use of Web 2.0 and social media is actually engaging users in order to show that libraries' online presences are indeed social and dialogical in nature. Studies on the effectiveness of Web 2.0 would answer the authors' underlying assumptions that use of Web 2.0 by academic libraries is effective, which this study does not have data to support.

As libraries increase their use of Web 2.0 tools, studies investigating the use and effectiveness of such tools become increasingly important. This study provides an overview that may be useful for academic librarians determining the best Web 2.0 tools for their particular needs. As research continues to increase on Web 2.0 and social networking tools, best practices should emerge that will further assist librarians in employing the best tools for engaging their users online.

References

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