

New modes of information behavior emerging from the social web

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Background

Engaging in interactive and social events on the Web has become very common practice. Activities such as blogging, posting web pages, instant messaging, engaging in e-commerce, chatting online etc. all comprise elements of personal information production processes. These are separate activities, yet at the same time they are integrated into our daily lives (Haythornthwaite and Hagar 2005, p. 311). Much is said about the social and interactive activities on the Web (Miller 2005; O'Reilly 2005; Maness 2006; Miller 2006), but little is known about their effects on individuals, work settings, and society on the whole. While events on the Web are integrated more and more into everyday life and work, it is obvious that there is a growing need for social technology competencies. Interactivity and participation are key elements in the social web (Maness 2006; Holmberg, Huvila et al. 2009, to appear). This means that the user perspective needs to be expanded to include the user as a part of the knowledge production process. The amount of available information requires instant relevance judgments by users and an ability to adapt into social networks on the Web. At the same time, issues concerning the motivations for engagement, as well as how to foster participation, remove barriers, and cultivate motivation are underlined. All of this also demands skills in evaluation techniques so that individuals may understand and reflect on the perceived importance of links and networks.

Structure of the panel

In this panel we will discuss new skills needed by the citizens and organizations of the information society, as well as by information professionals and those working in libraries. First, common questions are addressed focusing the challenges in developing information service, literacy and the information profession in the context of social computing and web 2.0. Secondly, through the panel presentations, we develop a deeper understanding of new modes of information behavior that are emerging from the social web where both user and information producer perspectives are considered. The panel members will focus on a number of environments and situations where particular challenges have been studied in greater detail: (1) information services and corporate organizations; (2) libraries; and (3) academic settings. In the final discussion the panelists and the audience will have a chance to develop the conclusions and prospects for future research together. The discussion is catalyzed by a set of questions (see Conclusions) emerging from the presentations.

Panel presentations

Information Service 2.0 / Isto Huvila

The emphasis on the role of users as participants (user-participants), and communities and social networks as central sources of information, distinguishes the social web from traditional channels of information delivery and information-related services (Casey and Savastinuk 2006; Maness 2006; Holmberg, Huvila et al. 2009, to appear). The need for comprehensive theoretical and empirical understanding of change in both (1) information behavior, and (2) public expectations on information-related services, is clear from a library and information perspective (Crawford 2006; Maness 2006). This panel contribution presents findings of an empirical study conducted in 2008. It covers the implications of the notion of a social web, and the availability of social web services to information services, as expected and required by user-participants. The study has developed the notion of “information service 2.0”, i.e. the information services needed and delivered in the context of the social web, to discuss these implications.

Opportunity and risk in social computing environments / Hazel Hall

The business environment is currently in a state of rapid evolution with regards to information infrastructures, not least due to heightened awareness of, and interest in, social computing tools. Enthusiasts recognize the potential of applications such as wikis, blogs, social networking, and microblogging, particularly in the context of how they can improve information and knowledge sharing for collaborative work purposes. However, previous studies have shown that ready availability of a technology tool does not necessarily lead to its adoption. Furthermore, even in cases where there is tool uptake, it cannot be guaranteed that actual deployment will match with the expectations of those who managed its introduction into the corporate environment. The emphasis on user-generated content, created by decentralized, self-managed communities, that is readily disseminated across unbounded networks, presents both opportunity and risk to organizations. These relate to specific issues such as collaborative work practice, information management and information security, as well as wider corporate concerns such as general productivity, organizational culture and employee empowerment. This panel contribution will discuss the findings of a UK study completed in 2008 that set out to establish the main risks and opportunities of the adoption of social computing tools within organizations for collaborative

work purposes as perceived by information and knowledge management professionals. A number of training needs will be identified, ranging from the requirement for information professionals to become familiar with social computing tools at a basic introductory level, to provision that will allow them to play an active role in influencing how social computing tools are implemented into the corporate setting.

Mapping trends and opinions in library blog space / Outi Nivakoski & Maria Kronqvist-Berg

A public librarian - Michael Casey - is said to have coined the term "Library 2.0" on his blog in 2005. Library professionals have often been the forerunners when it comes to seeing the possibilities of new technology. Public libraries and social web technologies have several common ideals, for example openness, participation and community (Melchionda 2007; Rutherford 2008). Weblogs, or blogs, are amongst the most well-known and highly-regarded social computing tools (O'Reilly 2005; Rutherford 2008). They are widely used also in libraries, where they can be used for building interaction and participation between different actors. For professionals of the library field, blogs are an effective means for keeping up with current communication (Powers 2008). Blogging librarians have opened up professional discussion making it more immediate and international than was possible in the past (Farkas 2007). It is, however, still unclear what motivates the different actors to engage in Library 2.0 activities and what kind of skills, resources and motivations are needed to develop and maintain Library 2.0 services. These issues will be studied in a Finnish context to gain a holistic view of Library 2.0. Further, the interactivity and participation of librarians in professional communication will be studied by analyzing the Finnish blogspace. The main focus of this panel contribution is on the nature of the professionally focused library blogspace as an information environment – what kind of information it provides and who does it have effect on. These two perspectives – one seeing Library 2.0 as an interplay of various actors, one concentrating on the professional networks around a social computing tool – build an understanding of the new kinds of activities that are emerging in the library field. A comprehensive picture of the interactivity between library professionals, social web technologies and users in Library 2.0 is necessary for developing libraries in the 21st century.

Incredible resources? The role of user-generated web sites in a high school setting / Helena Francke

Freely available, easy-to-use technology encourages users to become producers with access to a world-wide audience. At much the same time, people are required to search among a variety of information types that is wider than before. This brings the sense of information overload to a new order of magnitude. Authorship is not always clearly established in user-generated resources. Indeed, anonymous producers and authors are often the rule, rather than the exception. Author authority is difficult to determine. These anonymous resources pose challenges with regards to the traditional criteria for credibility assessment. When web-based resources become the first (and primary) source of information for many children (Alexandersson and Limberg 2004), these challenges need to be taken into consideration. One reaction is to forbid the use of these resources in school work altogether. Another is to try to tackle the question of when the resources may be useful and when they are not. This presentation will explore how credibility problems are addressed by pupils, librarians, and teachers in a high school setting with regards to the use of online user-generated content. It is based on the analysis of data collected in ethnographic studies of two classes, and through focus groups discussions with librarians and teachers. The issue is addressed from the perspective of potential new challenges to information literacy in schools, in particular the role of the school library in the evolving information landscape.

Change in scholarly communication: implications of Web 2.0 in the context of research dissemination / Gunilla Widén-Wulff

Web 2.0 is believed to have implications for the way research collaboration will be conducted across various communities, groups, discourses and regimes in the academic context. Web 2.0 authoring is creative, open, user-friendly and interactive, and scholarly communication is no longer a linear and hierarchical process with the notion of cumulating knowledge; rather it is about circularity and evolution. Through open source techniques a new form of writing practice is emerging (Jones 2008). Social software also affects social knowledge, and Web 2.0 tools that are simple to use enable groups to self organize, and interact more closely than before (Schiltz, Truyen and Coppens 2007; Gray, Thompson et al.

2008). This development has implications for university libraries as integrated parts of research work and scholarly communication. Already digital libraries have shortened the distance between author and reader as they facilitate direct involvement in the dissemination of information (Fox and Urs 2002). The development of Web 2.0-based services that involve users in the production of content (Benson and Favini 2006; Bearman 2007; Coombs 2007), will alter the whole picture of scholarly communication further. This panel contribution explores the effects of new Web 2.0 tools on researchers' scholarly communication, and how university libraries should develop their services to match new ways of information dissemination. The study provides an understanding of the extent to which Finnish academics use Web 2.0 techniques, and how this affects scholarly communication. In addition the study explores users' understanding of the quality of collectively-generated information, and findings on this theme will also form part of the presentation.

Conclusions

The panel has a common goal which is to address new modes of information behaviour in different information professional contexts focusing the effects of social technologies in the interactive web. At the same time it is important to remember that the change process is not straight forward and we need to underline what is really changing and what is only a trend. The Web 2.0 and Library 2.0 discussion has its advocates as well as its opponents. What are really the core aspects of the changing information behaviour? How much do the social technologies affect information behaviour in the end? And how can information studies contribute to develop the understanding of the social web and its effects? These kinds of questions will be discussed by the panel in interaction with the audience.

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