

Transforming Reference

Online tools are reinventing reference work

by Leslie Burger

I recently attended the Ontario Library Association Super Conference, January 31–February 3, in Toronto, Canada, where I had the luxury of attending a number of conference programs—not something I often get to do these days. The conference theme, “Solutions in a Changing Landscape,” offered me a chance to catch up on the many Web 2.0 topics I’ve missed at recent ALA conferences.

I try to keep up with Web 2.0 activities but find I lack the time to be “social.” As an irregular blogger, I have occasionally posted photos on Flickr, joined Facebook so that I could view photos posted by my kids, used Wikipedia to find information, checked out the social-bookmarks manager del.icio.us, spent time within the online society Second Life, and used Skype Chat on a regular basis. I have to admit that being of a “certain age,” it still makes me just a little uncomfortable to have complete strangers sending messages to me or seeking to befriend me when I have no idea who they are.

It wasn't until I listened to Yahoo's Tomi Poutanen speak about the future of search—specifically Yahoo Answers—that I finally understood the power of Web 2.0 and how it is changing our world. Yahoo Answers and other answer sites use social networking software to allow anyone to

respond to someone's question. The person who is seeking information posts his or her question, such as “Where can I get the best hot chocolate in Paris?” and within minutes you receive answers from “experts” around the globe.

There is no way to determine if the information is accurate, reliable, or authoritative but people seem not to care. It's the social networking that's most important. Participants pride themselves on becoming experts based on the number of questions they answer and a ranking system. If you look at the question list, you soon realize that it runs the gamut of every topic we've ever been asked at our reference desks: How do lawyers choose jurors? What makes a tire bulge? How do you get rid of ants in a kitchen? In its first year Yahoo Answers had more than 50 million questions.

As I thought about Yahoo Answers and other sites like Flickr and Wikipedia, I finally understood their utility. These days everyone can be an information expert. No longer is information the precious commodity of a few; it is now an open commodity freely available for the asking.



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By using Web 2.0 software, people are sharing information, answering each other's questions with amazing speed, and are cataloging and finding information by creating tags with terms they can easily understand. I was exhilarated and excited when I thought of the possibilities that Yahoo Answers and other Web 2.0 sites hold for transforming libraries.

No more reinventing reference. The people have reinvented it for us. It is as simple as us going to where the people are. What if instead of waiting for people to come to our library portals or virtual reference sites where they must “fit” into our world, we venture into their world and answer questions where they are? A scarier, uncataloged place for sure, but one where the gratification of helping someone in need is immediate. If every librarian in the world worked a two-hour shift on an answer portal and we really had experts answering 50 million questions each year, what an amazing world it would be. Think about it. ■

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