BITS & BYTES
Online communities

John Maxymuk

Robson Library, Rutgers University, Camden, New Jersey, USA

Abstract

Purpose – This paper seeks to explore how new communication technologies could be used in a library.

Design/methodology/approach – Discusses the implications of using podcasts, blogs, and wikis in a library environment.

Findings – While the author remains skeptical of the widespread application of podcasts and vodcasts for most libraries due to the dry nature of the content generally on offer, there are exceptions with special collections, music and art libraries especially. Blogs and wikis present more potential to most libraries in disseminating the type of information and assistance that libraries tend to provide.

Originality/value – The article looks at how libraries could implement the use of podcasts, blogs, and wikis.

Keywords Libraries, Communication technologies

Paper type Viewpoint

My daughter pays an extra fee each month on her cellular phone bill to be able to view commercial music videos and professional sports highlights on the minuscule screen of her smartphone. I do not understand why, but the service is not really being marketed to me, and I am not paying for it so one would think that I do not need to care.

However, on another level, it is important to take note of such widespread developments because they represent the interests, needs and styles of potential library users. Libraries, to some extent, need to fit into the contemporary world if we are to thrive. In the past decades, we have moved beyond purely print collections to include visual, audio and online media and now have to continue to evolve to incorporate interactive online community media that may combine print, video, sound and the web.

Podcasting

A podcast is a multimedia file that a user downloads to listen and/or view at his convenience. It may be solely audio, such as a talk radio broadcast, or it may include video as well, such as the televised programs of major news organizations. These video podcasts are sometimes referred to as vodcasts. A user may download podcasts by searching for them via any of several podcast search engines such as Singing Fish (http://search.singingfish.com/sfw/home.jsp), Rocket Info (www.rocketnews.com/info/portal.jsp) and Podscope (www.podscope.com/). Singing Fish and Rocketinfo, search assigned metadata terms, but Podscope searches the actual words spoken in the podcasts. A user may also use podcatcher software to subscribe to the feeds of specific podcast sites and have the software automatically download new content as it is posted, but if you are not careful, you may end up with more podcasts downloaded than you have to time to check them out.

Academic libraries have used podcasting to achieve various ends. Arizona State University Libraries has a web page for their library channel of podcasts (www.asu. edu/lib/librarychannel/). These programs attempt to meet the needs of the surrounding community and include audio tours of the library, interviews with curators of different special collections and exhibits and streaming video vodcasts of local interest such as the 2006 Navajo presidential debate. Western Kentucky University Libraries (www. wku.edu/Library/podcast/index.html) has two podcast lecture series tied to their local community. One is called Faraway Places and features lectures by nearby scholars who are doing research in foreign countries. The other series features authors, historians and entrepreneurs speaking about Kentucky politics, history, culture and business.

Public libraries have tried similar approaches. Lansing Public Library in Illinois (www.lansing.lib.il.us/podcast.htm) offers its adult, teen, youth and information technology programs as podcasts. The Cheshire (Connecticut) Public Library Podcast (www.cheshirelib.org/teens/cplpodcast.htm) is a regular magazine aimed at adolescent culture and featuring teen writers, musicians, reviewers and commentators that attempts to reach out to the library's youthful patrons.

The main podcasting problem for libraries is how to make the podcasts interesting. So much of what public and academic libraries offer may be necessary, but it is not exactly exciting listening. Audio tours and bibliographic instruction sessions are more likely to be used by patrons desperately trying to cure insomnia than to find information. Libraries that already have an interesting lecture series have an advantage in programming. Special libraries in particular would seem to be ideally suited for this type of series. For example, the Pritzker Military Library (www. pritzkermilitarylibrary.org/podcasts/index.jsp) in Chicago offers lectures by authors, historians, journalists and soldiers who provide unique perspectives on history and military affairs.

Podcasting is often referred to as "push" technology; in other words, the information publisher is pushing the content directly to the user. A more grassroots application of streaming video that has become extremely popular over the past year or two is the YouTube site (www.youtube.com/) where amateur filmmakers upload original videos covering all types of human experience. There are several indexed with the keyword "library," but most of these seem to be aimless home movies of teenagers goofing off in the library. There are also videos produced by libraries, but these tend to be either boring and tendentious or painful unsuccessful attempts to be hip and clever. This site does not seem to be of much value for libraries.

Text-driven online media

Two years ago I devoted a column to blogging and libraries. Since then blogs have become more prevalent on library sites, not to mention the unofficial private blogs of librarians that may or may not be related to librarianship. It seems that librarians who are in the forefront of podcasting also maintain blogs, and blogs are a no brainer for a library's website. They are a quick and easy way to publish pointed information to a wide audience and to allow the readership to respond effortlessly to the postings. A

good source to locate library blogs is Darlene Fichter's Finding Library Weblogs page (http://library2.usask.ca/ ~ fichter/weblog/library_weblogs.html).

Another textual web platform that more and more libraries are using to spread content online is the Wiki. Wiki is a type of web software that permits users to add, remove, and change an informational page's content. The aim of a wiki site is collaborative authorship amongst a presumably knowledgeable broad audience. The most well known wiki is the online encyclopedia, Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page), that has been the subject of several studies comparing its error rates to those of commercially-produced encyclopedias. Some librarians view the wiki as an excellent tool to collaborate with faculty and others to create truly useful research portals.

Perhaps the best example of a library using a wiki as a research portal is the Biz Wiki at Ohio University (www.library.ohiou.edu/subjects/bizwiki/index.php/Main_Page). In the help section, Biz Wiki creator Chad Boehninger states that he views this as an "alternative form of delivery of library information" that essentially expands and reconfigures his traditional library pathfinders on business topics. Similarly, the St Joseph County Public Library in Indiana has arranged its existing subject guides into a wiki (www.libraryforlife.org/subjectguides/index.php/Main_Page). Butler University has set up a wiki (www.seedwiki.com/wiki/butler_wikiref/) to review the print and online reference resources available at Butler. It also allows Butler users to add comments about any of the resources listed, making it a collaborative effort of the entire Butler University online community.

Wikis can also be useful for librarians collaborating with other librarians. The Library Success wiki (www.libsuccess.org/index.php?title = Main_Page) is devoted to best practices in librarianship. Its articles are arranged in such categories as management and leadership, readers' advisory, reference services and technology. The LISWiki (http://liswiki.org/wiki/Main_Page) is set up to be the Wikipedia equivalent for library science. It's an ongoing online project that may someday prove to be worthwhile.

Another library use of wikis is for library staff. The University of Minnesota has set up its library staff page as a wiki (http://wiki.lib.umn.edu/) with information on the library's organization, budget, facilities, personnel and more. The University of Connecticut created a wiki (http://wiki.lib.uconn.edu/wiki/Main_Page) to host its in-house documentation. Finally, Antioch University New England has set up a wiki (www.seedwiki.com/wiki/antioch_university_new_england_library_staff_training_and_support_wiki/) to train its staff on front desk policies and procedures with articles covering how to do all sorts of front desk activities. All these sites allow users to update and edit wiki content swiftly and simply.

Still another foray into user-generated content is the Swivel site (www.swivel.com/). Swivel lets users upload data that displays in graphic formats. As with Youtube, anyone can add to this resource. As with Wikipedia, the reliability of the information has to be questioned since it is not professionally edited. Like both of those resources, however, it is an interesting place to browse from time to time.

While I remain skeptical of the widespread application of podcasts and vodcasts for most libraries due to the dry nature of the content we generally have to offer, there are

exceptions with special collections, music and art libraries especially. Blogs and wikis present more potential to most libraries in disseminating the type of information and assistance that libraries tend to provide. These two formats also incorporate user feedback and even editing in ways that actually offer the prospect of improving the message originally delivered and engaging our patrons into an online community.

Corresponding author
John Maxymuk can be contacted at: maxymuk@camden.rutgers.edu