

2.0 Watch

DISPATCHES FROM THE FRONT LINES OF WEB 2.0

A SIP FROM THE FIREHOSE

Strategies for Keeping Up with Technology

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I received my first email message from an *Access* reader a couple of months ago. Not only was it an exciting and momentous occasion for me (fan mail!), it also reminded me of an on-going issue with which we all struggle. My reader, let's call him Harrison, admitted to being interested in technology and all things 2.0, but lamented the fact that he just did not have enough time to keep up with all the new tools, tech, and terminology.

"Information overload" is certainly not a 2.0 problem and Harrison is hardly alone. I'd guess that very few of us feel that we have enough time to consume all the information we need to make us truly informed citizens. So, how do we keep up? Let's talk strategies.

PLAYING CATCH-UP

The world of 2.0 technologies is fast-paced and ever-changing. One of my favourite tools for getting up to speed on new technologies is the Explanations in Plain English series of short videos created by Common Craft (commoncraft.com). Lee and Sachi LeFever use low-tech tools (a whiteboard, paper, and markers) to explain complex technologies in a matter of minutes, providing an excellent introduction to how the tool works and the kind of impact it is having on the current web landscape. Recent videos include Video Sharing in Plain English and Twitter in Plain English.

Another favourite for getting up to speed on emerging technologies is the *7 Things You Should Know About...* series published by Educause (educause.edu/ELI/ELIResources/7ThingsYouShouldKnowAbout/7495). As a network whose mission is to promote the smart use of technology in higher education, Educause tends to focus on the practicalities of new technologies and their implications for higher education.

IT'S ALL ABOUT FILTERING

Blogs began their lives as link-heavy information-filtering mechanisms – early bloggers used the format to present

quick posts with annotated links to web content. If you're reading blogs these days, you already know that the format has evolved since those early days, and bloggers now use the tool for so much more than just annotated links. However, blogs are still excellent filtering mechanisms. There are literally thousands of library-related blogs out there (liswiki.org/wiki/Weblogs) and while I wouldn't recommend reading them all, reading a few blogs on topics you're interested in can provide you with a reasonably comprehensive view of those topics, filtered by bloggers you trust. And for a filtered view of the wider web, sites like Digg (digg.com) and Reddit (reddit.com) can provide a "sip from the fire hose" without being completely overwhelming.

STEPPING OUT ON THE BLEEDING EDGE

Libraries do a reasonable job of adopting and keeping up with emerging technology, but I don't think it's unreasonable to suggest that we're not on the bleeding edge. While some might argue that we probably shouldn't be on the bleeding edge with technology adoption (preferring tested technologies over experimental ones), I do think that it's important that we scan the horizon and do some futurecasting so that we're not caught off guard. Happily, for us, there are a number of approachable resources we can turn to to get a glimpse of "what's next."

One of my favourite strategies is following technology and "idea" conferences online. TED conferences, for example, gather thought leaders from all industries and backgrounds to speak about and discuss "ideas worth spreading" (their tagline). Attending a TED conference would be out of the realm of possibility for most of us, but since all talks are recorded and archived online (ted.com), we still have ample opportunity to be inspired by these thought leaders. Similarly, the Web 2.0 Expo/Summit brings technology leaders together and makes a lot of the conference coverage freely available online (web2expo.com). Additionally, I've recently taken to spending a few minutes a week browsing the slideshows on Slideshare

(slideshare.net), which is an online network that allows you to share your presentation slides (much like Flickr allows you to share your photographs). A quick glance through Slideshare reveals that library conferences are well covered on the site, as are other technology conferences, camps, and unconferences. While we might not be able to physically attend these gatherings, we're lucky to have the opportunity to virtually engage with the content.

THE TIME PROBLEM

You've probably heard about the 15-minute strategy: carve out just 15 minutes a day to read an article, check your RSS feeds, or read a blog post or two. 15 minutes are not an enormous time burden and might be just enough to learn about a new tool, technology, or issue pertinent to libraries/librarianship. If I could offer one more strategy it would be this: talk to your colleagues. Ask them what they've read or learned about recently. It's a simple, low-tech solution, but one that almost always guarantees that you'll learn something new yourself.

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