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M IS FOR MEETING PLACES: THE ARTS LIBRARIES SOCIETY OF AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND BUILDS A VIRTUAL WEB 2.0 'CLUBHOUSE'

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ABSTRACT

Library and information professionals are familiar with the social networking technologies referred to collectively as "Web 2.0". Recent discussion in library and information management conferences, symposia and blogs has centred on how Web 2.0 tools are being used to maximise client services and enhance the user experience. What is not so frequently discussed is how they can be used to develop and strengthen professional networks and facilitate knowledge sharing within the industry itself.

In this paper, we show how Web 2.0 technologies can make it possible for a small, specialist and geographically distributed group to 'punch above its weight'.

Arlis/ANZ (the Arts Libraries Society - Australia and New Zealand) is a small association of arts information professionals. We have embraced a strategic vision to grow, develop and support our member community by taking advantage of Web 2.0 technologies to build a "virtual clubhouse". This "virtual clubhouse" is a Web 2.0 meeting place where conversations occur, knowledge is created and shared, and relationships built and strengthened despite geographical distance.

The focus was a redesign of the society's web presence, but also incorporated experimental and collaborative use of freely available Web 2.0 tools such as social tagging sites, social networking communities and collaborative authoring software. Although still in its infancy, this Web 2.0-driven initiative enables us to capitalise on our unique strength as acknowledged experts in Arts librarianship, and to share this wonderful asset not only amongst the current generations of Arlis/ANZ members, but amongst succeeding generations of arts information professionals.

BODY OF PAPER

Introduction

Web 2.0 - everyone's doing it. We are by now quite familiar with the social networking technologies collectively referred to as Web 2.0. While there is debate and contention around the term and how it is being used, that debate is not going to be part of this paper. Our particular use and understanding of the term will be defined when we discuss what we've done with the inherent technologies. And what they've done for us.

Libraries are doing it for their clients; and they're talking about it; but in the library and information management literature most of the discussion has focussed on what library professionals can do for users with Web 2.0 tools. There is a lot of discussion about how Web 2.0 tools are being used to maximise services, enhance the user experience and engage client groups. What is not so frequently discussed is how Web 2.0 can be used to develop and strengthen professional networks and facilitate knowledge sharing within the industry itself. A quick scan through the same literature yields little about how the profession as a group is using social networking to, well, socially network! Social networks are essential to organisations (Smith and McKeen 2007), in terms of growth, communication, learning and responsiveness to change. Librarians are excellent social networkers, and we are keen on Web 2.0. So what can library professionals do for each other with Web 2.0 tools?

In this paper, we look at the possibilities packed into that ubiquitous term and ask what they mean for the future of a voluntary society. We show how Web 2.0 technologies offer the possibility for Arlis/ANZ - a small, specialist and geographically distributed group of Arts information professionals - to harness the power of its crowd of members. Our continuing vision is that the whole will become greater than the sum of its parts, and that through collaboration, communication, and knowledge creation, our community will self-strengthen and our society continue to thrive.

In 2007, that vision took the form of website re-development project. As the website project settles, we continue to live the dream, and have embraced an online existence of perpetual beta. But we are pragmatists too, and need to know whether our vision is working and just exactly how we can measure our success.

Who we are: The Art Libraries Society - Australia and New Zealand (Arlis/ANZ)

To envision a future for the 'virtual' Arlis/ANZ, we need to know who we are now. The Arts Libraries Society of Australia and New Zealand (Arlis/ANZ) is a dynamic organisation for information professionals working with an arts specialisation. We've been around since 1975, promoting arts librarianship and working with other national and international organisations in the field. Our members are architecture, art, film, and

design librarians; visual resources professionals; artists, curators, educators, publishers, booksellers - essentially anyone with a professional interest in arts information management. The society acts as a forum for the exchange of information and expertise, and represents substantial specialist knowledge. We have a history of collaboration and knowledge-sharing and a commitment to facilitating connection between arts information workers. While much has changed since 1975, one thing has not changed: the tyranny of distance.

The society represents both Australia and New Zealand, and our members are widely distributed - from Auckland to Perth, Darwin to Hobart. Some State Chapters are made up of only one or two people. Many members have never met colleagues outside of their own States and this physical dis-connection takes its toll. It affects our ability to effectively realise those goals of collaboration, knowledge sharing and connection. The issue becomes about who we are and why we exist as a society. "If keeping track of members is core to what associations do, so is providing them the means to interact, to communicate, to learn, and to grow together" (Henry and Magnuson 2007). This is an issue not only for our existing membership but it is also a challenge to the society's ability to engage with and inspire the next generation of arts information professionals. If we don't engage the next generation of Arlis/ANZ members, then we have no society.

On our minds, then, is the very real issue of ensuring the survival of a society which we feel has much to offer. Part of that process is acknowledging the generational expectations regarding the online presence of Arlis/ANZ. The demographics of future Arlis/ANZ members are changing, and the technological times, they are a-changing too. Our younger members and our members of the future will want a sense of Community from Arlis/ANZ, not just Society. Web 2.0 technologies will help us respond to that desire. (Beatty 2007).

So, with these changes are coming opportunities. Arlis/ANZ is embracing a strategic vision to grow, engage and support our member community, both present and future, by building a "virtual clubhouse". The physical clubhouse of 1975 becomes the "virtual clubhouse" of Web 2.0.

A vision for Arlis/ANZ - the "virtual clubhouse" idea begins to form

Our vision for a "virtual clubhouse" is a Web 2.0 meeting place where conversations occur, knowledge is created and shared, and relationships built and strengthened. The site would remove barriers to participation in society activities, and show dynamic evidence of members' activity (Lankes 2007). Our vision was for a virtual society where geographical distance was cut down to size and where isolation was replaced by names, faces, stories and voices. We envisioned a virtual space where Society was synonymous with Community. However, every vision has to start somewhere, and the first generation Arlis/ANZ website was set up with different goals in mind.

The original Arlis/ANZ website was launched in 2004, an eon ago in internet geology. It was a traditional, static site that performed a basic function but technology and our member's needs had moved on. The site focused on providing information, and recording and publicising some of the society's activities. This information, however, did not represent much of the actual dynamic activity of society members, and had begun to give an impression of a quiet and inactive society. It was time to update.

The impetus for our redevelopment came from two major forces: the need to plan and provide for the future of the society, and the need to provide the space and tools for what members want to do now. Members had begun to experiment with free tools such as wikis, collaborative documents, blogs and image sharing sites. For example, wikis were being used to collaborate on conference planning, to organise Chapter meetings and publish meeting minutes and to advertise social and professional development events. Arlis/ANZ Executive members used Google Docs to collaborate on authoring formal documents such as policies and external correspondence and the society's President began blogging to keep in touch with members, communicate society activities and to give the society a more dynamic, conversational 'voice'. Sometimes the sites of these extra-curricular activities were linked from the official site, but mostly not. And there was no technical option to integrate these types of tools into the existing site whatsoever.

While using free, distributed Web 2.0 tools was convenient and easy, this diffusion of our activity was working against us. The strength of our society is in collaboration and networking and Web 2.0 helps us remove the geographic distance between our members (Habib 2006). But our future viability lies in building Community, and the sense of virtual community that was growing was splintering away from the central idea of Arlis/ANZ as a society. It was important that the official Arlis/ANZ website should be the central enabling mechanism for society activity. We certainly needed Web 2.0, but gathered and integrated into Arlis/ANZ space, not scattered all over cyberspace.

So the need to incorporate this technology into a re-invigorated website was clear.

Our decision to make the new website a collaborative, community space, represented a major shift from using the website as marketing tool and information repository to making it a central part of a knowledge management and member value strategy. When the Web Team began brainstorming ideas, the many possibilities offered such a wealth of collaborative and community building potential that we started referring to the emerging strategic vision as "Arlis/ANZ 2.0," and presented it to members through blog and discussion list posts and more thoroughly, an article in the association's journal (McKeon, Rossitto & Thompson 2007). This vision sees the website as essential infrastructure on which our "product" (member to member connections) is built.

The true value of Arlis/ANZ membership lies in the strength of member's connections to each other. A major role of the society's executive is, essentially, to maintain the structure those connections are built upon and to provide a fertile environment for new ones to grow. We are not just selling memberships with discounts on conferences, we are "selling members to each other" (Della Rocca 2007). With that purpose in mind, we

are well placed to take advantage of the rising popularity of online social networking tools. Alongside the bigger players like Facebook are many much smaller networks. They are specialist groups serving niche markets, engaged in chasing what Chris Anderson termed "the long tail" (Anderson 2004). We are one of those niches.

As a niche group we are able to leverage the power of combined skills and specialist knowledge, also known as the wisdom of the crowd, (Bowman 2008) to provide a truly engaging experience for our members. This, we hope, will dramatically increase member value now and keep pace with the expectations of new members in the future. This is vitally important to our survival, as engagement is "one of the prime indicators of somebody's likelihood to renew, volunteer, or recommend your association to a colleague" (Ben Martin quoted in Pelletier 2007). Genuine engagement, though, involves more than building relationships. We also need to offer our members the ability to contribute to and participate in the society's processes and accumulation of knowledge.

The changing nature of user participation online is translating into the changing expectations of members and potential members. Members want to participate, and they want their involvement to make a difference. They participate in professional associations only as far as it benefits them (Lankes 2007) and not only professionally but - importantly - socially as well. Our members of the future, young people developing learning habits now, are getting used to making connections and contributions and "it is how people will expect to interact in the not-too-distant future" (Henry and Magnuson 2007). The old model of offering volunteer opportunities to members after years of networking is no longer going to be enough: "members going forward will begin to expect to be able to contribute to the association in a meaningful way within 10 minutes of joining rather than within 10 years" (Gammel 2006). In order to not merely survive but flourish in the future, associations will need to place participatory technology at the forefront of communication strategy (Henry and Magnuson 2007, 2). We have watched social media (including networking tools and user-created content) quickly become a fixture of the online world and weave into people's personal and professional lives. An association's website should be dynamic, members should see obvious and fruitful activity up front and be inspired to join in (Lankes 2007). Members must see that they are integral participants in an association's publishing process (Gammel 2006).

Membership of Arlis/ANZ has always been participatory - people join to access and become part of a network where help is often sought and provided. In recent years, this has occurred through an email list and face-to-face interactions at conferences and local chapter meetings. Since a natural bias towards participation and contribution already exists - we need only to position our members where they can ramp this up to a new level. We will place them "squarely in the middle of enhancing or even creating the value of the service itself" (Gammel 2006). By simply providing the tools and environment, associations can help members help each other and enhance the value of their own network: "associations need to learn how to design online services so that by merely using them, members create additional value for all other members" (Gammel

2006). The ultimate goal of a "virtual clubhouse" should be to enhance the value of membership for all members (Abram 2007).

Walking the talk: Using Web 2.0 to become Web 2.0: How we actually did it.

It's a challenging road from vision to reality. In order to move the society forward toward the Web 2.0 vision, toward what we now referred to as "Arlis/ANZ 2.0" (McKeon, Rossitto & Thompson 2007), we needed a website that would handle interaction, connect members with their community and remove barriers to participation in society business. A tall order? Not at all. In 2007, Arlis/ANZ began its website redevelopment project and the possibility of a "virtual clubhouse" moved one step closer to becoming a virtual reality.

The redevelopment project aimed to solve a host of technical problems and introduce a new flexibility to our web authoring system, as well as ushering in "Arlis/ANZ 2.0". Arlis/ANZ did not own a domain name nor manage its own site hosting. A series of hosting arrangements managed by the parent institutions of members provided free and secure web space, but like the site itself, these hosting arrangements were also very static and did not provide for redevelopment or re-visioning. While the site's focus was merely to serve static information, the limitations on our autonomy due to the hosting arrangements were just manageable, but with members' needs quickly moving beyond this focus, these arrangements were seriously limiting the society's ability to respond to change. On the simplest level site maintenance was a lengthy and clumsy process, complicated by inflexible web-authoring mechanisms. On another, more fundamental level, the 'locked-down' state of the site only served to isolated members from opportunities to communicate, collaborate and participate, virtually, in their society's activities. It made sense to look for ways to overcome these restrictions, but we were still faced with the same limitations that had generated that restricted environment in the first place: we needed to keep the costs down and keep our volunteers' workload sustainable and manageable. The answer lay in collaboration with Queensland University of Technology's Creative Industries Faculty.

Our redevelopment became a real world project for Communication Design students and offered an opportunity not only for them to learn how to work with clients, but for us to put into practice the kind of communication environment we wanted to offer to our members. By enthusiastically taking up the Web 2.0 principle of "the web as platform" (O'Reilly 2005), we were able to successfully manage communications between team members in different states as well as provide a clear brief and answer questions for three student groups and their unit co-ordinator. Collaborative online spaces freed us of our desktops and allowed us to work together in real time (McKeon & Thompson 2008). The final result, a site run on open-source content management system Drupal, successfully integrates all of the functionality we were seeking, is flexible to manage and maintain, and ably met our vision for a truly transformed Arlis/ANZ website.

Where to now?: Future plans.

Grow member participation

The Arlis/ANZ Website version 2.0 is not yet a year old. We are still in the post-implementation phase. The "virtual clubhouse" has been built, but we are still furnishing it. So, growth in participation and interaction with the site is our most pressing goal. We are yet to fully test the notion that if you build it, they will come. We are mindful of Lankes' warning that functionality does not equal use, and that interaction with the society absolutely must contribute to our members' professional lives (2007). However, if the new site is to fulfil its potential we need to attract a critical mass of participating members. The value of a (Web 2.0) network grows in proportion to the number of its members, online and adding value (Gammel 2006). So we need to get more members online.

We need to manage this post-implementation phase to maximise meaningful participation for members. During the next twelve months we will work on personalising the member experience, opening up opportunities for members to contribute to the processes of the society, and support and build our growing online user community by aligning virtual interactions with existing face-to-face activities. For instance, it is important that we greet new online members of the site, and encourage them to build their profile. While the site is still new, these personalised interactions invite members to contribute to developing the site with us and stand in for the self-generating activity which will happen more naturally when our virtual members reach critical mass. Through creating and viewing profiles, members get the opportunity to showcase themselves to each other (Steggles 2007) and get a stronger sense that they have joined a community (Bowman 2007). While our site is not Facebook, it does provide most "Directory 2.0" features that enable members to find each other (Steggles 2007). Until they do, until we reach critical mass in our online member community, we will continue to run some systems in tandem.

System changeover

We will continue existing systems that still provide a meaningful interaction for members with each other, until they naturally devolve. The main electronic communication system in use is the Arlis/ANZ email list. It is a subscription-based list, available to Arlis/ANZ members and non-members. It is quick, convenient technology and as such, very popular. But like all email lists, communication is one-way in the form of broadcast posts, conversations are not interactive and the inter-weaving history of conversations isn't easily collated. Once a conversation finishes on the list, the combined input from all the participants is effectively hidden from future users. The new website offers discussion fora, which enable topics to be posted just like the discussion list, however with the advantage that the history of the conversation is always easily accessible through search, and therefore the knowledge retained. It is true that people are used to using email and one great advantage of the email list is that once subscribed, members do not need to do anything to receive the posts. But each of the new site's fora has an RSS feed and we expect that in the future more members will

utilise them and will also naturally spend more time onsite. Thus we expect that the discussion fora will begin to host more and more of the conversations and that eventually the email list may become obsolete. But we do not plan to turn off any existing system which is still in solid use, and we will need to 'do the maths' first, in this and in other aspects of the project.

Measure what's working

At the same time as we work on growing participation, we must check that our version of the Web 2.0 approach is the right fit: which elements are working best, and how our members are interacting with the site and with each other. We must now think hard about gathering some canny metrics and quality feedback. We can't just rely on page-hits. We have moved from a static, one-way style of website into the Web 2.0 world of user-generated content and participatory conversations. But the site we have created is complex and measuring success in a socially interactive online space is ambiguous. However, to continue to develop a site which enhances the professional lives of our members (Lankes 2007) we absolutely need to be able to measure it, and in straightforward, gritty and meaningful ways. This is our most pressing challenge.

While we can harvest some simple figures, such as percentage of members with profiles on the site, we need to use a variety of techniques to truly determine if the "virtual clubhouse" is a success. While Gammel (2007) notes that there is ambiguity around social media measurement, there are some simple ways Arlis/ANZ could get started. And it may be as straightforward as starting with clear performance indicators related to the new functionality of the site. For instance, we could expect that:

- New members join online;
- Existing members renew online;
- A majority of members have profiles on the site;
- Attendees register for events online;
- Members start or contribute to discussions online (in proportion to previous trends in email list usage);
- Society business processes are conducted and documented online.

The process of gathering the qualitative and quantitative data surrounding these activities will be complex and will take some time, especially for a society run on volunteerism. How well and how quickly we grow participation on the site is a metric in itself, but much of the other data we are looking at gathering will only be meaningful once we have critical mass. Feedback directly from our members and site users will be key, as will an analysis of which parts of the site are being used or edited, by whom, and how often. Analysing the activity of our members on the site (and with each other as facilitated by the site) will be complex - like tracking the incremental changes of collaborators to a wiki. But it will give us an indication of how fully the content on the

site represents the activity of the society and therefore, how powerfully this should feed into and inform our formal interactions.

Integrate the virtual with face-to-face

The "virtual clubhouse" is by no means designed to take over entirely from the actual. In fact, it is in a position to enhance our more formal, physical meetings. As Junker describes it, one of the great strengths of Facebook on a college campus is its ability to augment face-to-face interaction between brand new classmates - they recognise each other from online profiles when they first enter the classroom (2007). We hope to see that happening at our conferences and other physical meetings too. The physical meetings will retain their importance whatever the success of the "virtual clubhouse" may be. Conferences will help us synthesise the work of members, and check and set the strategic direction of the society (Lankes 2008). Member participation in society business is a productive way to get work done, but every so often, we will need to meet and take a look at the whole forest. If members take up the offer of participation, the opportunities to do that will become more fruitful.

We look forward to a time when Arlis/ANZ conference planning and content is informed by document collaboration and forum discussion on the site, as these become an "authentic survey of the work of the organisation" (Lankes 2008). And we see new possibilities of opening up the task of conference planning as a direct result of the new website's functionality. Currently conference planning is delegated on a rotating basis to a single chapter, with no input from other chapters, and little communication with past organisers. Smaller chapters never get the opportunity to participate, as they do not have the numbers to tackle the task. Conference planning has occurred either offline, or in distributed Web 2.0 spaces. It's time to bring this vital activity back home, to the "virtual clubhouse", where all who visit the clubhouse can participate and knowledge created there is shared and retained for future users. Conference planning is a challenging task, and the power of the crowd could be a significant advantage. Likewise, the society is obliged to hold an Annual General Meeting each year. This meeting is potentially undemocratic, because the vast majority of members cannot physically attend. The society runs the risk of hearing only from the same voices, and the principle at the heart of a participatory society, a professionally rewarding society, is eroded. There is potential within "Arlis/ANZ 2.0" to not only involve members more fully and fairly in their AGM, but to source input for the agenda from the activity and content on the site.

Take a strategic look at the society itself

The very things which come to define Arlis/ANZ work in our favour in this instance. The society is small, so members are often already hands-on in multiple roles. Position-holders change regularly, and new position-holders naturally question current practice as they learn their roles. Loss of corporate knowledge, inconsistencies of practice and "peaks and troughs of energy and output" (Bentley 2005) is a problem associated with

constant position changes. However, on the up-side, this continual reinvention of processes works in our favour by keeping our approach to procedure fresh. When we do move, we can move fast and we can work light. So it means that the society has the inherent flexibility required to move from a "store and forward" business model (Lankes 2008) to an interactive, dynamic, member-driven and participatory business model. This will enable us to integrate the ethos of Web 2.0 underlying our vision of the "virtual clubhouse", into the very structure and processes of the society itself.

Members want action from their professional organisation, and they want to be part of shaping that action. Waiting while others act, in a Web 2.0 world, is no longer a desirable way to operate, or attract and sustain membership. Lankes states that: "Members should be able to vote, comment, and author at any intersection between the association and the member. This need for interaction is not simply some Web 2.0 ideal, but goes to the heart of a membership organisation." (2008) We have here an opportunity to reflect upon our society and potentially reshape and improve it. This is a more far-reaching goal than was at first thought possible within the scope of the website redevelopment project, and hints at some substantial work yet to be done, should we wish to rise to the challenge.

Conclusion

Impelled by the need to upgrade what was a very basic online presence, Arlis/ANZ embraced a vision for a re-invigorated website employing Web 2.0 tools designed to dramatically enhance member value. The "virtual clubhouse" planned through the website redevelopment was designed to help members connect despite great physical distances and professional isolation and provide the means for them to participate more fully in their association.

The benefits of adopting an open-source, participatory, and interactive model further opened up to include efficient executive planning; flexible web authoring; increased ability to harness and share the collective knowledge of skilled and specialist members; and rich potential for authentic member input into conference planning, meeting agenda, and the strategic direction of the society itself.

Arlis/ANZ moves forward into the next stages of the project prepared to tackle the difficult task of measuring and evaluating its success and is poised to take up the opportunity to carry the re-visioning forward - examining the structure and operation of the society itself using real input from the members it exists to serve.

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ADDITIONAL

Current Arlis/ANZ website: <http://www.arlis.org.au>

Previous Arlis/ANZ website, archived on Pandora:
<http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/50138/20070831-0921/www.arlis.org.au/index.html>