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Participatory Networks: The Library As Conversation

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The goal of the technology brief is to familiarize library decision-makers with the opportunities and challenges of participatory networks. In order to accomplish this goal the brief is divided into four sections (excluding an overview and a detailed statement of goal):

- *a conceptual framework for understanding and evaluating participatory networks;*
- *a discussion of key concepts and technologies in participatory networks drawn primarily from Web 2.0 and Library 2.0;*
- *a merging of the conceptual framework with the technological discussion to present a roadmap for library systems development; and*
- *a set of recommendations to foster greater discussion and action on the topic of participatory networks and, more broadly, participatory librarianship.*

This summary will highlight the discussions in each of these four topics. For consistency, the section numbers and titles from the full brief are used.

Knowledge is created through conversation. Libraries are in the knowledge business. Therefore, libraries are in the conversation business. Some of those conversations span millennia, while others only span a few seconds. Some of these conversations happen in real time. In some conversations, there is a broadcast of ideas from one author to multiple audiences. Some conversations are sparked by a book, a video, or a Web page. Some of these conversations are as trivial as directing someone to the bathroom. Other conversations center on the foundations of ourselves and our humanity.

It may be odd to start a technology brief with such seemingly abstract comments. Yet, without this firm, if theoretical, footing, the advent of Web 2.0, social networking, Library 2.0, and participatory networks seems a clutter of new terminology, tools, and acronyms. In fact, as will be discussed, without this conceptual footing, many library functions can seem disconnected, and the field that serves lawyers, doctors, single mothers, and eight-year olds (among others) fragmented.

The scale of this technology brief is limited; it is to present library decision-makers with the opportunities and challenges of participatory networks. It is only a single piece of a much larger puzzle that seeks to present a cohesive framework for libraries. This framework not only will fit tools such as blogs and wikis into their offerings (where appropriate), but also will show how a more participatory, conversational approach to libraries

in general can help libraries better integrate current and future functions. Think of this document as an overview or introduction to participatory librarianship. Readers will find plenty of examples and definitions of Web 2.0 and social networking later in this article. However, to jump right into the technology without a larger framework invites the rightful skepticism of a library organization that feels constantly buffeted by new technological advances. In any environment with no larger conceptual founding, to measure the importance of an advance in technology or practice selection of any one technology or practice is nearly arbitrary. Without a framework, the field becomes open to the influence of personalities and trendy technology. Therefore, it is vital to ground any technological, social, or policy conversation into a larger, rooted concept. As Susser said, "to practice without theory is to sail an uncharted sea; theory without practice is not to set sail at all."¹ For this paper, the chart will be conversation theory.

The core of this article is in four sections:

- a conceptual framework for understanding and evaluating participatory networks;
- a discussion of key concepts and technologies in participatory networks drawn primarily from Web 2.0 and Library 2.0;
- a merging of the conceptual framework with the technological discussion to present a sort of roadmap for library systems development; and
- a set of recommendations to foster greater discussion and action on the topic of participatory networks and, more broadly, participatory librarianship.

It is recommended that the reader follow this order to get the big picture; however, the second section should be a useful primer on the language and concepts of participatory networks.

Library as a facilitator of conversation

Let us return to the concept that knowledge is created through conversation. This notion stretches back to Socrates and the Socratic method. However, the specific foundation for this statement comes from conversation theory, a means of explaining cognition and how people learn.² It is not the purpose of this article to provide a

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