

Flickr as a Visual Resource Centre: Lessons for the Library World

Amanda LeClerc, Master of Information Studies, Faculty of Information, University of Toronto.

Amanda LeClerc is a graduate student in the Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto. She holds an undergraduate degree in Art History and Cultural Studies from McGill University. Amanda has worked as a Customer Service Consultant for ZipLocal.com, an online search directory, and as an Account Executive at Ogilvy & Mather advertising agency. She is currently working with BiblioCommons in implementing new social discovery systems on public library catalogues.

Abstract:

Vast image collections are integral to art and design libraries, serving as

points of artistic inspiration. Traditionally, libraries have depended on standardized classification to facilitate patron access to such materials. However, search engines such as Google and various Web 2.0 applications have changed both the search behaviours and expectations of library users. The inclusiveness, interactivity and access provided by external websites are not yet reflected in libraries. Library 2.0 has been proposed as a new paradigm for library service that applies the interactive, collaborative and multi-media technologies of Web 2.0 to library services and collections. This article discusses how Flickr, a Web 2.0 photosharing application, exemplifies the essential elements of Library 2.0, how this serves the art and design community and how Flickr can act as a potential model and partner for Library 2.0 initiatives.

The role of the library is to function as a gateway to resources. In the art and design world, this includes vast collections of visual materials. These can be monographs, slides, image databases, and artist or subject files of clippings. These image collections are an integral aspect of art and design libraries, serving as points of artistic inspiration. Traditionally, libraries have depended on standardized

classification to facilitate patron access to materials. However, search engines such as Google and various Web 2.0 applications have changed both the search behaviours and expectations of library users (Pearce, 2006). The inclusiveness, interactivity and access provided by external websites are not yet reflected in libraries, which arguably require a new model of library service to support these principles in their collections (Pearce, 2006). This new model has been called Library 2.0, which Maness (2006) defines as “the application of interactive, collaborative, and multi-media web-based technologies to web-based library services and collections” (Library 2.0 section, para. 3). Maness sees Library 2.0 as comprising four essential elements: it is user-centred, it provides a multimedia experience, it is socially rich, and it is communally innovative, not only changing with its community but allowing the community to change it.

As Maness says, “Library 2.0 is not about searching, but finding; not about access, but sharing” (2006, Conclusion section, para. 5). Libraries have, for the most part, not yet fully adopted this paradigm. This article discusses Flickr, a Web 2.0 photo-sharing application, as a model and a possible partner for providing Library 2.0 services. As its content is strictly original, Flickr is not a substitute for the library’s collection or image databases like Corbis. However, its success illustrates how users can interact with a library’s collection and how communities can develop around it. This paper discusses how Flickr exemplifies the essential elements of Library 2.0, how this serves the art

and design community and how Flickr can act as a potential partner for library initiatives.

Flickr was launched in 2004 by a Canadian couple and purchased in 2005 by Yahoo. It now claims over 2.5 million users (Sinclair, 2006) and 3 billion photos (“3 Billion!”, 2008). There is no single user group, as the scale of the visual library and ease of use has made it a staple for creative professionals and non-professionals alike. Flickr allows users to post, share and comment on images on the web. Users tag images and create groups, sets, and collections based on similar interests and topics. It has been called the “ultimate photo album, visual email server, inspiration source, globally distributed photographers’ portfolio, news-gatherer and... alternative image library” (“About Flickr,” 2009).

Flickr incorporates all four of the essential elements of Library 2.0: a user-centred focus, a multimedia experience, a socially rich dynamic, and a communally innovative approach. Users are the main drivers of Flickr; they provide both the content and the metadata structure through tags, sets and collections. There is no formal classification structure imposed upon this. The user experience is entirely customized, from creating a personalized profile to uploading and tagging content to providing comments on resources to other users. The application has also expanded to include video, thereby improving the multimedia experience. Features like Flickr mail, comments, discussion boards and groups facilitate a socially rich dynamic that encourages user interaction with resources and each other.

Finally, it is communally innovative. As previously mentioned, the content is entirely created by users and, as such, not only changes *with* the community but, literally, allows the community to change it. For instance, Flickr's new "Interestingness" feature evaluates user input (i.e., click through sources, comments, tags, marked as favourite) to determine whether a given item is interesting. The highest-scoring content is then highlighted throughout the site. This interestingness is dynamically created by the community's actions.

The goal of Flickr is to enable users to make their content available and to provide new ways of organizing these resources ("About Flickr," 2009). Collaboration is the solution. It allows users to share content with each other and to organize selected contacts' content by adding comments, notes and tags. This promotes the communal aspect of the application while providing additional metadata structure to the collection. In *The Commons* feature, Flickr has teamed with a number of institutions to enrich their public photography archives. Users are invited to provide comments or tags to describe the photographs in these collections. In one example, for an undated Library of Congress image of a Columbia professor, a user was able to suggest a possible date based on a *New York Times* article that the user linked to the photograph. This user-generated content adds to the "universal collection of knowledge" that is fundamental to the Library of Congress' mission ("About the Library," 2008). Flickr's vision of leveraging users to organize visual content is one that is,

therefore, applicable to the goals of more formal institutions.

To explore how Flickr functions within the wider art and design community, I will once again turn to the four essential elements of Library 2.0. Through these elements Flickr has built a virtual space that creates and strengthens ad hoc communities, promotes networking and exposure for artists, facilitates the legal use of artists' works, and provides artistic inspiration. This virtual space serves as an international platform for the art and design community.

The first element of Library 2.0 is user-centeredness. Flickr is thriving at a time when user content is increasingly finding a mass audience. As technology critic Bill Thompson states, "the boundaries between professional photography, art and popular snapshots are blurring, just as the growth of blogging and citizen journalism makes it hard at times to distinguish between journalism, literature and a diary entry" (Bennett, 2007, p.19). In this environment, user-generated content such as Flickr is providing a fresh, unpolished and exciting energy to the creative industries (Bennett, 2007). It is also increasingly being used as an inspiration source, a trend that I will later explain in greater detail.

Flickr also provides users with a multimedia experience. Personal image and video collections can be highlighted on customized Flickr URLs that are passed along for promotional purposes. Aspiring photographers are increasingly using their Flickr sites to showcase their work, and some brands are also getting on board. For example, the Sony

Balls ad was supported by a behind-the-scenes footage Flickr set (Sinclair, 2006). Using the website for commercial purposes is currently frowned upon, carrying a risk of account suspension. However, the potential for Flickr to develop as an image marketplace is clear.

The communally innovative element has been called the most important aspect of Library 2.0 (Maness, 2006). It rests on the premise that libraries are a community service and that Library 2.0 are “a virtual reality of the library, a place where one can not only search... but interact with a community, a librarian, and share knowledge and understanding with them” (Maness, 2006, Conclusion section, para. 2). This community building is one of the main reasons for Flickr’s success and one of its primary functions in the art and design community. Images are sought out through tags, groups are formed, and communities are developed based on common areas of interest. The important role of these communities is repeatedly underscored in the art and design literature regarding Flickr (Pearce, 2006; Sinclair, 2006; Zeiger, 2007).

The final element of Library 2.0 is social richness, which, for Maness, includes a combination of synchronous and asynchronous means of communication. Flickr has yet to incorporate synchronous communication, such as instant messaging, although arguably it facilitates a social connection on a much larger scale. Users are able to engage socially with each other through Flickr mail and comments. They are also able to engage, in real time, with society at large in a way that traditional libraries cannot.

Flickr has increasingly become a “first place to look’ repository” for images of breaking news, as was highlighted during events like Hurricane Katrina and the London bombings (Sinclair, 2006, p. 40). Images not only appeared on Flickr first, products of “community photojournalism,” but the site proved better able to cope with the stream of updated images than prominent news sites that were slowed by increased traffic (Sinclair, 2006). The new Interestingness feature further facilitates finding breaking events as they unfold (Sinclair, 2006). The currency of these images, particularly during breaking news events, cultivates an ersatz community and reflects how socially rich Flickr can be. This immediacy of content cannot be provided in a traditional library, where resources must be indexed and catalogued.

Many users of art and design libraries are now turning to Flickr. To evaluate how it is meeting their needs, I will distinguish between those users I will call *creators* (i.e., artists, designers, architects, and students of these disciplines) and those who are researchers (faculty and students). Clearly this distinction is not absolute, as many students are artists and designers as well. However, these roles are distinct, as they necessitate different needs. Creators are increasingly referencing Flickr for inspiration. Designers require all forms of visual images, particularly stock photography and photojournalism (Payne, February 2009). Flickr has become the starting point for designer image searches as the quality is often high, the “look” is authentic and the images are more interesting than the content of big stock

agencies (Bennett, 2007). In the article “Bringing the Studio in to the Library,” the author notes that resources for studio students (whom I am classifying as creators) are often items furthering “original observation through accidental discovery” (Bennett, 2006, p. 38). The challenge is for libraries to find a place within students’ “visual representation of a memory, mood, concept or event” (Bennett, 2006, p. 38). Flickr tags meet this need by allowing users to categorize the content by *any* association they want. As a result, the collection is a visual representation of users’ memories, moods, concepts, and experiences, and facilitates accidental discovery by these associations.

Researchers have very different needs. Clearly Flickr does not compete with the library image collections and proprietary databases that provide these users with historical art content. However, it can serve their other visual resource needs. Faculty researchers are very concerned with copyright and often have their own extensive personal image collections (Payne, 2009). Flickr is a tool for these users to store and share (or not share) their personal collections; to make explicit the limitations of how these images are to be used (via the Creative Commons licensing system); and to explore new content with the copyright limitations set out. Student researchers have their own needs. These include greater flexibility in the search interface, a higher concern with metadata and comprehensive collections (Payne, 2009). Flickr’s intuitive interface with its multiple access points and natural language

metadata provide the flexibility these users are looking for.

There are some significant limitations to Flickr as a visual resource library. First, it does not yet compare to the professional stock libraries in terms of ease of use and specialist research facilities (Sinclair, 2006). Second, though Flickr’s metadata structure is one of the site’s greatest assets, the quality of the data can be a significant issue. Surprisingly, this is not because of a lack of controlled vocabulary. Instead, it is because users do not generally attribute a significantly descriptive title or assign enough tags to images (Pearce, 2006). That can make seeking specific images much more difficult than in traditional formally structured resources. However, it has been found that the quality of metadata can be improved by having administrators monitor images and e-mail users with advice on tagging (Sinclair, 2006). Of greater concern is the threat that Flickr poses to the very concept of “the artist.” Gareth Gardner, a photographer, filmmaker and writer, has posited that user-generated libraries are damaging to the highly skilled professional photographer by promoting the idea that anyone can do it (Sinclair, 2006). This content is further driving a new raw, immediate aesthetic that is being imitated by professionals for advertising campaigns (Sinclair, 2006).

Flickr is not a substitute for art and design libraries. It cannot provide the content that makes up these collections. Yet its growing popularity among these libraries’ users is an indication that it is doing something right. Flickr’s use of Library 2.0’s four elements to

create a user-centered community space can be a model for art libraries of the future. Art and design libraries must look to Flickr not as a competitor but as a possible partner and guide. The Picture Australia project is a clear example of this. Picture Australia is a federated search service of pictorial collections. The National Library of Australia's 2006 Picture Australia pilot project sought to engage new audiences and increase its number of contemporary images by enabling people to contribute photos through Flickr (Pearce, 2006). Users uploaded images and added them to a Picture Australia group. The metadata and thumbnails were then harvested weekly by the library and added to Picture Australia (Pearce, 2006). The project increased Picture Australia's coverage of topical issues, expanded the number of full-colour images in the collection, and provided interesting juxtapositions between old and new photos of the same subject (Pearce, 2006). The project also provided new images to the National Library of Australia's collection. The Library contacted the creators of selected photos to obtain a high-resolution version for its digital archive (Pearce, 2006).

In her article "The Symbolic Meaning of Libraries in a Digital Age," Manoff accuses librarians of becoming "vandals and barbarians plundering the stacks" and of failing to protect and cherish our cultural memory (2001, p. 373). She believes it is the library's role to unearth, preserve and protect the historical record. Flickr does not do this. However, it does preserve the present. A review of Flickr's images, comments and metadata offers a comprehensive snapshot

of our era. Flickr cannot offer the historical record that Manoff cherishes or the library content that users still need. Yet it can offer a new model for how users can interact with these materials and how a collection can facilitate community.

References

3 Billion! (2008). Retrieved March 29, 2009, from <http://blog.flickr.net/en/2008/11/03/3-billion/>

About Flickr. (2009). Retrieved March 29, 2009, from <http://www.flickr.com/about/>

About the Library [Library of Congress]. (2008). Retrieved March 29, 2009, from <http://www.loc.gov/about/mission.html>

Bennett, H. (2006). Bringing the studio into the library: Addressing the research needs of studio art and architecture students. *Art Documentation: Bulletin of the Art Libraries Society of North America*, 25(1), 38-42.

Bennett, O. (2007). Free for all. *Design Week*, 22(17), 19-21.

Maness, J. (2006). Library 2.0 theory: Web 2.0 and its implications for libraries. *Webology*, 3(2). Retrieved March 27, 2009, from Google Scholar.

Manoff, M. (2001). The symbolic meaning of libraries in a digital age. *Libraries and the Academy*, 1(4), 371-381.

Payne, D. (February, 2009). Art reference: images. In FIS 2302 Art Librarianship. Faculty of Information, University of Toronto.

Payne, D. (January, 2009). What is an art library? In FIS 2302 Art Librarianship. Faculty of Information, University of Toronto.

Pearce, J. (2006). User collaboration in websites. *ARLIS/ANZ Journal*, 62(12), 32-40.

Sinclair, M. (2006). What is Flickr?. *Creative Review*, 26(6), 39-41.

Zeiger, M. (2007) Flickr.com. *Architect*, 96(14), 28.