Chapter title: The rise of recommendation and review - a place in online library environments?

Kara Jones, Kate Robinson

Introduction

Online collaboration and interaction, self-publishing, personalised categorisation and sharing of content – these are all hallmarks of our internet exchanges today. More websites and online services are building on these activities and encouraging their users to add their own content or highlight useful or quality resources.

This paper is an exploration into the issues surrounding the rise of recommendation and review services and whether they're of benefit to library users in online academic environments. Should we be taking advantage of this opportunity to build communities and conversations, or should this remain the domain of online trade and commerce?   Does user generated content add value to our resources, or does it weaken its integrity? We take a look at the review and recommendation services currently available in academic library online environments, and explore the issues involved in adding user generated content to our resources, using research undertaken for our own pilot project entitled 'Around the world in 80+ books'.

Why investigate user generated content?

Reviews, recommendations and personalised categorisation are all types of user generated content. This content is produced by the end-user or consumer, rather than the traditional sources such as copy writers, publishers, and commercial content creators. A personalised perspective or review of a book is one form of user generated content, as is writing an online journal or weblog; another is uploading music or photographs to file-sharing websites. In the wider picture this is part of the web 2.0 architecture of participation (O'Reilly, 2005). These days almost half of adult internet users interact or read web 2.0 sites online, from publishing

blogs, posting ratings and reviews, using RSS, tagging webpages, using social networking sites, listening to podcasts and so on (Li, 2007).   The development of internet technology has widened our interaction and content creation activities. As Coyle (2007, 290) notes, 'users have become accustomed to creating content on the Web. … [they] have an expectation that they will find a community at their electronic destination. They also expect to interact with their information resources, not to consume them passively'.

The expectations of our users, along with technical developments such as APIs to import data into our resources suggests that now is the time to actively investigate adding user generated content to our online environments.

Why do people use reviews and recommendations?

Getting advice or opinions from others is an important part of any selection or purchase decision. We ask for referees for job candidates, we read customer reviews on Amazon before buying the latest bestseller, and we check TripAdvisor before booking our holiday hotel. Often our decisions to buy, read or visit something are formed by information provided by our peers, colleagues, neighbours or fellow consumers. We've always used recommendation, reputation and reviews to make our decisions, and with the explosion of information brought by the internet it seems a logical progression for these two concepts to meet.

In terms of information management, user generated content is one of three ways in which we select or evaluate information. Clearly the best method for evaluating information is to build personal expertise and subject knowledge. Senior academics, for example, are aware of key authors and texts in their field of research. They have an established set of trusted sources they might use. Secondly, we use an information literacy approach to evaluating information, basing our decisions on evidence present in the resource. A website, for example, might be evaluated based on the authority or credibility of the author, a particular

bias of the site, the currency of the information, whether it's from an academic, government or commercial website and so on. This is a skill we develop to select information from previously unknown sources. Finally we use the wisdom of others to make decisions such as reviews, recommendations and ratings from other people who have used this information. This method works best when we can identify with the author, or use a system based on reputation to establish trust. This last method for information selection, along with the familiarity of library users with online communities is the reason we're investigating reviews and recommendation in our online library environments.

What's currently happening?

There is a definite move towards integrating user generated comment within online library environments around the globe. Libraries and library system vendors are actively investigating and adding mechanisms for engaging library users and building communities around our resources. In an academic environment, we've often used Virtual Learning Environments and forums to engage our students with learning and teaching activities. Evolving technologies means these communities can be built directly into the resource itself. The following examples show how reviews, recommendations and similar services are being used.

The Library catalogue

The library catalogue seems an obvious place to engage with library communities, and thanks to sites like Amazon and LibraryThing, our library users are often familiar with reviews, comments, ratings and suggestions on resources.

Dave Pattern, Library Systems Manager at the University of Huddersfield, UK, recently surveyed librarians around the world to gather thoughts on potential features for library catalogues. His research included the following features for user generated content:

- Also borrowed — "people who borrowed this also borrowed…" suggestions based on circulation data

- User tagging — allowing the user to apply their own keywords (tags) to items in the OPAC

- User comments — allowing the user to add their own reviews and comments to items in the OPAC

- User learning — an "intelligent" OPAC that makes personalised suggestions based on what the user does

- User ratings — allowing the user to add their own ratings or scores to items in the OPAC (Pattern, 2007)

These features generated interest amongst the 700+ librarians who responded to the survey. Huddersfield have implemented un-moderated ratings and moderated comments in their catalogue, with use by students and academic staff. Examples of potential uses for comments in a catalogue record include lecturers highlighting particular chapters, distance learning students sharing evaluations of resources that might normally be done face to face in a tutorial, or a librarian placing a comment on a heavily-used out-of-print textbook, suggesting alternative texts.

Tagging of resources

Tagging is best described as personalised cataloguing of resources for sharing. This feature is part of a larger movement called social bookmarking. Tagging is a tool which has been deployed already in both university catalogues, and abstracting and indexing databases. Tags are often displayed as a 'tag cloud', where the most popular words are shown larger, indicating hot topics.

Two examples of tags used to add personal subject headings to information resources include PennTags and Engineering Village. PennTags from the University of Pennsylvania

is a social bookmarking tool for locating, organizing, and sharing online resources. PennTags are promoted as a portable 'favourites' or 'bookmarks' tool, and as a social discovery system to see what others are posting and what tags they are using (University of Pennsylvania, 2007). Engineering Village is an abstracting and indexing database which has also enhanced their descriptors and keywords by adding tagging features for resource discovery and sharing.

Literature Awareness Services

The arrival of BioMed Central's 'Faculty of 1000 Biology' is another strong indication of the value of recommendation to information users. Its strength lies in a key feature to successful communities – reputation. Faculty of 1000 Biology is a literature awareness tool that highlights and reviews the most interesting papers published in the biological sciences, based on the recommendations of a faculty of well over 2300 selected leading researchers ("Faculty Members").

At the University of Bath, we subscribed to F1000 Biology in March 2007, after a trial proved wildly successful with the Biology and Biochemistry department. The openness and transparency of the credentials of reviewers was key to convincing busy researchers that this tool would help filter professional reading down to manageable levels.

Doubtless there is a move towards adding user generated content to our information resources, but it brings with it risks and issues we have navigated away from in the past. It is sensible to consider the issues involved, such as moderation, ownership, and responsibility to help make informed decisions. At the University of Bath, we investigated these issues as part of a pilot project to build a community of library users around a particular collection of material, books personally recommended by international students and staff as a 'taster' of their home countries and cultures.

Case Study – Around the world in 80+ books

The University of Bath prides itself on the diversity of its student body. As a reflection of this we began a project in 2006/7 with our international staff and students to exploit and enrich the Library's collections. We asked for personal recommendations of international libraries which participants had used or studied in and literature they had read which they felt would give readers a flavour of their home countries. Copies of each of the listed texts were added to library stock and wherever possible the collection included both the original and English language versions. The books were then complied into a hard-copy and web-based reading list arranged by country, with direct links into, or references to (depending on format), our library catalogue. Pictures of the recommended libraries with a short quote regarding why they had chosen the library and their experience of it were brought together in an exhibition on the main service floor of the University Library with images included on the web. This is a living project and further recommendations are still being received. Some examples of suggestions include:

Table 1: Selections from reading lists

England	Malawi
Austen, J. *Emma*	Chimombo, S. *The Wrath of Napolo*
Collins, W. *Woman in White*	Chimombo, S. *The Bird Boy's Song*
Grahame, K. *Wind in the Willows*	Mapanje, J. *The Last of the Sweet Bananas*
Mitford, N. *The Pursuit of Love*	White, L. *Magomero: Portrait of an African*
Le Carre, J. *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*	*Village*
Sweden	**Pakistan**
Lindgren, A. *Pippi Longstocking*	Faiz, A. *O City of Lights: Selected Poetry*
Moberg, V. *The Emigrants*	and Biographical Notes
Söderberg, H. *Doctor Glas*	Hamid, M. *Moth Smoke*
Strindberg, A. *Miss Julie*	Sidwha, B. *The Crow Eaters*

What are the issues to be addressed?

Whose reading list is it?

The decision as to where to experiment with this technology was carefully made. This booklist is a collaborative venture already, based on personal recommendation and supporting leisure reading rather than any academic course of study. We felt that to begin with an academic's reading list would raise ethical concerns, most obviously the undermining of an academic's ownership of their own reading lists. Traditionally academics have been able to recommend any book which they feel supports their course without any suggestion that this book might not be fit for purpose. With review these lists are opened up to criticism. It could be something which confident academics would welcome, but there are questions also about who is able to make such judgements as to what is appropriate for particular course reading: is it the students, or is it the academic? What if the book is one written by the academic themselves? We felt these concerns could be better addressed by initially providing an example in a safe environment such as the 80+ booklist.

Risk management

With all projects it is wise to give some consideration to risk factors. Of most interest to ourselves was to consider the impact of doing this or not doing this. To go ahead would, we felt, encourage wider reading, build communities and add value to our resources. In this context it would encourage participation and also allow people to understand what it was about a particular book that they wished to recommend and share with others. Asking for recommendations which give a flavour of a person's country brought some interesting stories in the process of the project and these would be good to share with the community. The choice of a particular book may also be contentious or lead to further thoughts or recommendations from others. This environment might well encourage participation in the project, lead to the discovery of material within the Library, or enhance library stock if

resulting purchases were made. Without attempting to build such a community there is a risk that the project will not continue to grow.

Authority of the library catalogue

Where should the reviews be? Should they be in the catalogue or should we be focusing more on moving the catalogue to the conversations, instead of trying to draw the conversations in by, for example, putting the catalogue in Facebooks, or on Moodle (our University's Virtual Learning Environment)? Is this about enhancing our catalogue or about building up a conversation and community around our holdings? Over recent years many library catalogues have, by technical necessity, become split between a catalogue dealing with mainly hard copy material and supplementary lists of web based resources (databases, e-journals lists, etc.) with robust links which are not yet supported effectively by many Library Management Systems. There is often a split between the breadth of information available on the catalogue depending on where it is hosted, i.e. in the Library on dedicated library terminals or on the web. Library catalogue terminals are often locked down to ensure availability, restricting access to linking to web based resources. The ideal of the catalogue as a one stop shop for all library users has already been lost, so does it matter where these conversations take place? Would hosting them in the traditional library catalogue undermine the integrity and quality of the catalogue where traditionally only librarians add data, or does this really matter? If we do not move forward and extend some ownership of the catalogue to others, are we hastening its demise?

We agreed to pilot two approaches and then review based on our experience and our users' preferences. The first was to attach a wiki to each of the 80+ books library catalogue records for use by our University community. The second was to link to another review site, in this case LibraryThing, so our users can read comments posted there and add their own to them if they choose to do so.

Moderation?

For social technologies to function effectively we felt it was important to have as open and unfettered system as possible. We want people to participate so shouldn't we try to make it as straightforward and as instantaneous as possible? We should begin with a concept of initial trust. While this may be the ideal approach it does raise some concerns which we felt could be addressed in the following ways. A sign-in system could discourage inappropriate comments. We have an in-house authentication system which would allow us to see who had posted comments to the wiki. By not anonymsing the comments people are able to associate with the authors. It adds openness, transparency and a level of accountability when details are visible. It could also be used to show some data about reviewers which might well have relevance to their review. If we did move to using this technology for academic's reading lists participants would be able to see if the reviewer was on their course and consequently reviewing the book from the same perspective. We would need to take data-protection requirements into account.

It would be up to the users to alert us to any unacceptable reviews or automated spam and for us to take action at that point. All that would be required is an initial disclaimer for contributers to click to agree that we would take this action if required. This raises the question of ownership of the comments where we are encouraging users to populate discreet areas of our library catalogue. Our view was that our disclaimer would also reserve the right remove anything at any time, to change and introduce moderation, etc. downstream and to change the policy itself if needs be thereby giving us flexibility from the start to make changes when we need to.

For our second approach using LibraryThing we agreed to link out to reviews rather than import them into the library catalogue, making it clear to users that they were leaving the University's area and interacting in a different space. Our view is that LibraryThing, although out of our control, holds reasonable comments.

Seeding

How then do we get people to add their reviews. What is the incentive? In some respects the initial use of LibraryThing alongside the wiki is to begin to populate the catalogue with 'ready-made' reviews which may encourage others to add theirs. There would need to be marketing or promotional activity to encourage community engagement and we could use our usual library channels for this. However, by using special collections or grouping related resources to encourage a community such as the Around the world in 80+ books, reading lists, etc. we may be able to encourage more engagement than if we initially attached wikis to every book on the library catalogue. This approach might instil a sense of community and ownership of the reviews. It may also be an area lecturers choose to engage with for teaching their students as use of this technology could form part of an assessment.

Other possibilities could be through the use of the Library Management System itself. We could join up people's requests for items (reservations) and use the automatic notification e-mail to ask the requestor to leave a comment on or rating of the item. We could also use the Expedia model which e-mails you after your holiday to suggest you rank or rate the hotel you stayed in. Again using links to the Library Management System we could generate an automatic e-mail to the borrower once they have returned a book with a link to the review section asking if they would like to participate.

Technical issues

The technical issues involved with adding user generated content to library environments are reducing. The advent of the Application Programming Interface, or API has extended opportunities for content from one database or website to plug into another, allowing systems to interact and this service can be used to bring content from Amazon, for example, into the library catalogue.

There are decisions to be made on how to display ratings or reviews on the library catalogue. The system on trial at Bath for adding comments is based on a wiki, with each entry dynamically created as necessary. Authentication is another issue, particularly if it's decided that reviewers must log in to a system to encourage transparency. In a community such as a university, computing services departments may need to authorise authentication with an LDAP or similar authentication server.

Conclusion

Integrating user generated content into library environments is becoming technically more feasible, and our library customers are generally more comfortable using and adding to these communities. Discussions at the University of Bath Library have highlighted a number of issues that need consideration before adding reviews, recommendations and ratings into the library catalogue. Deciding the level of risk involved, and how to manage this risk is key. Prioritising this service development in relation to other library initiatives is likely to be another key consideration, as it's a value-adding rather than core service. On the other hand, our library users are coming to expect a community at their online destination, and are comfortable interacting with resources.

As the 'Around the world in 80+ books' project develops, we will be able to use the experience gained to inform decisions on rolling out this service on a larger scale. These reflections will also be helpful for decision-making should options for adding user generated content be added to upgrades or new versions of our library management system.

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