

## 'Facebook for Scientists'

CiteULike, a free resource, described by Tony Hey (Microsoft) as the sort of tool needed in a 'Facebook for Scientists', works better for researchers than proprietary bibliographic tools like RefWorks or EndNote, its founder Richard Cameron told delegates.

That's because it draws together scientists interested in reading about the same topic. A form of social tagging, as well as a bibliographic reference tool, it takes user-classified literature and articles and creates a 'citation network of readers'.

Scientists are impatient of current routes to the literature. Academic articles are organised in vertical silos by publisher and journal. Identifying relevant articles within a journal depends on (copyrighted) abstracts, which are difficult even for Google to find. In music, the i-Tunes model is a winner because it is organised by genre and you don't have to buy the whole album, just download the item you want.

## Empowering users

Lawyers' clients are starting to share best practice with each other, rather than going to lawyers, thanks to peer-to-peer networks, according to social-computing expert Euan Semple. His talk explored how technology is disrupting traditional business models by connecting and empowering users.

Modern communities software, and blogs, have led to a breakthrough in communication. Suddenly, it is easy to publish. Blogs are useful backup when websites are redesigned. Even if the page has disappeared, you can point to the idea on the blog.

Hyperlinking enables like-minded people to navigate and share relevant information quickly, and to collect conversations about it.

Even before tools like Facebook and YouTube, online forums worked well in enterprises, because 'it's not easy to find the document you need, in an environment used by 23,000 people'. If the interested party is part of a community and puts in a question, you get 'multiple relevant answers – the combination is powerful'.

But communities can be disruptive because they bring difficult internal issues to the surface – although this can stimulate innovation and change.

RSS is good for finding useful material (he uses it for 5-600 sources). But users should give up misguided attempts to aggregate the web. Using your own tags enables you to navigate your own interests. And, using, say, Bookman in Delicious, can bring people together 'if you get someone active in the same field'.

## PL doubt contrasts with academic confidence

Public and academic library communities showed markedly different levels of confidence about their core offering at Talis's Insight conference in Birmingham in November, writes *Elspeth Hyams*.

Public librarians, continuing a debate that spilled over from October's PLA conference, struggled to establish priorities. Books and reading? Community place? Social outreach? Cutting-edge technology? Virtual service? Informal learning? Shared services? What is the public library service's USP?

Meanwhile local authority budgets are shrinking, and heads of service must find ways to preserve the services library users value most. Past failures of advocacy may mean that there are lower levels of public awareness for outreach, reader development and such services than we might wish. That is why consultants such as Tim Coates (a speaker) get away with categorising many of the jewels in the PL crown as back-office overhead.

MLA chief Roy Clare declared that public libraries needed a simpler message (see p. 2) to achieve higher national profile and 'break-through' impact on public awareness. But no truly unifying vision was forthcoming, despite the sterling efforts of luminaries such as John Dolan, Tony Durcan, David Lightfoot and Frances Hendrix and a panel of techno-savvy young librarians, keen to use new tools to deliver

classic services better.

And this was a technology-inspired conference. Technical services librarians and innovators examined tools that help add value for online users, especially in the academic domain. Speakers from Jisc and Janet, on Opacs, metadata, and library management systems, had a field day, as well as PL Talis members, describing how new functionality – community management tools, say – had enhanced their services.

Many Talis customers say they like the way the company consults its community about the functionality they want, quickly develops prototypes, and goes straight back to the user. And, as Richard Wallis, one of our hosts pointed out, they can draw on much existing functionality – the so-called Talis platform.

Even so, US guru Marshall Breeding's frustration at the time it still takes LMS providers to develop the functionality consumers now expect must have resonated with all library customers.

Mr Breeding raised a bigger question. Has the time for a global all-singing, all-dancing LMS now passed? If so, Talis's crusade to persuade rival systems suppliers to make their code available, so that customers can bolt on anyone else's functionality if they wish, would seem a canny move.

■ Presentations will be published:

[www.talis.com/applications/news\\_and\\_events/talis\\_insight.shtml](http://www.talis.com/applications/news_and_events/talis_insight.shtml)

### Data management

## Scientists, too, want Web 2.0

Scientists are 'swamped by data'. They're trying to manage it, find it, access it, reference it. 'Data management is becoming a serious issue.' Open source software is not enough, Professor Tony Hey of Microsoft told delegates.

Unrestricted use of data promotes scientific progress, but making data open access raises complex questions. Nonetheless, scientists are applying technologies – such as those developed in the business environment to filter spam – for example, to detect patterns in biological datasets that show the immune system is working. This can lead to breakthroughs in the development of cheap vaccines against HIV.

There are many examples of programmes developed for non-scientific purposes being applied to sky data, infra-red, gamma rays and the visible spectrum. Scientists can run programmes such as Blast (offered by the National Library of Medicine, which identifies regions of similarity in biological sequences). These can 'expose functionality'. The software is a service you can use without loading it on to your computer.

Scientists are 'extreme information

users'. They want to do Web 2.0 things like other internet users. They need 'serious tools', empowerment to do something 'worthwhile' with workflows and mash-ups.

Increasingly, social science data is part of the picture: 'You might want to overlay census data with genetic data.'

Commercial concerns like Amazon offer a 'state-of-the-art' virtual computer behind a user-friendly front end. Scientists too need 'a simple interface, an ability to store stuff, visualisation on demand'.

In the new data-centric paradigm of e-research, a revolution in scholarly publishing is inevitable. E-journals are richer than their paper versions. You can click through to the datasets, but scientists also want the functionality behind.

Curator repositories are an important component. So are 'all sorts of database networks'.

There is a need to redefine the role of the library in the research university, but librarians are definitely needed.

'Together it's possible to do something about the data deluge.'