



## Establishing a Participatory Library Model: A Grounded Theory Study



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### ABSTRACT

*Purpose:* The purpose of this research is to explore the idea of the participatory library in higher education settings. This research aims to address the question, what is a participatory university library?

*Design/methodology/approach:* Grounded theory approach was adopted. In-depth individual interviews were conducted with two diverse groups of participants including ten library staff members and six library users. Data collection and analysis were carried out simultaneously and complied with Straussian grounded theory principles and techniques.

*Findings:* Three core categories representing the participatory library were found including “community”, “empowerment”, and “experience”. Each category was thoroughly delineated via sub-categories, properties, and dimensions that all together create a foundation for the participatory library. A participatory library model was also developed together with an explanation of model building blocks that provide a deeper understanding of the participatory library phenomenon.

*Research limitations:* The research focuses on a specific library system, i.e., academic libraries. Therefore, the research results may not be very applicable to public, special, and school library contexts.

*Originality/Value:* This is the first empirical study developing a participatory library model. It provides librarians, library managers, researchers, library students, and the library community with a holistic picture of the contemporary library.

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### INTRODUCTION

The use of Web 2.0 or social media in the library is commonly known as Library 2.0. Whilst scholars have examined various aspects of Library 2.0, their investigations have tended to focus mainly on the practical use and application of technology. For example, some scholars introduce potential applications of Web 2.0 tools for building a Library 2.0 service model (Bradley, 2007; Courtney, 2007; Miller, 2005), focus on technical aspects of Library 2.0 (Yang, Wei, & Peng, 2009), or concentrate on a Library 2.0 model or the use of Web 2.0 technologies in specific libraries (Cohen, 2007; Gross & Leslie, 2010; Pienaar & Smith, 2008). Similarly, Stephens and Collins (2007) have noted that the majority of discussions in conference presentations and journal articles have a strong focus on technologies. These discussions sometimes neglect to address the application of open and participatory thinking to library services.

Lankes, Silverstein, Nicholson, and Marshall (2007) proposed the “participatory library” idea, referring to it as a truly integrated library system that must allow users to take part in core functions of the library, like the catalogue system, rather than the more peripheral functions.

Whilst there has been some discussion of the term, it has not yet been fully adopted into mainstream library discourse and practice, nor has it been discussed in empirical studies. The library community is witnessing the birth of a new library model that is more firmly grounded in user engagement and participation than ever before. Emerging technologies are challenging libraries and librarians to re-conceptualise and re-position the role of users within the context of the contemporary library. This context highlights the need to understand what is happening to the library's evolution and the true nature of the contemporary library.

This paper will first provide an overview of the existing literature. Next, it will describe the research design and research approach. This will be followed by a presentation of research findings and a discussion on the contribution of the research. The paper will then discuss the research's limitation and finally it will suggest directions for future research.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Library 2.0 is a spin-off of Web 2.0 and there is a prevailing use of the “Library 2.0” term in library discourse. For this reason, though this research focuses on the participatory library, the literature review still provides details about Library 2.0. This helps to portray a fuller picture of the library evolution over time.

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## EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES AND LIBRARY 2.0

The term “emerging technologies” refers to Web 2.0, social media, and associated mobile and hand-held devices that have had a significant influence on libraries in the last ten years. Web 2.0 or social media include things such as wikis, social networking spaces, and microblogs. The practice of using these tools in libraries is often known as Library 2.0.

The term “Library 2.0”, a derivative of Web 2.0, was coined by a public librarian, Michael Casey in 2005 (Arif & Mahmood, 2012; Courtney, 2007; Crawford, 2006; Murley, 2008). Library 2.0 is defined as:

a model for library service that encourages constant and purposeful change, inviting user participation in the creation of both the physical and the virtual services they want, supported by consistently evaluating services. It also attempts to reach new users and better serve current ones through improved customer-driven offerings (Casey & Savastinuk, 2006, p. 40).

Whilst several scholars assert that Library 2.0 is not purely technology (Crawford, 2006; Holmberg, Huvila, Kronqvist-Berg, & Widen-Wulff, 2009; Wallis, 2007), many scholars and practitioners hold the view that that Library 2.0 is about technology (or depends on technology). For instance, in early articles, Maness (2006a) states that Library 2.0 is “the application of interactive, collaborative, and multi-media web-based technologies to web-based library services and collections” (para. 8). In this line of thought, Library 2.0 is purported to be primarily web-based and hence involves the implementation of web tools, particularly Web 2.0 tools. This perspective is one that gives the impression that Library 2.0 is primarily technology driven (Shoniwa & Hall, 2007). Those who see Library 2.0 as a technology-based library also reason that the increase in virtual services within the library environment is primarily the implementation and experiment of Web 2.0 technologies (Bradley, 2007). The use of Web 2.0 technologies enables libraries to easily collaborate and create online communities, to explore new ways to communicate with, educate, and attract new users. Shoniwa and Hall (2007), found that Library 2.0 is predominantly considered to be the application of Web 2.0 tools and techniques in which users were the centre of services.

Though Library 2.0 was a heatedly debated topic, its heyday is past. In terms of statistics, Brantley (2010) found that the number of articles about Web 2.0 and Library 2.0 published in the library and information science journals increased dramatically in the period between 2005 and 2009, in which 2008 was recorded as the peak of Library 2.0 publication. For example, in the database, Library Literature and Information Science Full Text, the number of articles went from 89 in 2005 to 459 in 2008 and dropped to 340 in 2009 (Brantley, 2010, p. 351). Similarly, Crawford (2011) found that the discussion on Library 2.0 peaked in 2007 and 2008 and then declined. His statistics revealed that in WorldCat.org, the phrase “Library 2.0” yielded one item in 2005, 39 in 2006, 149 in 2007, 131 in 2008, 90 in 2009, and 42 in 2010.

## LIBRARY 2.0 THEORIES AND MODELS

Though use of the term “Library 2.0” is declining, it is necessary to be aware of Library 2.0 models and theories that have been developed. This helps us to see the evolution of the library over time. Table 1 below shows an overview of those theories and models.

As can be seen from the table, Library 2.0 theories and models were developed between 2006 and 2009. Noticeably, most of them are not based on empirical studies. The development of these models is primarily based on literature review, Web 2.0 principles, and the personal understanding and experiences of the researchers and practitioners. There is only one model that is empirically developed. However, it is not based on a key stakeholder in libraries (i.e., users). Rather, it is based on ideas provided by researchers and practitioners whose perspective may be different from that of users.

However Library 2.0 is defined or whatever Library models are developed, there has been always a relationship between two main stakeholders (librarians and users) and this relationship has been changed in the period of Library 2.0. The primary changes include enhancing interaction and the rapport between libraries and users (Bosque, Leif, & Skarl, 2012; Chen, Chu, & Xu, 2012; Connell, 2009; Ganster & Schumacher, 2009; Phillips, 2011; Sodt & Summey, 2009; Sump-Crethar, 2012; Wan, 2011). Users' rights and power have also been increased as users can to take part in a wide range of activities in the library, for instance, cataloguing (Gordon-Murnane, 2006; Steele, 2009), collection development (Reynolds et al., 2010), and improvement of library services (Curran, Murray, Stephen Norrby, & Christian, 2006; Mahmood & Richardson, 2011).

## PARTICIPATION IN LIBRARIES AND PARTICIPATORY LIBRARY

The change in relationship between libraries and users, the diversification of roles that users can play, and the promotion of users' rights demonstrate the fact that users have had opportunities to participate in the business of libraries. Participation is acknowledged as the key element in contemporary libraries. For example, Fichter (2006) viewed that participation is a must-have feature of the library. Without participation, and its enabler, trust, libraries will remain dated. Casey and Savastinuk (2006, 2007) also considered participatory and user-driven services to be core feature of libraries. The ideas of participation or involvement are further supported by other scholars. Participation means that users are involved in planning library services, evaluating those services and suggesting improvements (Stephens & Collins, 2007). Likewise, a study by Holmberg et al. (2009) upheld this idea by saying Library 2.0 enables “a new culture of participation catalysed by social web technologies” (p. 677).

In order to reflect the true change in libraries, Lankes and Silverstein (2006) introduced the term, “participatory library” that refers to a more evolved version of Library 2.0. These two scholars recognised that in existing Library 2.0 systems, Web 2.0 sits at the peripheral functions of libraries (i.e., libraries use a social networking tool to market their services). The idea is that participatory library must allow users to

**Table 1**  
Overview of existing Library 2.0 models and theories

Model/Theory name	Authors and year	Publication format	Methodology/Approach
Library 2.0 theory	Maness (2006a)	Journal article	Personal experience
Participatory library service model	Casey and Savastinuk (2007)	Book	Personal experience
Building blocks of Library 2.0	Holmberg et al. (2009)	Journal article	Survey
Public Library 2.0 model	Chowdhury, Poulter, and McMenemy (2006)	Journal article	Personal experience and Ranganathan law
Academic Library 2.0 model	Xu et al. (2009)	Journal article	Inspecting websites for Web 2.0 features
Academic Library 2.0 model	Habib (2006)	Thesis	Brainstorming chart
Library 2.0 service model	Pienaar and Smith (2008)	Journal article	Adapted from O'Reilly (2005) model of Web 2.0
System architecture of Library 2.0	Yang et al. (2009)	Journal article	Personal experience

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