Web 2.0 as a Tool for Competitive Intelligence
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What does Web 2.0 mean?
Web 2.0 is an overarching term that describes a popular new approach to user-interaction with websites, which affects software designers and end-user experiences. Generally, developers create an application which is populated with user-generated content. Many Web 2.0 applications allow a user to post, edit, read and upload content, which ranges from simple text-based content to audio, image and video-based content. Thus, the user becomes an integral part of the applications as the source of content.

Web 2.0 Applications
Because the term Web 2.0 encompasses an approach to design and user-interaction, it is impossible to describe just one way these Web 2.0 applications are created. Although most applications are capable of any type of content, each application is different and built specifically for a particular user-interaction experience. As a result, the Web 2.0 experience varies between applications which emphasize certain content types and provide different content layout schemes. There are many applications available for users today, but some of the most popular examples include Twitter, Facebook, Wikipedia, RSS Feeds and Blogs.

Getting Technical
Web 2.0 applications interact with servers by allowing information to be both sent and received at the same time without reloading. This asynchronous movement of information allows users to interact with web pages efficiently and seamlessly.

When information requests reach the server, the information returned is formatted in XML or JSON format, both of which are popular web creation languages. The integration of Flash for media files where HTML is not sufficient further enhances this “Web 2.0” experience.

Another uniquely Web 2.0 feature is the ability for many of the sites to communicate with one another using various developer languages. XML, RSS and JSON output are generated by web sites so that other sites can integrate functionality into itself, linking the two together. The sharing of data between sites supports the vast network of linked sites that we recognize as an essential part of the Web 2.0 experience.

Social Networking
Immensely popular for both professional and personal users, who create and design profile pages to display and share personal information. Many businesses and organizations maintain profiles to share organizational announcements, news, product development, etc.

Librarian’s Uses
Identify company executives, organizational contacts, professional relationships and potential clients
Monitor an organization’s news and announcements

Blogs (“web logs”)
An online journal or editorial, delivering facts or opinions, but usually a combination thereof. Although commonly text-based, audio and video Blogs are also prevalent, as are features which allow readers to post comments.

Librarian’s Uses
Monitor for current events/latest news articles
Explore an organization or individual’s views on a particular topic
Learn about an organization or individual’s projects, activities, and goals

Twitter
A micro blogging and social networking site. Users share text-based information of 140 characters or less. Users “follow” each other to receive postings via “tweets.”

Librarian’s Uses
News aggregator - Monitor news events as they occur
Locate new product information, press releases and articles of interest shared by individuals or organizations

RSS (“Really Simple Syndication”) Feeds
RSS feeds provide short headline-like statements to a subscriber whenever a blog, news site or webpage is updated. Users subscribe to RSS feeds on websites using an RSS reader, which establishes a connection between the webpage and the RSS Reader.

Librarian’s Uses
Receive latest news and/or press releases without manually checking multiple sites
Provides alerts for important events (e.g., Supreme Court Rulings, product releases, etc.)

Advantages
Timeliness
No publication, print or distribution deadlines means Blogs often break stories before newspapers or magazines
RSS feeds, Twitter feeds and status alerts share information as the event occurs; before a news article is written
Ability to selectively choose which feeds or status alerts to receive based on author, distributor or content genre

Precision
Blogs, RSS feeds and Twitter feeds focus on specific topics or organizations, minimizing search times to weed for relevant information
Twitter hashtags act as a controlled vocabulary for searching

Links and New Leads
Bloggers link to additional articles
Relevant issues and links in “comments” on blogs and Facebook pages
RSS and Twitter often link to articles and/or press releases
Follow relationships on LinkedIn for new contacts

Disadvantages
Time Commitment
Account set-up and maintenance
Monitoring more sites takes more time

Reliability
Rumors spread quickly in the online environment
No fact-checking mechanism
Illegitimate accounts
False information purposefully shared

Accessibility and Privacy
Some organizations restrict access or do not want other companies to know they are being monitored
Many sites now include options to monitor who has viewed a profile, page or tweets about a subject