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Lee Rainie, Director, Pew Internet & American Life Project: Web 2.0 and What It Means for Libraries

By Michelle Foyt

Anticipating that I would hear the latest on Web 2.0 and beyond, I sat in the back of the crowded Salon F at the Mystic Marriott, Groton, catching glimpses of the small but distinguished looking man at the front who was being introduced by Chris Bradley. Chris let us know that pewinternet.org, the Web page for Pew Internet & American Life Project, for which Lee Rainie was director, had 150 free Internet research reports. Lee Rainie oversees one of the 8 major initiatives underway at the PEW Research Center, “a nonpartisan ‘fact tank’ that provides information on the issues, attitudes and trends shaping America and the world.”

What I gleaned from Lee’s informative, well-documented talk was that Web 2.0 is about participation and because of its widespread use now plays a more central role in everyday life. Wireless and broadband have helped transform the Web. Interconnectivity among the Web, cell phones, ipods, and other gadgets has led to a multitude of ways for people to share information, their lives and their creativity.

The “New Digital Ecosystem” has emerged because most people have broadband and the internet at home. Because of speed and convenience, the Web has become a “destination.” Gadgets, video and other media have become ubiquitous. The Internet has replaced the computer as “local storage.” All of this has intensified the way people use the internet and centralizes it in our way of life. Wireless has dramatically increased ways and means of connectivity.

Many millions, especially young people, create and share content online. By sharing their knowledge and feelings, they build relationships, communities and communication. Americans customize their online experience with Web 2.0 tools. This diverse array of tools has led to a spectrum of new ways of communicating.

Lee suggests, among other things, that libraries can rise to the challenge by managing and using the explosion of information on the Web, remaining critical and evaluative of information, and monitoring and guiding ethical behavior. The librarian can network with people and act as a “neutral information broker” that can assist individuals authenticate information and social situations

The “new connectivity” has changed life and culture by substantially increasing the amount and speed of information. The diversity of connectivity has dramatically increased the opportunities to find information, people and social situations. The “multi-tasker” exhibits “continuous partial attention” caused by the diversity of gadgets and Web connections. Although this continuous openness to interruptions, occasions, etc., causes stress, most don’t want things to change back.