Cool Tools and Toys for Play and Work

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OCLC’s 2005 report, *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources*, highlighted the phrase ‘keep keeping up’ to call attention to the need for libraries and the people who work in them to keep current with changes in information technology, the Internet, and the devices we use (De Rosa, et al., 2005). What a challenge! We are all acutely aware of the need to track changes and we all devise our own strategies to do so. Like many, I employ several strategies for keeping up with technological innovations and for adopting innovations. My strategies include: subscribing to listservs and rss feeds, contributing to a group blog, using wiki software for group projects, and generally being open to incorporating new ways of doing my day-to-day work.

My prevailing strategy is to divide technological innovations I want to watch and learn about into hardware and software. Thinking about technology like this makes me feel less overwhelmed and helps me better track changes. I offer this as just one approach, knowing that everyone will do what works best for them when deciding what to watch and how deeply they will explore new trends.

**Practice with Hardware**
In the early 1990s, I set the intention to learn about computers and took an introductory computer class at a local community college. The instructor gave advice that I still find useful. He suggested reviewing ads for computers to maintain awareness of developments in hardware. At the time he meant ads directed at people who build their own computers. Now I browse ads showing the breadth of consumer electronics and imagine how libraries might use these “toys.” For example, will library users want to check out book readers, laptops, video cameras, game consoles, or other devices? Or, what new services might library staff create and what new skills might be gained when using these tools?

My short list of possible electronics to play with is below. What would yours include? Examples of possible uses are included, though there are certainly many additional inspired uses.

Digital cameras can be used for taking photos of your library events, for use in written or oral presentations or to post on Web pages, and many other reasons. Many libraries offer cameras for check out and some, like Ann Arbor District Library, give classes on how to use them.

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Partial solutions don’t work. That’s why EBSCONET does.

We can help.
Cell phones and other hand-held devices such as smartphones and PDAs are being used by libraries for text messaging reference services. LibrarianInBlack blogged about South Eastern Louisiana University’s early experience with their text message reference service using Altarama’s Reference by SMS. In February 2008, Joe Murphy from Yale University’s Kline Science Library guest posted on Tame The Web. He described Yale’s use of an Apple iPhone for their Txt a Librarian service and for posting to their Twitter and Facebook accounts.

Small laptops are increasing in numbers and options. You may be familiar with the Asus Eee PC or the XO Laptop from the One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) Project. Many Web sites describing the OLPC Project and laptop can be found on the Internet. I especially enjoyed the You Tube review, “A Librarian Reviews the XO Laptop” by You Tuber rashford of Portland, OR (rashford also writes the blog “Librarian by Design”). Several other small laptops are listed at the site Laptoping. Recently small laptops have become popular for use at conferences because of their portability, novelty, and lower cost.

Microphones, webcams, and head-phones are common accessories for computers and laptops. Yet, using these for services such as video chat reference is still new territory for many libraries. Two leading the way with a Skype a Librarian service are The Ohio University Libraries and University of Waterloo Library. Skype requires use of a microphone and a webcam. Char Booth was recognized as a Mover and Shaker for her role in developing OU’s Skype a Librarian service.

E-book readers’ merits are still debated even though many libraries have provided lending services for several years. With the release of the Amazon Kindle, libraries once again can evaluate if and how they will incorporate readers into their services.

Video cameras offer libraries numerous creative options. A quick search for ‘library’ or ‘libraries’ on YouTube or blip.tv returns numerous instructional and promotional videos. Other uses for cameras are making them available for check out and creating video contests where library users submit their videos.

Game consoles and games are very popular with our users and many libraries are mulling if they should or how they will incorporate games and gaming into their collections and services. Others provide the usual range of services such as game and game console checkout and game nights. Libraries also incorporate games into their instruction and orientation programs. The Ubiquitous Librarian’s post “CeLIBration 2007—recap (Diddy ain’t got nothin’ on us)” describes Georgia Tech’s successful orientation program featuring games.

This isn’t meant to be a definitive list and like any list, arguments can be made to remove or include items. The list is intended to give libraries and library staff something to react to (a starting point) when thinking about what skills they want to gain or services they want to consider developing. As I compiled this list, I discovered similar lists from Stephen Abram and David Lee King. You can see what they chose in their blog posts titled Technology Petting Zoos from February 5, 2008 and Topeka’s Techie Toybox from October 23, 2007 respectively.

Exploring Social Software
After deciding which hardware or “toys” you want to learn more about, dive into the mix of social software and social networking sites. You probably have heard of and used many of these or similar Web hosted services. Flickr and YouTube are just two obvious matches to the electronics listed above because of their photo and video
hosting services. Common to all of these is
the ability to connect with others whether
creating a document together, commenting
on a post, or friending someone.

Web hosted productivity software
such as Google Docs and Zoho foster col-
laboration. Participants use the Web-based
software to create documents online and
can collaborate with anyone who is given
permission to access the online document.
(You may recognize Google Docs from its
former incarnation as Writely.) Because
Google Docs and Zoho are Internet-based,
working with colleagues, regardless of their
location, is a snap. New to Zoho is their
redesign for the iPhone. In their blog post
“Zoho for iPhone Redesigned” from June
6, 2008, commenters note that mobile ver-
sions for other phones are in development.

Wiki software is well known because
of Wikipedia. Libraries and librarians have
employed wiki software in numerous ways:
for professional conferences and committee
work, work projects, subject guides, and
more. A well known subject guide using
wiki software is Chad Boeninger’s Biz Wiki.
Other notable wikis are Library Success: A
Best Practices Wiki and the Library In-
struction Wiki.

WebBlog software is very common
among libraries and librarians as a way
to promote services, discuss issues affect-
ing librarianship, and more. Many of us
are familiar with text blogs which fill the
biblioblogosphere. Other types of blogging
include mobile blogging or moblogging,
and video blogging, also called vlogging or
v-blogging. Mobile blogging entails using
a mobile device to post entries to a blog.
Often photos and videos taken with a cell
phone are included. A video blog primarily
consists of posted videos regardless of the
tools used to create the videos.

Social networking sites like Facebook,
MySpace and Ning enable people to con-
nect with friends and colleagues as well
as with organizations, causes, events, and
more. Librarians and libraries are exploring
these as ways to connect with each other,
their users, and to promote their services.

Widgets are increasingly popping up
on library Web sites. For example, many
libraries use a Meebo widget for their chat
service and embed the widget on their
library home page or on individual librar-
ian pages. So what exactly is a widget? From
Wikipedia’s definition, it can be described
as a small Web-based application or code
that can be placed into a Web site. By
embedding widgets featuring video, photo,
or more, librarians can spice up static html
pages without acquiring expert program-
ing skills. Sites like Sprout make it even
easier by enabling you to build, publish,
and manage your own widgets.

Social bookmarking sites like del.icio.
us, Furl, and Digg let you save your favor-
ite Web sites for later access. Librarians
are finding creative ways of incorporating
bookmarked sites into their work. Some
librarians include a tag cloud—words repre-
senting the saved sites shaped in the form of
a cloud—on a library course page. Anne-
Marie Deitering’s WR 222: Everything’s an
Argument course page is one example.

Media sharing sites like Flickr and
Vimeo are great for hosting photos and vid-
eos. Many libraries use media sharing sites to
store content for use on Web sites, in presen-
tations, and as a way to promote and make
visible the library, its events and services.
One nice example (ok, maybe I’m biased!) is
Oregon State University Library’s display of
its Northwest Art Collection on Flickr.

Games, massive multiplayer online
games and alternate reality games continue
to be hot topics of discussion. For some
libraries the discussion centers on whether
to collect and lend games. Other libraries
question how to incorporate games into
bibliographic information services, programming, and library events. Blogs exploring issues of games and gaming may help libraries looking at these issues. Examples include Research Quest, information.games and News about Games and Gaming from the American Library Association’s Games and Gaming Member Interest Group.

Now that you’ve seen this list, what might you add or subtract? Which sites would you choose to focus on? Muddling through the decision of which software will be most impactful for us and our libraries will take time for exploration. Regardless of what is chosen, it’s apparent that social software and the devices used with them are no longer a fad.

**Reading**

One more piece critical to keeping up is learning about others’ experiences. We all know about keeping up with journal literature and many of us subscribe to e-mail listservs. Add to this, setting up a RSS reader to follow blogs and other sites which offer feeds including journals and listservs.

With the many choices of feed readers, you are likely to find one matching your preferences. I have stuck with Bloglines, while colleagues swear by NetVibes or Google Reader. Other options include PageFlakes and Yahoo Pipes. After choosing a reader, the next challenge is deciding on which sites to subscribe to and how many. My feed reader quickly ballooned with subscriptions to many more feeds than I realistically could read. So I continually evaluate my feeds and attempt to harness my enthusiasm by focusing on blogs and sites that consistently contribute content over time and that provoke and engage me. Some that have recently caught my eye, as well as some well established sites, are in the sidebar.

**Common Craft**
http://www.commoncraft.com/

**Designing Better Libraries**
http://dbl.lishost.org/blog/

**Educause Connects Contributed by Educause Learning Initiative**
http://connect.educause.edu/Library/ELI/

**Info-fetishist**
http://info-fetishist.org

**Infomational**
http://infomational.wordpress.com/

**LibrarianInBlack.net**
http://librarianinblack.typepad.com/librarianinblack/

**Read Write Web**
http://www.readwriteweb.com/

**Web Social Architecture and the post “A Conceptual Map of the Social Web”**
http://www.websocialarchitecture.com
Keeping up has become more complex. However, cultivating a sense of play and adventure will hopefully prevent this from becoming just another chore. Add to that an item posted on the Info-fetishist blog stating, “sometimes even when the social or informational or educational or other payoff is there for the taking, developing new social networks takes work, and energy—and sometimes we have to pick and choose where to spend it,” which is also true about keeping up with changes in libraries and technology.

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YouTube, LLC. A Librarian Reviews the XO Laptop. http://youtube.com/watch?v=quj1AucDOU0&feature=related.


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