"Local library" takes on a whole new meaning with these community-focused sites, explains Charles Lyons

While Google has been busy making good on its mission "to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful," it has been less successful at making your community's local information accessible and useful. It's not that the company is not trying, but that information seems to flow differently at a local level than it does on a global scale. Google's most visible foray into the "local web" is its local search engine Google Maps. Essentially, it's a business and residential directory enhanced by the addition of maps, photos, user reviews, and more. Type "libraries buffalo ny" into the search box and get a list of libraries in Buffalo. While such local search engines are useful, the real potential of the local web is just emerging—something deeper, more 2.0, and more "hyper," to use the prevailing term.

The hype around hyperlocal
"Hyperlocal" information is in-depth, intensely local information about the places where you live your everyday life: not necessarily cities or towns but the amorphous places with which you often associate more closely, like your neighborhood or your street or block. Hyperlocal web sites associate and connect online data with specific locations in the real world. In doing so, they make the Internet less of a placeless infosphere, totally separate from the physical world, and help ensure that the virtual world complements our real-world activities. In short, hyperlocal web sites are bringing a sense of place to the Internet.

And bringing a sense of place to the Internet is becoming a bustling business. EveryBlock, Hello Metro, and Outside.in are just a few of the newer hyperlocal sites focusing on geo-enriching online information. Likewise, many newspapers, often in efforts to save their very livelihoods, are initiating hyperlocal coverage of their communities. Even Google is becoming more hyperlocal by enhancing Google Maps, improving local search capabilities in Google News, and experimenting with geographic displays of search results using maps.

Libraries, too, are bringing a sense of place to the Internet. Many libraries are widely recognized for their local heritage projects that produce valuable online collections of local images, documents, maps, and more. Other libraries focus on bringing community information online: calendars of local events, directories of local organizations, municipal government data, and links to other informative local sites. Beyond that, however, the local web is creating new opportunities for community-based, locally focused libraries to get more involved with native information provision and to go hyperlocal.

Local data dispersion
A central challenge of local community data has always been that it comes from so many different places: the media, residents, government entities, and other narrowly focused organizations. Today, blogs, social networks, Twitter, and emerging hyperlocal web sites are generating even more sources for potentially useful, relevant community data. Libraries can and are serving important functions in their communities with resources that don't engender any original content but that tidy up the local infosphere, that aggregate, organize, and unify the
existing information tucked away in various corners of their communities and on the Internet.

For example, placeblogs (blogs about specific places) are becoming more common, and some libraries are building directories of noteworthy local placeblogs (see Hartford Public Library’s, CT, “Hartford Blogs” page). More enterprising librarians could even design a blog aggregator to syndicate and display content from a variety of local placeblogs.

Another example is the community calendar: local event data abounds on the web but is spread across many different sites. Using the technology developed for the elmcity project by Jon Udell, a "new librarian" created a "calendar curator" blog (see Hartford Public Library’s “Hartford Blogs” page). More enterprising librarians could even design a blog aggregator to syndicate and display content from a variety of local placeblogs.

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for example). Google Custom Search and Rollyo enable the design of focused search engines that only search the sites you select. You can put the search box right on the library site and customize the look of it. The best part? They’re both free. Any library that already has a web page with a collection of local links can simply use those two sites as the basis for its own custom search engine.

**LINK LIST**

- Elmcity Project blog.jonudell.net/elmcity-project-faq
- Everyblock everyblock.com
- Front Porch Forum frontporchforum.com
- Geograph British Isles geograph.org.uk
- HelloMetro hellometro.com
- MyCommunityInfo.ca mycommunityinfo.ca
- Nearby Tweets nearbytweets.com
- Outside.in outside.in
- Placeblogger placeblogger.com
- Platial platial.com
- Syracuse.com’s “Central NY on Twitter” syracuse.com/twitter/index.ssf
- Topix topix.com

**LIBRARY PROJECTS**

- Hartford Blogs: List of placeblogs specific to the Connecticut capital collected by Hartford PL hartfordinfo.org/hartford_blogs.asp
- Loudounpedia: Wiki from Loudoun County PL, VA, featuring local news and community spotlights loudounpedia.org
- MyHamilton.ca: “The one location where you can find everything you want to know about Hamilton, Ontario, Canada,” sponsored in part by Hamilton PL myhamilton.ca
- New York City Labor History Map: Images from NYU’s Wagner labor archives embedded in a Google Map of New York City’s streets and avenues bit.ly/NYULaborMap
- Pikes Peak Library District’s “Community Information”: Access to economic indicator statistics and information on local agencies and more bit.ly/PPPLinfo
- Wikinorthia: Australian effort from Darebin, Moreland City, and Yarra Plenty Regional Libraries “documenting life in Melbourne’s North” wikinorthia.net.au

**Drawing out local voices**

Think about it. Who knows the community best, who are the real experts? A multilingual behemoth like Google? The city newspaper? No! It’s the locals themselves, people like you and your patrons. And the best hyperlocal web sites draw out the knowledge that resides in the citizens of a community by creating local conversations. One way libraries can do this is to start a placeblog. Lots of libraries are already blogging, but most blog about themselves. By turning the lens around and focusing on the community, librarians can work with the two-way, conversational nature of blogs, by encouraging comments from readers in the pursuit of local dialog. Some librarians may even want to consider collaborating with the community on its placeblog.

A step beyond placeblogs are locally focused social networks that combine old and new media platforms: information from traditional sources like newspapers and magazines comiled with user-generated blog posts and photos. Many cities have them, e.g., Hoboken411 and Buffalo Rising. A library-affiliated example is myhamilton.ca, where the Hamilton Public Library, Ont., is a collaborator (“The one location where you can find everything you want to know about Hamilton, Ontario, Canada”).

**THE LOCAL WEB IS CREATING NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR COMMUNITY-BASED, LOCALLY FOCUSED LIBRARIES TO GO HYPERLOCAL.**

These sites implement a more full blown “crowdsourcing” approach to tap into local knowledge—residents not only comment on posts but also submit their own. The sites also provide forums with often lively discussions about local topics. Starting and maintaining a hyperlocal social network is a large undertaking and likely not feasible for most libraries. Still, at least, libraries can monitor these sites to stay in touch with topics of interest within their communities. Some librarians may want to become active participants, more vocal locals, in these networks and establish the library as a knowledgeable, resourceful presence.

Starting up a local dialog, however, doesn’t have to entail a large technological endeavor like a social networking site. Some libraries may want to follow the lead of Front Porch Forum, a site that relies on the ancient technology called email to de-vise neighborhood discussion forums that have proven to be quite effective.

**Homemade bread or Pop-Tarts?**

Baxter Black, the cowboy poet on National Public Radio, once wrote, “Small-town papers often thrive because CNN or the New York Times are not going to scoop them for coverage of the ‘VFW Fish Fry’ or ‘Bridge Construction Delay’... I think of local papers as the last refuge of unfiltered America—a running documentary of the warts and triumphs of Real People—unfiltered by the Spin and Bias and the Opaque Polish of today’s Homogenized Journalism. It is the difference between Homemade Bread and Pop-Tarts.”

Like small-town papers, libraries can thrive because they won’t be scooped if they focus on organizing hyperlocal information that is more granular, more specialized, more detailed than what other sources supply. Every community is, in its own way, buzzing with activity, and local librarians can dare to press their ears to the hive. There is no shortage of material that locally curious libraries can strive to make more accessible online, from the traditional (oral histories, postcards, death certificates, draft cards) to the more techie (blogs, mashups, tweets). Let Big City Newspapers (if it even survives) serve up Pop-Tarts, while libraries focus on all the different types of bread being baked at home—the things that capture the truly unique personality of their communities and things that will not likely be available elsewhere.

When people refer to their local library they often mean “local” only in the sense that the library happens to be the one located closest to them. By becoming more persistently and energetically local, by going hyperlocal, libraries can make the word local a more meaningful part of what defines the library’s role in the community, beyond just its physical location. Doing so can demonstrate that the library is in touch with the information needs of community members and help them view the library as a more relevant resource in their everyday lives.

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