

Socially (un)acceptable

Access to social media sites via public libraries is patchy in Scotland, says Christine Rooney-Browne, and it's time to bring them all into the world of shared communities.

The evolution of the internet and concepts such as Web 2.0 has made a significant impact on how we access and share information, communicate with one another and form communities. Many of the traditional services offered by public libraries are now available online via search engines, social networking websites, blogs, wikis, instant messaging and virtual communities. These websites offer us an opportunity to express ourselves, enjoy the social side of the internet, and improve the speed at which we can share news, information and advice. Although the quality of information provided by many of these resources can be questionable, the reality is that they are fast becoming essential tools.

Although some public library authorities in Scotland, such as Edinburgh, West Lothian and East Renfrewshire, have embraced Web 2.0, offering users access to a range of social media websites, there are others which, at present only offer restricted access.

Visiting the Mitchell Library in Glasgow to attend the Aye Write! book festival, I had intended to write about author events on Twitter using the Mitchell's public access computers. However, when I tried to access [Twitter](#), I was greeted with the screen message: "This site has been banned under Glasgow City Council's Acceptable Use Policy." I was also reminded that my "Internet usage was being monitored and logged" and informed that "Users who ignore this warning and persistently attempt to access barred sites may have access to library computers and the internet withdrawn".

[Flickr](#) and [YouTube](#) produced the same message while attempts to log on to [Facebook](#) and [MySpace](#) redirected me to a restricted access screen. Strangely, [Bebo](#), which has the youngest user profile of all social media, was available with full unrestricted access. The Mitchell's library assistants were helpful but could only respond with a standard reply that all social networking sites were banned.

After filling out a customer comment card I posted about my experiences on my blog, Library of Digress. I received several comments from others expressing similar concerns in other local authorities. The Head of PR for Glasgow City Council, Colin Edgar, also commented and informed me that the problems with Facebook and MySpace were the result of "small technical problems" which have since been resolved. Flickr and YouTube

are still unavailable, however, as Glasgow Libraries are concerned that minors might be able to view adult content via these sites. Twitter, on the other hand, had been added to the list of banned websites because it was "...relatively new so a decision hasn't been made yet by libraries as to whether to permit access".

I absolutely understand the need to protect and prevent users from accessing inappropriate content from public access PCs. However, I am unhappy that this is being used as a justification for banning access to useful websites, especially when users could easily stumble across inappropriate content on websites that are not banned. So as a member of Glasgow Libraries I am unable to browse photography collections on Flickr, view webcasts on YouTube or share information on Twitter, at least for the time being.

This experience highlights the inconsistency that exists in Scotland in terms of public libraries providing access to and supporting web 2.0 services. It also draws our attention to a possible lack of awareness about what these websites actually do and misconceptions regarding their value. In addition, it communicates a mixed message to library users throughout Scotland with some being unfairly disadvantaged as a result of local internet filtering policies.

Twitter and Flickr are excellent examples of websites that offer opportunities for individuals and groups to connect, collaborate, communicate, exchange ideas, ask for advice, and learn from others. Therefore, would it not make more sense to educate library users about the appropriate use of Web 2.0 and social networking rather than choosing to ban access? Is it not the role of public libraries to help library users and staff get to grips with Web 2.0 services; to encourage participation; and to teach essential skills to help users effectively manage their virtual lives? After all, Barack Obama, Gordon Brown and even Glasgow City Council realise the value and impact of these services and regularly post updates on Twitter.

The [Scottish Library and Information Council](#) (SLIC) and [CILIPS](#) are keen supporters of Web 2.0, appreciating its value in facilitating the development of virtual library services. I am currently working with SLIC to develop Web 2.0 guidelines to help support public libraries in their understanding of these services and to promote awareness and advocacy at both a national and local level. These guidelines will be available soon.

Web 2.0 tools allow public libraries the chance to extend their role in breaking down barriers by promoting democratic access to resources; addressing the digital divide; supporting communities; and encouraging

learning in online virtual communities. It provides us with invaluable opportunities to enable and educate our users and society as a whole, not only about new technologies but also about our profession's relevance in the 21st century.

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