Facebook this!: How academic libraries can use
social networking sites to stay relevant with their users

Introduction

In order to stay relevant with the student population at colleges and universities, academic librarians need to pay attention to the trends and behaviors of the students. Evidence suggests that students are increasingly using the Internet to conduct research for classes and to socialize with each other. Social networking websites, particularly Facebook, play an important role in many college students' lives and should not be ignored by information professionals, especially public service academic librarians. Facebook provides a preexisting online community that reflects the real campus community, which librarians can utilize to better understand students and to offer useful and applicable library services.

What is Facebook?

Facebook is a social networking site that allows people to connect with friends, classmates, coworkers, casual acquaintances — anyone who is also a member of the site. The name refers to the traditional print face books of incoming students once popular at many colleges. The site started at Harvard in February 2004 and soon spread to some other campuses. In its early days, only those with a verified university e-mail address could sign up. This exclusivity made it different from MySpace and Friendster, two other popular social networking sites, which were open to anyone with an e-mail address. Facebook soon began expanding to college campuses across the country and the world. College-bound high school seniors knew of the site from older friends and clambered to get their official e-mail addresses so they could get on and start making friends before setting foot on campus. Facebook opened to high school students with verified e-mails in September 2005.

In September 2006, Facebook opened to everyone, a slightly controversial move among its users, but one that led it to become a strong competitor with MySpace. As of January 2008, Facebook claims 60 million active users with an 85 percent market share at 4-year U.S. universities (Facebook n.d.). Changes and new features to the site are often met with resentment and user outcry. For example, when the news feed feature launched in September 2006, students joined groups like "Students against Facebook News Feed (Official Petition to Facebook)" en masse to voice their opinions collectively. Usually this user feedback results in changes—Facebook soon added ways for users to opt out of sharing information via the news feed and continues to fine tune the service.

Why is Facebook important for academic libraries?

Though Facebook is open to anyone now, it has retained its popularity on college campuses. It has very high adoption and retention rates amongst students. It is also becoming a primary means of communication for students. A study by Student Activities administrator Greg Heiberger at South Dakota State University revealed that 98 percent of students log into Facebook daily compared with 31 percent that visit the university's online portal. Those students also check Facebook more often than e-mail (Guidry 2007). Similarly, Fred Stutzman at UNC Chapel Hill found that 94 percent of freshmen had a Facebook account by the end of the first semester (2006). Additionally, a report by the Pew Internet and American Life Project states that more teens use social networking sites and other forms of contact like IMs and texting than they use e-mail to communicate (2007). Clearly, Facebook is important to students and there is a disconnect between the way they communicate with each other (social networking sites) and the way universities communicate with students (e-mail and campus websites). Academic libraries need to explore these emerging communication avenues to provide services, marketing and outreach to their users.

Another important aspect of Facebook is that it reflects and interacts with a real life community rather than being an online-only community. The social connections evident on Facebook are, for the most part, genuine. College students are friends with high school classmates, people they live with on campus, fellow members of organizations and acquaintances they meet at parties. Most campus groups also have a virtual group on Facebook that its members can join to display their affiliation. Students used to be able to show their class schedule on profiles, though that feature appears to be currently disabled. The campus community and the Facebook community do not exist separately—Facebook complements the in person community and extends the conversation and identity building occurring in real life. Since the library remains an important part of student life on campus, it should play a role in the online campus community as well.

Furthermore, Facebook is only part of a bigger technology movement. This trend, often termed "Web 2.0,"is characterized by user interaction, collaborative intelligence, and "lightweight user interfaces" (O'Reilly 2005). Other services that fit this model include blogs, wikis, podcasts and social bookmarking. Librarians need to be aware of all of these technologies, including Facebook, in order to keep up with their users.

How can libraries use Facebook?

Facebook started off small. Initially, the user profiles formed the core of the site with private messages serving as the communication tool. Three years later, though, Facebook has many features including groups, photos, notes, and thousands of applications. For newcomers to the site, the range of features can be intimidating. Below is an overview of what's available and how libraries and librarians can make use of the site.

Librarians can join the site just like anyone else, especially now that anyone can sign up. With official university e-mail addresses, librarians at academic institutions

have been able to sign up since the site started. Because they are part of the school's network, they are able to see most of the student profiles and group pages that are accessible to members of the network. (Some users set higher privacy levels making their profiles only visible to friends, not to the entire network. Some groups are visible only to fellow group members.)

One of the major concerns for librarians and other faculty and staff members on Facebook is the issue of "friending" students. Though open to anyone and rapidly growing in the 25 and up demographic (Facebook n.d.), the core of the site focuses on students. Students see it as their space and may view activity by campus administration as an invasion of their privacy, despite their knowledge that the information they display is viewable by the whole network. From personal experience, this is a valid concern, but some librarians report being friends with students (Mathews 2006).

Because of these concerns about invading students' space, many libraries created Facebook profiles for the library itself. In late 2006, however, Facebook began shutting these pages down because it violated their terms of service (Greenwell 2006). Facebook profiles are only allowed for real people, not organizations.

Some libraries also use the groups feature to promote the library and its services. Groups do provide more functionality, like the ability to message large numbers of users at once, than is provided to individual users. Since group activity is not posted to the user's news feed, though, maintaining a library group is not the most effective way to reach students. They will have to remember to check the group page periodically rather than have information pushed to them via the news feed. Furthermore, most groups convey a student's feelings about a particular topic, confirm their membership in an organization or display an inside joke among friends, so they are not used extensively for communicating. Interestingly, students sometimes create groups about their campus library, which show that libraries do play a role in the social lives of students. However, these groups can be negative —"My School has a Library Nazi

Club" with 278 members—as well as positive—"Powell Rangers" at UCLA is "for those of us who spend endless nights at Powell and consider it our Second Home...if not just Home!" and has 120 members.

In November 2007, Facebook launched Facebook Pages. This feature is intended for businesses, non-profits, music groups and the like and is in response to the shutting down of such profiles the year prior. Library/Public Building is one of the official categories of pages one can create. Instead of having friends, organizations with pages can have fans. Since institutions are no longer allowed to create their own profiles, libraries with a Facebook presence seem to be adopting the Pages model. A search for 'library' in Facebook Pages results in over 350 hits. These libraries are a mix of public, academic and school libraries with a few special libraries and non-relevant hits. There does not seem to be a high rate of adoption among students for these Pages—most have 20-30 fans—but they are still a new feature and are not easy to find within Facebook. However, this seems to be a promising venture for academic libraries and their use should definitely be explored further.

The Facebook Platform for applications launched in May 2007. This service allows anyone to develop programs that operate in Facebook. Applications are available free of charge for all users to add to their account and display on their profile pages. As of November 30, 2007, the most popular applications include Superwall and Funwall, which enhance the standard wall feature, Top Friends, which emulates a popular MySpace feature allowing a user to select their favorite friends, and SuperPoke and X Me, which add more to the Poke feature (Peters 2007). Several libraries (Notre Dame, University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign, and the College of William and Mary, to name a few) have created applications aimed at their student users. The majority of these applications have one feature — they provide a simple search for the library's OPAC. Worldcat and JSTOR also provide applications that search their respective databases.

Though the ability to search the library's catalog from within Facebook, a place many college students visit daily, is an appealing prospect, the ones currently available are not widely used. The majority of these have no more than three daily active users according to Facebook. One of the possible reasons for the non-success of library search applications is that their purpose is to send users away from Facebook. A major appeal of the site is its self-containment—users can talk to their friends, share information, play games and more, all through one interface that is uniform and easy to use. A library search on one's profile page is counterintuitive to this. Users want applications that allow them to share information about themselves and their interests—maps of places they've traveled, concerts they're attending, movies they're watching—or applications that let them interact with their friends—advanced walls that allow them to post pictures and send virtual gifts or round up a virtual zombie army.

A possibly more effective library application should provide the user with a way to share or interact. For example, Swem Library at the College of William and Mary has a Facebook application that allows the user to search, but also has a way for the user to display a map of his or her current location in the library on their profile. Still, this application only has an average of one daily active user, which is typical of library Facebook applications. Ryan Deschamps, a blogger at The Other Librarian, shares this view. He advocates librarians understanding the culture of Facebook and being extroverted and non-business-like in their approach to applications (2007). One idea he proposes for a non-search application is a "cartoony-like character that identifies the user as a certain kind of geek, according to a specific discipline? Then, the cartoon offers a series of articles, books and websites that display the geeky interest" (Deschamps 2007).

Here are some of my ideas for library Facebook applications:
> ⇒ A way for students to track progress of their research papers and other projects to display on their profile. I've often seen this type of

information displayed via other media like IM away messages and Facebook status updates. For example 5 of 15 pages done!

⇒ Similarly, a way for students to display what they're currently researching.

⇒ A daily updating feed of images and tidbits from the University archives to display on one's profile.

⇒ A daily updating feed of recommended books, serials or other resources for a chosen discipline.

⇒ A short, entertaining quiz about the library with the user's score displayed. What is your library IQ?

One possible barrier to attracting users to library applications is the need for developers. Anyone can easily create a Facebook page, but creating an application requires some knowledge of programming languages. Creating and maintaining a useful and elegant application can take away a staff programmer's time for other projects that may be deemed more important. Some of the top applications are maintained by businesses devoted solely to creating web applications, so they have the time, money and expertise to make slick, fun applications that students want to use. In fact, there are several popular book applications used to keep track of what one is reading, none of which were created by libraries.

Another powerful way for libraries to use Facebook is to gather demographic information about the community. As a member of the campus network, the librarian is able to view profiles of everyone else in the network (unless the user has stricter privacy settings), groups that are on the network, and the network home page, which includes statistics about the network. Since most campuses have a high adoption rate, the information about students available gives a realistic snapshot of student life. Though some may see this as an invasion of privacy (Farkas 2006), it is an invaluable resource to

learning about student culture and assessing student needs for all aspects of library services.

Regardless of the degree an academic library chooses to participate in Facebook, it is important to remember that the online community is not separate from the real life community. The library should promote and advertise what it is doing on Facebook in the library building and other places on campus. One way to do this could be to create an in-library display of the campus' favorite books and movies as found through the network statistics page. The display could have other interesting campus statistics listed (political affiliations, religion, etc) as well as information about the library's activities on Facebook.

Like with most emerging technologies, there seems to be some hesitation on academic libraries' parts about embracing Facebook as a tool. I see no need for this hesitation, however. Setting up a page for a library on Facebook is a simple task and the worst result is that students will ignore it. Of course, getting students to notice the library's presence seems to be a more difficult task, but one that can be overcome with creative promotion techniques on campus and online. Furthermore, the site also makes it easy to collaborate with other librarians to improve existing efforts.

Which specific professionals are already doing relevant work?

Facebook and other social networking sites like MySpace and LinkedIn have received a fair amount of attention in various library and information related literature. (Breeding 2007; Charnigo & Barnett-Ellis 2007; Farkas 2007; Mathews 2006 and others). Librarians, though, are not the only ones keeping an eye on these sites. Mainstream media cover the phenomena extensively, though some stories tend to focus on the perceived dangers and privacy threats of the sites. The business world also especially has in interest in these ventures, as the high page views mean lots of exposure to products.

Some of the most interesting discussion regarding Facebook and other social networking sites occurs in the "blogosphere" — that is, on the personal blogs of information professionals. A search for 'facebook' and 'academic libraries' in LISZen, which searches over 700 library and information science blogs, returns over 200 hits. Since blogs can be updated at any time and are not held to traditional print publishing cycles, the information shared through them tends to be more timely and relevant for rapidly changing technologies like Facebook. Indeed, most of the information about Facebook in Meredith Farkas' 2007 book, Social Software in Libraries, is already outdated.

Since Facebook is now open to anyone, many librarians and other professionals are joining the site for personal use and to connect with friends. Of course, the social interaction allowed by the site makes it a great place for librarians to talk with each other about professional issues and share ideas and resources about emerging technologies including Facebook itself. Indeed, there are many Facebook groups intended for librarians. The group "Facebook and Librarians" has over 4,000 members. Its discussion board averages about five posts a month, with topics ranging from Facebook issues to job announcements.

Among the librarians doing relevant work is Brian Mathews, the User Experience Librarian at Georgia Tech. He has blogged extensively on the subject of Facebook in libraries at his blog The Ubiquitous Librarian over the last two years in addition to publishing a few related articles. His outreach efforts through Facebook are creative and seem to be effective.

Another professional, Fred Stutzman, a Ph.D. student at the University of North Carolina's School of Information and Library Science, studies the use of social networks by users. He presents some interesting findings, particularly about the adoption rates and the usage of Facebook by freshmen at UNC-Chapel Hill (2006). He approaches his work from an information science perspective, however, and does not touch on the

ways libraries can interact with social networking sites except for saying, "Higher Ed should look at developing useful, need-answering places in Facebook (2007).

Even though Facebook has been a fixture on most campuses since 2006, not many libraries have conducted and published concrete studies related to the site. Facebook itself can produce lots of numbers to show usage of the site at particular institutions, but it would be interesting for a library to study how its own students use the site and utilize the results to determine how and to what extent the library itself can use Facebook. Libraries who already have a presence on the site should conduct research to determine the effects its efforts are having and the perception that students have of the efforts.

Personal professional agenda

I hope that I will be able to bring my unique knowledge as a "native" student Facebook user to whichever information setting I work in and implement some of the ideas outlined above. I would also like to conduct user surveys to better understand the way the site is used in particular institutions and contribute to the professional dialogue on the subject. Since my own Facebook profile reflects my personal interests and my identity as a student, I will have to consider if I will change it to fit my professional identity if I am employed as an academic or public librarian. Another point to keep in mind is that Facebook, while immensely popular now, will eventually be replaced or complemented by some other trend or technology. Even while maintaining a library presence in Facebook, as a professional I will also have to keep my eye on emerging ideas by reading extensively in library literature and other disciplines and by paying attention to student trends.

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