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Social networking in academic libraries: the possibilities and the concerns

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Abstract

Purpose

The goal of this article is to examine the use of the major social networking tools in academic libraries in the United States. Since college students are heavy users of social networking, such efforts provide academic libraries with outreach possibilities to students who do not use the physical library. The paper also examines the concerns about their use both from students and within the academic library.

Design/methodology/approach

The paper summarizes findings from articles published since 2006 found in the *Library Literature and Information Full Text* database. The first author also examined librarian blogs and library accounts in various social networking sites.

Findings

Social networking can be an effective method of student outreach in academic libraries if libraries take care to respect student privacy and to provide equal coverage for all subject areas.

Research limitations/implications

Most information about social networking is anecdotal with very little statistical analysis of its effectiveness. The popularity of the various social networking sites can change quickly.

Practical implications

Academic libraries should consider using social networking as an outreach effort but take care to avoid the potential negative consequences.

Originality/value

This article provides a snapshot on the use of social networking in academic libraries through a thorough review of the available literature and an examination of the libraries' presence on the most popular social networking sites. It also provides help for academic libraries wishing to implement social networking.

Keywords

Social networking, academic libraries, student outreach, Facebook, Twitter, Second Life, blogs, wikis

Introduction

Facebook. MySpace. Twitter. Second Life. Delicious. Blogs. Wikis. These are just a few of the social networking options available on the Internet today. The Oxford English Dictionary defines social networking as "the use or establishment of social networks or connections; (now *esp.*) the use of Web sites which enable users to interact with one another, find and contact people with common interests, etc." (Social Networking, 2010). The varied social networking tools are increasingly used by individuals of all ages but are especially popular among young people and college students. Due to high use among these two groups, many academic librarians advocate using these new social Web platforms to reach out to student populations (Farkas, 2007a; Farkas, 2007b; Mathews, 2006, Mathews, 2007a; Milstein, 2009). Online social networking by academic libraries is not, however, without controversy. While some maintain that social networking efforts are a successful and innovative method of student outreach, others argue that social networking by academic librarians is an ineffective use of librarian time and effort (Sekyere, 2009). A review of recent literature shows that social networking by academic librarians provides a potentially effective method of student outreach as long as librarians take into account the possible issues that may arise.

Methodology

To analyze the use of social networking tools for outreach in academic libraries, the first author conducted a review of the recent literature. In order to analyze how academic libraries utilize social networking tools, a search was conducted in *Library Literature and Information Full Text* database for articles about social networking, library 2.0 and each of the social networking tools. Other databases were utilized as necessary to retrieve relevant articles located through a bibliography search of each article found during initial research. Due to the dynamic nature of social networking tools, only articles and books published within the last three years, 2006-2009, were considered. A search of the library catalog at Wayne State University was also conducted regarding these topics. In order to gain a broader understanding of the issue, librarian blogs and library accounts in the various social networking sites were examined for effective practices. The sheer number of social networking sites available today can be overwhelming for any librarian. As a result, only major social networking services, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Delicious, were analyzed as useful forms of student outreach within an academic library.

Emergence of Social Networking and its Impact on Outreach

The rise of online social networking tools is rooted in the emergence of Web 2.0. Web 2.0 can be "loosely defined as the evolution to a social and interactive Web that gives everyone a chance to participate…" (Kroski, 2007b). The Web is no longer the domain of those who possess computer programming skills. Average Internet users "are creating knowledge repositories on Wikis, developing bibliographies through social bookmarking sites, building historical and cultural collections through media sharing applications, and forming relationships with like-minded individuals in social networking communities" (Kroski, 2007b). With the enormous popularity of Web 2.0's social networking platforms, libraries of all types have embraced them as a method of promoting themselves within their communities. This new method of providing library services is referred to as Library 2.0.

Academic library outreach is not a new phenomenon. Several outreach methods exist with the goal of encouraging library usage by faculty and students. Some outreach methods focus on programs aimed at faculty with the hope that faculty will encourage library use among their students. Other approaches focus more on the student population, including embedded librarians and collaboration with student organizations. Thus, the use of social networking is only the latest example of academic library outreach to students.

Student-based outreach is encouraged because college students today are less dependent upon the traditional library. With the rise of electronic and Internet resources, students may never feel the need to step inside the physical library or use a librarian in their research. Thus, many academic librarians advocate reaching students in their preferred environments in order to extend library services beyond the traditional library walls. Academic librarian Meredith Farkas is a strong advocate of reaching patrons where they are:

> If libraries are not the first place our prospective users go to do research, they will likely miss any marketing we do on our own Web sites. This is why we must start looking beyond these sites and toward putting our content where our users actually *are.* (2007b, p. 36).

Online social networking provides such an avenue to reach college students in their own environments. The goal among academic libraries is to reduce the need for users to come to the library and "to repackage our materials into an environment that is more familiar to specific users"

(Mathews, 2007a, p. 11). Based on a review of the relevant literature, the major social networking tools used today for social networking by academic libraries are the mainstream social networking Web sites, blogs, Wikis, social media Web sites, and social bookmarking Web sites.

Major Social Networking Web sites

Though an array of comprehensive social networking Web sites exists, the most common sites are Facebook and MySpace. MySpace has approximately 70 million users in the United States but has recently experienced a decline in the number of users compared to Facebook (Arango, 2009). According to comScore marketing data, Facebook saw 100 million US users during November 2009, a record for the Web site (Lipsman, 2009). Although MySpace was originally the most popular social networking site, Facebook started with college students at Harvard and originally permitted only users with a college email address to register (Chu & Meulemans, 2008). Past estimates have placed Facebook with an 85 percent market share among college students (Mathews, 2007b). As a result of its strong user base among college students, Facebook appears to be the most logical social networking Web site to be used by an academic library. Most recent discussions about social networking focus on Facebook rather than MySpace. This is also evident from the higher number of social networking articles on Facebook in the *Library Literature and Information Full Text* database in November 2009, with 95 articles appearing in a basic search for "Facebook" compared to 50 articles for "MySpace." For these reasons, discussion will focus on Facebook rather than MySpace.

Discussions by academic librarians highlight several uses of Facebook for academic library outreach. One of the primary uses of Facebook by academic libraries is to market the library with a library fan page. Libraries advertise hours, location, and Web site information. By linking to the library's Web site, the Facebook page acts as a portal to the library (Farkas, 2007a). Since students frequently use outside search engines for academic research, even a basic Facebook page can serve as a reminder to use the resources available at an academic library (Farkas, 2007a). Libraries also create event invitations for programs as an additional forum to promote library activities (Chu & Meulemans, 2008). Essentially, Facebook pages provide a marketing tool for the services available to students at their academic library.

Additionally, academic libraries are experimenting with embedding library services within the Facebook page itself for a true outreach program. Using Facebook applications, some academic libraries embed the library catalog to allow students to access the contents of the library catalog without actually visiting the library's Web site (Farkas, 2007b). Another option for libraries using

LibGuides is to embed subject guides within the Facebook page through a LibGuides application (iLibrarian, 2007). Some academic libraries are also embedding the "ask-a-librarian" feature within the Facebook page to provide reference services through the social networking medium and to expand the chat and message function available through Facebook itself. In the case of the Harlan Hatcher Graduate Library at the University of Michigan, they have created a Facebook page incorporating a catalog search function, "ask-a-librarian," LibGuides, a WorldCat search, and links to all essential library Web pages. Essentially, the goal of creating a Facebook page is to provide customized library services within Facebook itself rather than merely redirecting users to the official Web site.

Blogs and Wikis

Blogs and Wikis offer another social platform to reach university students. Blogs are Web pages consisting of user-supplied content in chronological order (Boxen, 2008). Wikis are open Web pages that allow approved users to add and alter a page's content (Boxen, 2008). Many students have their own blogs and most have encountered Wikis at some time. Thus, most students are familiar with both Web formats. Blogs and Wikis encourage interaction and collaboration among users, an important component for a new outreach tool.

Blogs have several potential uses by academic libraries. Blogs encourage user interaction through their comment feature, which allows students to provide feedback regarding the information provided and the library itself. In one form, librarians can post news about the library as well as events occurring at the library. Blogs are also used to create subject guides as they can be easily updated to reflect the most current sources for a particular class or department. Libraries embarking on large projects, such as renovations, can also create a blog detailing the progress for students. Blogs allow students to comment on the information included in the blog by inviting user feedback regarding the library. However, traditional blogs still require the student to come to it rather than the library going to the users.

Microblogging is a newer blog option made popular by Twitter. Twitter allows registered users to post brief messages for other users who follow the account and to comment on other user posts. Unlike traditional blogs, sites such as Twitter allow librarians to go where the students are already located. As of February 2009, there were 7 million unique visitors to Twitter, a 1,382 percent increase from February 2008 (McGiboney, 2009). Libraries post hour changes, events, new resources available, search tips, deadlines, links to the library Web sites, responses to student comments, and news affecting students without the requirement that students visit the official library Web site. In

one example of an academic library using Twitter, the Yale Science Libraries Twitter page has approximately 2000 followers and posts links to current news articles and to library resources. In this example, the Yale Science Libraries use Twitter primarily to broadcast links and news rather than as a true interaction with students. For it to truly be an effective method of interaction, academic libraries need to post discussion questions and respond quickly to any questions posted to the library's account (Milstein, 2009). For a more interactive example, Michigan State University Libraries regularly respond to comments by its followers, even if the goal is only building a rapport with the students and not answering reference questions. Ultimately, blogs allow libraries to provide easy-to-update information for students while also encouraging student comments and interaction.

In contrast to blogs, Wikis are collaborative Web pages allowing for higher user participation. Wikis allow users to create Web pages and documents as a collaborative community. Unlike most Web pages, Wiki users can edit the content as they read. Related pages are linked within the text to make it easy to move from the Wiki to another related site. Within academic libraries, Wikis are primarily used for the creation of collaborative subject guides. Academic libraries can create subject Wikis with links to resources on a chosen topic or for a particular class, including information regarding relevant databases and search tips tailored to that subject (Kroski, 2007b). Students conducting research on a topic can use the resources provided as well as edit the Wiki to include additional information. Thus, a Wiki-based subject guide allows for collaboration between academic librarians and the students. For example, Ohio University created a Biz Wiki of business resources for students in the department (The Ohio University Biz Wiki, 2009). The Biz Wiki includes embedded catalog records for books, instructional videos by the liaison librarian, IM reference, and links to the liaison librarian's Facebook and Twitter accounts. Thus, with student cooperation, Wikis can create a dynamic subject guide.

Though Wikis lack the same level of content control as blogs, librarians have found solutions to this issue. Librarians concerned with control over editing can choose to increase privacy settings by determining who is able to edit and read the Wiki. A study of Wiki use among academic librarians revealed that private Wikis allowing only authorized users to edit and read the content were the most common and represented 50% of the Wikis created by academic libraries using the new technology. These were followed at 31.8% by semi-private Wikis, which allow anyone to read the content but only authorized users to edit the page (Chu, 2009). Based on this information, it can be inferred that, though academic librarians are receptive to the idea of Wikis, they are still cautious about the highly collaborative format of Wikis and seek to maintain some level of control.

Nonetheless, both Wikis and blogs have several creative uses for academic librarians engaged in student outreach.

Social Media and Gaming

An assortment of social media Web sites have appeared in recent years to encourage users to share multimedia objects from photographs to videos. These sites also encourage users to comment on items posted by fellow users. Users can also tag the content of the media, essentially creating a new classification system within the Web site itself.

YouTube, Flickr, and Second Life are a few of the most popular social media Web sites. YouTube allows individuals and organizations to post original videos. The site also enables users to embed their videos onto other Web sites, including other tools such as Facebook, blogs, Wikis, or the library Web site. Academic libraries currently post videos of library tours as well as bibliographic instruction videos for students (Kroski, 2007b). Bibliographic instruction videos can also be shown during in-classroom library instruction, as described by librarians at the University of South Florida who created a video for students demonstrating how to use a database (Ariew, 2008). Though it may be time-consuming to create the videos, they can be versatile in their use. Flickr allows users to post photographs and to create discussion groups. While Flickr is known largely as a photo sharing Web site, it also allows users to post videos. Academic librarians post photos of the library and its staff to provide a virtual tour of the library itself while simultaneously putting a human face to the building. Academic libraries can also post material from special collections on a Flickr account, though a general search of Flickr reveals that most academic libraries use Flickr to post pictures of the library building and its staff (Farkas, 2007b).

In addition to multimedia Web sites, there are also social games that can be used in student outreach. Second Life is an online reality game that allows libraries to set up virtual libraries and to provide library services, particularly reference services. Academic librarian Brian Mathews states that "[t]hese digital libraries provide a 3-D environment with the potential to include video tutorials, audio players, subject guides, database and catalog searching, live assistance, instructional sessions, meeting areas, and other features" (2007a, p. 10). Libraries can also collaborate with other academic libraries to provide continuous service. Virtual games allow academic libraries to move traditional library services to an entirely new platform. Ultimately, social media sites enable librarians to create multimedia profiles with the goal of encouraging interaction between library staff and students.

Social Bookmarking

Social bookmarking Web sites have also emerged to encourage users to store their Internet bookmarks and to interact with users bookmarking similar Web sites. Social bookmarking is a form of link management that lets "users to collect and label information resources for both their own use and for sharing with other users" (Gilmour & Strickland, 2009, p. 234). The bookmarks can be accessed from any computer or browser. After bookmarking, users tag their links with keywords that describe the Web page's content so that a tag cloud of related Web sites can be viewed and so that the user can view what other sources users tagged have with the same keyword. This process is known as folksonomy (Gilmour & Strickland, 2009).

The most popular social bookmarking Web site is Delicious. The site allows users to friend other users to see what they tag and to view other Web sites tagged with a particular keyword. Academic librarians can use social bookmarking to create resource lists for different departments and classes that can be viewed by students. Class reading lists and bibliographies can be created easily by tagging the resources with the department and class number (Kroski, 2007b). Some libraries add the content and tags from their Delicious account to the library catalog in order to create access points for materials that are not adequately described by the existing Library of Congress Subject Headings. Such access was provided for film classes at Ithaca College (Gilmour & Strickland, 2009). A link to Delicious can also be added to the library catalog. Another option, undertaken at Pennsylvania State University, is to create a university-based social bookmarking Web site. PennTags is a private bookmarking community for members of the university to tag online resources and items from the catalog as well as view the resources tagged by fellow students and faculty members. This illuminates how students search and categorize resources. Additionally, it gives students more input in the process of categorizing academic resources. Though social bookmarking does not include the same level of interaction as some other social networking tools, it does have potential uses within academic libraries.

Drawbacks to Social Networking

As demonstrated above, online social networking by academic libraries has many possibilities within the realm of student outreach. Some libraries may choose to use several social networking methods simultaneously while others may only use one preferred option. Yet, using the various social networking Web sites available does not guarantee success or effectiveness as an outreach method. Several concerns about the use of social networking have been raised and must be considered by any academic library currently using social networking Web sites or considering the implementation of social networking outreach programs.

Several of the concerns about social networking by academic libraries center on the lack of quantitative data to support their effectiveness in student outreach. Most discussions about social networking by academic libraries are primarily anecdotal (Boxen, 2008). There are very few quantitative studies available about the broad effectiveness of the approach. This makes it extremely difficult to determine if the social networking efforts are worth librarian time in competition with other established outreach methods.

One of the primary concerns about social networking is low usage. One article reported that from the messages sent to 1,500 undergraduate and graduate students on Facebook by an academic librarian, only 48 responded (Mathews, 2006). Another study focusing on Wiki use in academic libraries found that six of twenty-one libraries reported difficulties with low participation rates (Chu, 2009). It is also difficult to determine if patrons using the library's social networking tools are new library users or existing patrons (Sekyere, 2009). Thus, each library must decide upon its definition of success for social networking tools. Is the goal chiefly to draw new users into the library, or does it also include keeping current users informed and engaged? Though each library can determine its own measures for success, usage rates should be monitored in social networking programs to determine whether or not they meet the library's goals.

Another major concern regarding social networking by academic libraries is whether students are even receptive to the idea. Librarians are seen as authority figures within the university community,. and students may be resistant to friending the library if their personal information is visible to university officials (Sekyere, 2009). Some librarians advocate actively friending their students, which may only serve to distance the very students librarians are trying to attract. For example, Brian Mathews advocates actively following student blogs to look for academic-related keywords, such as library or assignment, and then encourages librarians to "initiate contact, conduct a reference interview, and provide the necessary support" (2007a, p. 12). However, some students may see this extremely proactive approach as stalking. A better option is to mention "one's Facebook account in library instruction sessions and reference interviews and then [let] the students find that account" (Connell, 2009, p. 28). Librarians at Pennsylvania State University found that promoting their Facebook page during library instruction sessions and reference interviews resulted in "increased research traffic in not only their Facebook message boxes, but also in their institutional email and even in person" (Mack, Behler, Roberts, & Rimland, 2007). In fact, over a fall semester, 126 of the 441 reference questions fielded by a Penn State librarian were through Facebook. This was the highest percentage of reference transactions among the various options--email, phone, IM, and in-person interactions (Mack et al, 2007). Thus, allowing

students to control their level of participation yielded positive results and increased the number of students using librarians in their research. Ultimately, librarians using social networking Web sites must avoid being perceived as invading student space.

In addition to student perceptions, another concern regarding social networking by academic libraries is in regards to how students actually use these technologies. Students generally use social networking sites to distract themselves from their academic activities (Sekyere, 2009). Even when they use social networking for school-related activities, it is usually in conjunction with a student organization or a specific class. Essentially, students use social networking to interact with fellow students. They are *not* using these services to connect with libraries. Ruth Sara Connell conducted a survey of Valparaiso University students that discovered that 17.2 percent of students were open to the idea of having the library as a friend, 57.7 percent would accept a friend request from the library but would not be proactive about it, and 25.1 percent would not add the library on their Facebook or MySpace page (2009). Thus, while most students were receptive to a library presence on the major social networking Web sites, a sizable percentage were not. Additionally, even those students receptive to social networking by libraries indicated that they did not want their time wasted with frequent, irrelevant messages (Connell, 2009). Academic librarians must be aware of student attitudes as constant updates from the library may detract from the libraries outreach attempts and be considered as intrusive as email spam. Ultimately, social networking by academic libraries can only be effective if library efforts are not seen as encroaching on student privacy and if they are not perceived as wasting valuable student time.

Academic librarians must also be in favor of social networking for it to be an effective tool. Librarians at an academic institution must be proactive in their social networking attempts and must be willing to participate in the ongoing process. There is little point to creating an account on a social networking platform if it is not going to be used or updated. For example, a survey of 126 academic librarians by librarians Laurie Charnigo and Paula Barnett-Ellis (2007) found that 54 percent of the librarians surveyed did not believe that there was an academic purpose for Facebook. Additionally, most of the librarians felt that Facebook was a student space and that librarians and other university administrators should not invade this space. Though this attitude many change as older individuals flock to social networking sites, it cannot be expected that all librarians will be in favor of the idea. Lack of librarian time is also a concern, particularly with social media games that are frequently labor-intensive, expensive, and only allow librarians to provide open-source information (Boxen, 2008). If the overwhelming majority of librarians are not in favor of social networking, this will not be an effective outreach strategy. A lack of librarian support for social

networking also risks uneven service levels for students enrolled in different disciplines. If only selective liaisons are proactive in social networking to provide subject support, subject-based support may become unequal among disciplines. Thus, libraries that only have certain librarians engaging in social networking with students will need to address this concern to ensure that all departments receive an equal level of subject support. Ultimately, social networking requires continuous updating, knowledge of changes to the social tools, and monitoring user comments. Thus, academic librarians must be willing to dedicate their time to social network-based student outreach for these methods to be successful.

In addition to general support for social networking by librarians, academic librarians engaged in social networking must also address the consistency and timeliness of the service. Students will expect timely responses to any inquiries sent through social networking tools. They are unlikely to return to social networking tools for library assistance if librarians do not respond quickly to inquiries. This also potentially risks the possibility that the student will not use other library services. Thus, libraries must create guidelines on response time to answer student questions on social networking platforms as they most often have done with email and virtual reference services. These guidelines must also address staff absences and vacations so that the social networking services remain consistent while still allowing librarians to take vacations or attend conferences. Ultimately, academic libraries engaging in social networking with students must address issues regarding consistent and timely responses for these new service tools.

Lastly, many academic librarians fear losing control over their resources if they use some of the available social networking tools. Tools that allow students, and even faculty, to edit content about the library remove a certain amount of control from the librarians themselves. Tools, in particular folksonomy, that allow users to assign tags to resources that then replace the traditional subject headings established by librarians can result in a lack of synonym control, lack of precision in subject terms, a lack of hierarchy among categories, and a lower recall ability (Kroski, 2007a). Ultimately, there is legitimate concern that permitting increased user participation through social tools will remove librarian control over resources and inhibit a librarian's ability to use the very resources they are trying to make more accessible among academic library users.

Effective Practices

Overall, social networking should not be avoided in academic libraries looking to reach out to their students. The ultimate goal of librarians is to make library resources available to students. If social networking helps to achieve that goal, it should be actively pursued. However, social networking outreach must factor in the concerns discussed above to effectively use this new technology. Any outreach via social networking must consider the individual user base to determine which sites are most used by students as well as how students would use library resources on a social networking platform. Chu and Meulemans caution that "[g]iven the dynamic natures of MySpace/Facebook, as with all new technology, libraries should proceed in adoption appropriate to their campus after analysis of the user population and consideration of overall objectives" (2008, p. 83). Libraries must continuously monitor how their social networking attempts are working among their users and make any necessary adjustments to their platforms that could make the new service more effective. Ultimately, there no single model for social networking within academic libraries as no student population is the same as another

Additionally, academic libraries must advertise so that students are able to find them on various social networking Web sites (Mathews, 2007b). This could be on the official library Web site, on bulletin boards around campus, in the student newspaper, during bibliographic instruction classes, or within the physical library itself. One account about the effectiveness of the Rutgers University library's Facebook page indicated that its proximity to the student newspaper and the library's relationship with the newspaper editor resulted in increased stories about library services as well as the newspaper's publicizing the existence of the Facebook account (Glazer, 2009). The campus community must be aware of the library's presence in social networking platforms for them to be an effective tool and this includes in-person networking with other campus departments. Social networking by academic libraries has the potential to reap great results, but librarians must consider the most effective methods for their particular library and student population.

Conclusion

Social networking Web sites are a new technology offering promising new outreach options for academic librarians. They provide a new platform for reaching students beyond the traditional library building and Web site by allowing students to access librarians and the library's resources without leaving the comfort of the Web sites they use the most. Though this discussion only examines a select few of the social networking tools available to librarians, the ideas for how best to use social networking tools are widely applicable. However, student outreach attempts using social networking are less likely to be effective if they are not based upon targeted, well-thought out

programs. Concerns still exist regarding the effectiveness of social networking by academic libraries, but librarians should not be scared off entirely by these concerns. Rather, academic librarians must thoughtfully address the issues associated with social networking as they seek new avenues to reach their students outside the library walls. Lastly, there needs to be quantitative and qualitative research about the use of social networking tools as a form of student outreach to determine its effectiveness within academic libraries so that academic librarians do not rely only on anecdotal evidence when considering implementing social networking programs within their own libraries.

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