Fall 2007

Internet Reviews: Social Networking Software Follow-up: Facebook and MySpace (and More)

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Notes/Citation Information

Published in *Kentucky Libraries*, v. 71, issue 4, p. 11-15.

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INTERNET REVIEWS: SOCIAL NETWORKING SOFTWARE FOLLOW-UP: FACEBOOK AND MYSPACE (AND MORE)

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This article is a follow-up to the Internet Reviews column which appeared in *Kentucky Libraries* in the Fall 2006 issue (v 70 n 4, p 12-16). As with all things internet, a lot has changed in a short time. Both Facebook (http://www.facebook.com) and MySpace (http://www.myspace.com) have new features with new implications for library use. We think it is time for another look.

WHAT IS SOCIAL NETWORKING SOFTWARE?

Social networking sites are still hot and getting hotter. The primary purpose of these applications is to allow people to connect. Most sites require an individual to create some kind of personal profile which is then linked to others in a variety of ways. (See our original article for the basics of social networking in *Kentucky Libraries*, vol. 70#4.) MySpace and Facebook are two of the more popular social networking sites, particularly with the Net Generation, including current high school and college students. The original primary purpose of these sites was simple social interaction: connecting with friends and/or meeting new people. These services have evolved beyond that original purpose to have specific information-sharing uses that have implications for libraries.

What started as a means to keep up with one's friends has become a tool for keeping up with professional contacts or promoting one's institution, business, or ideals. Whether using social networking software for political campaigns or for bringing a grieving campus together, social networking software has become an important way to build community among its users. In this follow-up, we'll describe how these services have evolved in this past year.

MySpace
(http://www.myspace.com)

MySpace is still one of the most popular sites on the web. According to Alexa: The Web Information Company, MySpace continues to be the sixth most trafficked site in any language worldwide (1). Usage is still primarily by the Net Gen demographic and bands, but usage is increasing in other groups as well. MySpace profiles have been created for politicians, authors promoting books, and movies. Movies that are specifically teen-oriented may use MySpace rather than a traditional movie.com site as their primary web presence.

Since our Fall 2006 article, MySpace has made available additional features to facilitate social interaction and information sharing. Some features seem to be a response to the popularity of other sites such as Facebook. Features that are popular in one service often show up in others. New MySpace features include:

1. *Photo album support*: MySpace images were previously uploaded and accessed individually. The service now supports a Facebook-style album system, allowing users to group photos into albums which make management of large photo collections much easier.
2. *Status update*: Users can use a quirky one-liner to specify where they are or how they are feeling at the moment. This may sound familiar to Facebook users and users of Twitter, a new utility that is much like a micro-blog; Twitter users post brief messages similar to instant messages or text posts about their current status or activities.
3. *MySpaceTV*: This is MySpace's answer to YouTube. One can upload, view, rate and comment on user-created videos.
4. *Friend search*: If the user is looking for a particular friend among the hundreds linked to his/her profile, this new search utility is very helpful. Until the search was imple-

mented, users had to scroll through pages of thumbnail images to find a specific person.
5. *News:* MySpace now includes a news aggregator, a real-time news service that supports user comments and ratings.

MySpace profiles can still be rather garish and site accessibility is not a high-priority, but the service has improved support, continues to provide information on internet safety for users, and has added features that attempt to prevent "spam" friend requests.

At the University of Kentucky, the library's MySpace site has had limited success in terms of reaching students, which was the initial goal. There are 122 friends who have linked to our profile. Most of those, however, seem to be organizations (e.g., the UK Student Activities board), businesses (e.g., local clubs and shops), regional bands and authors, and other libraries and librarians. The original plan was not to aggressively seek friends but rather to "build it and they would come." However, the friend requests that came unsolicited were not UK students but the groups mentioned above, as well as hoards of "unsavory" or irrelevant profiles (e.g., romance authors) that were rejected. With this strategy, the library gained 87 friends during approximately the first year of our profile.

As an experiment, it was decided to see what response we would generate if the library did send out friend requests to UK students. The MySpace search utility was used to bring up profiles of users who identified themselves as current UK students. One-hundred four friend requests were sent in one afternoon during July. By the next morning we had 17 new friends, for a response rate of about 16%. This kind of promotion is somewhat tedious. Each friend request needs to be sent out individually; we felt compelled to take a quick look at the profile before "friending" them to guard against anything beyond a normal level of inappropriateness in the content.

Although it may be tedious, this kind of promotion may be worth doing. We did not receive any negative feedback from sending the requests. Students are accustomed to receiving friend requests from people they don't know. If they do not want to link to a profile, they simply reject the request. If the friend invitation is accepted, then their profile will be linked to the library profile. Friends will receive any bulletins the library sends out

(and vice versa), they can add comments to the library profile site, and their friends may see the library profile (which could potentially result in more friend requests). The potential for broadening the audience for library bulletins may make more aggressive solicitation of friends beneficial. Libraries (particularly public libraries) have used bulletins to promote events, classes and services. Creating a MySpace profile is free to create, the system is extremely popular, and the profiles do not take a lot of time to maintain. As of September 2007, the UK profile has been viewed 1865 times. For our particular audience, the profile is not having a huge impact, but for a zero-cost and a low-effort activity it is worth continuing.

Facebook
(http://www.facebook.com)
Since our initial article in Fall of 2006, several significant things have happened with Facebook. Most notably, it is now open to everyone. Originally created by two students as a social networking tool for Harvard students in February 2004, the site was only open to college students, then later high school students and some large workplaces until September 2006 when it opened to everyone. Once Facbook allowed anyone to join, enormous growth naturally resulted: from 12 million active users in December 2006 to over 31 million active users today.

Though now wide open, Facebook became restrictive in regard to who could create a profile. In August 2006, there were over 100 libraries with active Facebook profiles. By the end of September 2006, there were none.

Why? Creating a profile for someone other than one's self violates Facebook's Terms of Service. Perhaps Facebook wanted to avoid becoming home to the thousands of "fakester" profiles one finds on My Space-real or fake profiles for celebrities, politicians, businesses, bands, even inanimate objects like cans of beer. Regardless, this interpretation of the Terms of Service significantly hampered librarians' efforts to reach out to students via Facebook. We attempted to reason with Facebook that what the library was doing was hardly "fakester" activity; for a complete accounting, visit http://sla-divisions.typepad. com/itbloggingsection/2006/09/librarys_ facebo.html.

Despite the issue with institutional profiles,

libraries can create groups. Our experience indicates the group has been considerably less successful than the profile. Some disadvantages of groups versus profiles that we have observed are as follows:

It is more difficult to notice the library group on a profile. When one was a "friend" with the library, it was easier to notice when we changed our profile picture, status, posted a note or picture, etc. Groups are much more hidden on the profile, usually buried somewhere between a hundred other groups one has joined (from "UK Basketball Rocks My World" to "Blanding Tower 15th Floor is the Best!" to "Guys Who Love Peeing Outdoors" to other things that aren't fit to print here).

It is more difficult to get people to join a group. With a profile, the library could "friend" students or encourage students to "friend" us. With groups, the group administrator (librarian) must already be friends with a student before requesting that student join the group. This severely limits how many people can be reached. The library's profile had over 50 friends after just a couple of months; after a year, there are barely 50 group members. It is possible for the librarian to "friend" students and then encourage them to join the group, but becoming friends with a librarian may seem more threatening to some students than simply being friends with the library as a whole.

Many features are not available in groups. With a profile, the library created a number of photo albums. Pictures were taken of student activities as well as pictures of interesting things in the library. Photos of the student organization banners hung in Young Library proved to be a particular popular photoset. With a group, we can post pictures but cannot organize them.

While the groups feature for libraries has not been very successful (at least not in our opinion at UK), the Facebook Platform has been a tremendous opportunity for libraries. Launched in May 2007, the Facebook Platform allows developers to create third-party applications for Facebook users. Applications cover a wide variety of purposes—from the silly (use Zombies to bite your friends or the Harry Potter application to cast spells) to the more compelling (the many catalog search applications or the Librarian application which supports reference with a real librarian).

One approach using Facebook is to talk to students directly as a librarian, and this was found to be fairly effective. For example, a number of students created unofficial "Class of 2011" groups. Over the summer we quietly monitored a few of the groups and answered questions as they arose: "Where is the Cat's Path?" (a designated safe place to walk at UK) "When is Fall Break?" "How do people address mail to my dorm?" It is challenging to walk the fine line between being helpful and butting in on student conversations, but we seemed to get no complaints when we offered the occasional friendly advice to these freshman groups.

Facebook advertising is something that many campus organizations have done, and the UK Libraries have taken out Facebook ads on several occasions. Most recently we ran an ad for our freshman welcome event "The Hubbub," a pizza and gaming party held in our information commons. Though the ads are fairly inexpensive and they are seen by many students it is difficult to evaluate their effectiveness. The attendance at "The Hubbub" was outstanding (around 400 students, and we were competing with rush activities) but it is unclear how much of that was a result of the Facebook ads since we advertised in multiple venues. For more information about Facebook advertising: http://utk.facebook.com/advertise.php

Facebook Flyer
What's all the HUBBUB?

FREE FOOD AND GAMES!

Monday, Aug 20, 6-8pm, the Hub @ Young Library welcomes UK Freshmen. Play videogames, create an avatar, shoot hoops, learn to belly dance, make art, eat and drink, enter prize drawings, all for FREE!

Posted by Stacey Greenwell

One surprising aspect of all this librarian experimentation with Facebook is how it has grown as a professional tool. We have often felt that, if nothing else, librarians should experiment with Facebook just to network with other colleagues. It pleased us to see that this sentiment is getting national attention

(see this *Business Week* article: http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/07_34/b4047050.htm)

Before Facebook was open to everyone, one of the authors created a Facebook group for SLA members (at the time, almost entirely academic librarians). Never expecting the group to grow, we were delighted a year later to see the group had grown to over 500 members. Since then, hundreds of library-related groups have sprung up on Facebook, including:

ALA
Kentucky Library People
First Year Experience Librarians
Library 2.0 Interest Group
No, I Don't Look Like a Librarian!

In addition to the groups (which have some problems in general—see above), librarians are "friending" each other and keeping up via messages and the wall. Upon returning from a conference, we routinely "friend" people post-conference rather than file business cards. With Facebook, we often respond to a colleague's status or recently posted note. Yes, we talk about everything from library 2.0 to shoes to U.S. Open Tennis, but what a wonderful way of keeping in touch with colleagues one would otherwise only communicate with a few times a year.

OTHER SOCIAL NETWORKING SERVICES

MySpace and Facebook are not the only social networking utilities used by libraries and librarians. Some of the tools described below are new and others are finding new use by libraries.

Flickr (http://www.flickr.com/).
Flickr's primary purpose is photo-sharing. Users can create a free account or can upgrade for additional services, such as greater storage capacity and more control over organizing images. Libraries are using Flickr to create photosets of library activities and events, as yet another way to reach users. Flickr is powerful and free or low-cost. A pro account providing unlimited photo uploading costs $25 per year.

Ning (http://www.ning.com/).
Ning is a social networking tool that allows users to create their own topic-based networks and invite others to join the group. Members of a given network can participate in threaded discussions, upload images and video, and create their own home page within the network. There are several library-related networks currently within the Ning system.

LinkedIn (http://www.linkedin.com/).
LinkedIn is marketed as a tool for professionals. The service provides typical social-networking options—create a profile and link it to the profiles of others—with a more business-oriented twist. Other users are called "connections" rather than "friends." The service provides an option to recommend others within your network and includes a section for job experience. A number of librarians have personal accounts in this service.

LibraryThing (http://www.librarything.com/).
LibraryThing allows users to catalog their own book collections in a web-based shareable database. The service supports tagging and allows users to connect with others based on common book interests.

del.icio.us (http://del.icio.us/).
A "social bookmarking" service that allows users to create web-based bookmarks, which can be accessed from any computer via the web. Bookmark collections are also shared with other users as a discovery tool.

Encore (http://ukty-mt.iii.com/iii/encore/app).
Think social networking is just for kids or your more techie colleagues? Features of social networking utilities have been showing up in traditional tools for a while, including library catalogs. The University of Kentucky is currently working with Innovative Interfaces, Inc. to develop an overlay to the library catalog that is intended to provide a more intuitive search interface option for users. The system supports a "tag cloud" relevancy feature common in social networking applications that support tagging. The system will support user tagging so that in addition to library-applied subject terms, we could soon see patron-applied tags as a tool for improving

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search. Students could tag library resources as useful for a specific class or project, helping students in later semesters to discover those resources.

SOCIAL NETWORKING SOFTWARE IS EVERYWHERE

In a short time, social networking software is becoming as ubiquitous as the phone or email. A recent study released by the National School Boards Association shows that 96% of U.S. teens and tweens with online access use some form of social networking software. And it's not just the kids—according to the *Business Week* article mentioned above, 41% of Facebook's visitors are 35 and older. The number of adults on MySpace is even higher.

The recent tragedy at Virginia Tech is an indication of how ingrained social networking is with the college-age generation. Several news stories during the early hours of that day noted survivor use of social networking tools, especially Facebook. Students used Facebook to get information about friends who had survived the massacre. A Facebook group for VT survivors popped up within hours and was a source of support as well as information. If one joined the group, then obviously they were OK. Where cell phones were busy and people had trouble making direct one-to-one contact, this was a way to "broadcast" one's status to a large number of people quickly.

This use of social networking sites indicates how important such sites are to these kids. Facebook is not just a tool. It's ingrained in their lives. There have been several news reports over the past year about use of Facebook and MySpace as a way for kids to grieve for lost friends. A personal MySpace site becomes like a guestbook at a memorial service when a teen dies. The site stays up (at least until or unless a parent wants to close it) and friends post messages and share memories. Organizations have begun to acknowledge the importance of social networking sites to millenials. Shortly after the Virginia Tech shootings, NBC News created a Facebook announcement to reach students willing to be interviewed about the tragedy. They wanted to interview students who knew the shooter, and this was the fastest way for them to make contact with the greatest number of students.

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TRENDS

Social networking is a powerful force. The influences extend beyond teen or young adult librarianship. The trends seen in these tools include:

The "personalization" of information resources and services. Information used to be dry and stuffy: "Just the facts, Jack." The author relating the information was explicitly separated from the content. Professional affiliation and contact information were generally the only personal details provided about the author. Social networking tools have opened the door to the personalization of information. An important critique or service announcement will appear next to photos of the author's cat or a description of a recent vacation. There is a blending of personal and professional lives, fueled by social networking. This can be an uncomfortable transition for experienced professionals, but it appears to be a strong trend.

The blending of tools, resources, formats, services. Social networking applications involve extending, blending, collaborating, personalizing, sharing, and re-mixing ("mash-ups"). Tools tend to be more modular or include modular components of other services and Facebook applications are one example of this trend. Mash-ups are everywhere-take a Google map of movie theaters or a list of movie reviews from IMDB.

Evolution of existing tools to incorporate elements of social networking. Elements of social networking are everywhere. Amazon supports tagging. CNN's broadcast includes user-submitted video. Even library catalogs are evolving-Encore is just one example.

TAKE THE PLUNGE

Don't let all the blinking, twirling cartoon-like stuff fool you or frighten you off. At least keep an eye on these trends and consider giving some of these tools a try. You might find that it's the most fun you've had at work in a long time.

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