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Cliff Landis
Georgia State University, clifflandis@gsu.edu

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Friending our Users: Social Networking and Reference Services

Cliff Landis

Introduction

Social networking sites are changing the way that libraries engage their users. Sometimes called "social networking software" or "social networking services," these Web sites are designed to let users share their lives with friends, family, and the general public. Many librarians immediately saw the possibilities in the proliferating social networks—by connecting with our users in "their space," we are making ourselves readily available and removing many of the obstacles to their information needs.

As reference librarians, our first reaction to new technology is to "set up desk"—to provide the same services we have traditionally offered, only in a new medium. However, new technologies demand a new approach, and recent years have seen librarians offering reference, instruction, and other services in unique and innovative ways.

What is it?

Social networking sites allow users to interact with each other in three different ways. First, a user creates a profile that will represent him or her to other users. This profile is a Web page that includes elements such as demographic information, hobbies, and interests (such as favorite bands, movies, books, and TV programs). Second, social networking sites allow users to interact with each other by sharing media such as videos, photos, music, and Web sites. Third, social networking sites allow users to communicate with each other using public messages, private messages, and blogs. Social networking sites have become powerful social tools because

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users can quickly identify individuals with similar interests, share media with friends, and directly communicate with other users all in the same Web site.

The "networking" part of social networking sites happens with the action of "Friending." To Friend someone (verb form capitalized for the sake of clarity) means to add that person to your list of Friends so that your two profiles are connected. This connection shows that you belong to each others' social networks. It does not, however, imply that you are actually friends with that person in daily life—Friending is simply a way to publicly display that you are in some way connected to a person for any number of reasons (Donath and boyd 2004, 71). danah boyd, speaking about the social networking site *Friendster*, shows that users are aware that there is a difference between friends and Friends: "Overheard conversations might include statements such as 'She's not my friend, but she's my Friendster' and 'Did you see that Alex is Drew's Friendster? (boyd 2004). By Friending an individual (such as a local librarian) or organization (such as the local library), the user is creating a connection that can be seen by others.

The History and Power Behind Social Networking Sites

The first social networking site was *SixDegrees.com*, which began in 1997 and closed four years later (Donath and boyd 2004). Many social networking sites followed, including *Friendster*, *Hi5*, *Bebo*, *Orkut*, and, of course, the now-ubiquitous *MySpace* and *Facebook.* *Facebook* will be the primary discussion point of this piece, but many others have proliferated, often setting themselves apart by specializing in different areas such as business relationships (*Ryze*, *LinkedIn*), school relationships (*Classmates.com*, *Graduates.com*), and hobbies (*Catster*, *CarDomain*, *Sportsvite*). Profiles can also be seen beyond social networking sites, since many

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popular Web sites give users the option to create profiles and connections with other users (*LiveJournal*, *YouTube*, *Xanga*, *LibraryThing*, *Flickr*).

The more users a social networking site has, the more powerful a tool it is to connect with other people. A large social network allows users to stay in touch with individuals throughout their lives. According to Dunbar's Rule of 150, we have the ability to mentally maintain relationships with approximately 147.8 individuals--this number is conventionally rounded to 150 (Dunbar 1993, 682). As we meet new friends, we lose contact with some old friends. Social networking sites allow us to maintain contact with those individuals (such as a best friend from middle school). Although the user may not talk to his or her middle school best friends anymore, by Friending them, the user maintains a connection and can still visit their profiles and see where they are and what they are doing.

Social networking Web sites are changing the Internet as a whole. As of May 14, 2007, five of the top twenty-five most visited Web sites were social networking sites (*MySpace*, *Orkut*, *Hi5*, *Facebook* and *Friendster*, in that order), and many of the other top twenty-five had the ability to create and connect profiles (Alexa.com 2007). Users look to each other for information, and social networking sites help to make that communication possible. People make use of social networking sites' built-in and user-designed applications to discover new music, plan parties, catch up on gossip, find interesting events to attend, watch TV shows, and creatively express themselves through blogs, videos, quizzes and comments.

The differences between social networking sites are important to note. Some, such as *MySpace*, allow users to create both personal and institutional profiles. This flexibility allows librarians to represent the library, the Reference Services department, or just themselves. *MySpace* also gives users the ability to edit the overall appearance and organization of the page,

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allowing you to brand your profile appropriately. Other sites, such as *Facebook*, limit profiles to individuals and do not allow editing of the profile's appearance. Instead, *Facebook* allows institutions to create "Pages," which give some of the functionality of profiles (such as the ability to send messages and comment). In addition, a Page creator can monitor how many times the Page has been viewed and create advertisement campaigns. Although the inability to create institutional profiles may seem like a drawback to *Facebook*'s service, it emphasizes the personal social network, and also gives users the benefit of a consistent interface. Additionally, *Facebook* allows the addition of user-created applications. Some are relevant to librarian profiles, such as library catalog and polling applications; others, such as "(fluff) Friends" and "My Aquarium" are primarily for entertainment and can unnecessarily clutter a librarian's profile. Similarly, Google has created *OpenSocial*, a user-created application set that would allow the sharing of applications between social networks like *Orkut*, *MySpace*, *Friendster* and others. This would prove particularly beneficial for libraries that would want to spread their catalog search interfaces into social networking sites. The differences in social networking sites should be taken into account as you develop your (or your library's) profiles.

Reservations

As with any new technology, many librarians have reservations about the place that social networking sites should have in the library. These reservations are partially due to negative media portrayals in recent years. There is also the perception that libraries are moving away from their mission of delivering information, and are instead turning into community playgrounds. Before I move on to the role of social networking sites in reference service, I would like to address these and other concerns.

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Privacy, Predators, and Freedom of Information

Librarians have long stood at the forefront on the battle for privacy rights, so it is not surprising that librarians are skeptical of social networking sites, which connect people through the disclosure of personal information. Yet, librarians are not alone in their concerns about privacy; social networking site users are concerned, too. In September 2006, *Facebook* launched its "mini-feed feature," which aggregated all of a user's behavior on *Facebook* and put it into an RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feed on their friends' homepages—making all a user's actions (from adding friends to changing relationship status) visible to everyone they listed as a friend. Immediately, there was a backlash, including a barrage of complaints, a petition, and the creation of a protest Web site (Cashmore 2006a). *Facebook* responded by creating a "My Privacy" feature, which greatly enhanced users' ability to control what information was visible to other users. This reaction was a surprise for social networking sites, which discovered that their users are quite aware of the privacy implications of their behavior, and are willing to fight to protect their privacy.

MySpace and *Facebook* gained negative attention when the media highlighted instances of sexual predation on social networking sites. However, Larry Rosen studied over 1,400 teenaged *MySpace* users to determine the instances of predation, with the following results:

> First…stalking is extremely rare, happening about 1.3% of the time, while being approached for sex happens slightly more often, roughly 5.1% of the time. Second, given the explanations from MySpacers, it appears that, for the vast majority, the episode [of being approached for sex] was brushed off and had no lasting impact. (Rosen 2006)

Most teens and adults who use social networking sites are savvy when it comes to blocking communications from sexual predators. Unfortunately, governments respond to the fears drummed up by media reports by legislating blocks against social networking sites from libraries and schools, rather than by educating students on appropriate and safe ways to use them. This

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restriction of access to information does not stop students who use social networking sites from home, but instead further limits the opportunities for students who access these sites from schools or libraries for educational purposes.

But It's Kid Stuff!

Many librarians see these Web sites as inappropriate for educational institutions or faculty. There is still a perception that *MySpace* is geared toward high-school students, and is therefore inappropriate for colleges and universities. However, according to a comScore report in October 2006, "Internet users between the ages of 35-54 now account for 40.6 percent of the MySpace visitor base, an 8.2 percentage point increase during the past year" (comScore 2006). Individuals of all kinds are using *MySpace* to connect with friends.

In 2006, *Facebook* opened to non-students. There were initial fears that it would lose its core of college and university students as members of the public joined the site. However, as Pete Cashmore predicted, since *Facebook* opened their service to the public, there has not been an "exodus of Facebook users" (Cashmore, 2006b). The future will show whether *Facebook's* demographic eventually grows beyond the college crowd, but for now *Facebook* is an excellent way to reach academic library users.

Who Can Keep Up?

Some librarians have commented that social networking sites are just "one more thing" to add to the list of things to keep up with, and that they fall outside of our mission—to deliver information and instruction to library users. Admittedly, in the realm of reference services, things are changing almost daily—as they always have been. The library profession has a history of working with the latest technology to help users, whether through punch cards or instant

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messaging, microfilm or databases. We have always struggled to keep abreast of these changes, and now have new tools (such as blogs and RSS) to stay up-to-date with these changes.

We now have to compete with services such as Yahoo! Answers and search engines such as Google. For libraries to stay relevant in this new information environment, we must provide excellent service—service that our users cannot get elsewhere. The key is to discover both what users *want* and what users *need*—and then supply *both*. Social networking sites can be a great way to discover these wants and needs, because they can be used for marketing, reference, instruction, and improvement of services.

Current Uses

Library Marketing

Library marketing often falls to reference and instruction librarians, since they provide the in-depth human resources that students, faculty and staff turn to for research help. Yet, most librarians can relate an experience in which library users complain about the library lacking a particular service or resource, when in fact the resource was there, but unknown. This type of complaint shows where library marketing is valuable:

> Libraries have a long tradition of bringing services wherever their patrons are located, through such approaches as bookmobiles and branches in strip malls and community centers. This has also become the case in the online world. While most libraries have their own Web sites, some are also starting to push their services to the online sites at which patrons congregate. (Farkas 2007, 27)

Social networking sites are the next generation of word-of-mouth marketing. An example is the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign's (UIUC) Undergraduate Library's *MySpace* page (http://www.myspace.com/undergradlibrary). The library has over four hundred Friends, including students, local bands, and other library-related users. Changes in hours, events and new

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services are advertised via *MySpace's* blogging tool, while a catalog search box has been embedded into the "About Me" section. Additionally, the UIUC Undergraduate Library has created a *Facebook* profile and joined other libraries in creating *Facebook* applications which allow users to add a catalog search box on their profiles (http://apps.facebook.com/uiuclibrary/). Each of these efforts increases the library's online visibility.

Marketing using social networking sites can be a time- and budget-saving way to reach out to library users. As Judith A. Seiss explains in *The Visible Librarian*, "If you're wondering when to market, the answer is easy—always. Every encounter with a customer or a prospective customer is a marketing opportunity" (2003, 33). Social networking sites can reach users whenever they log on through an interface they are already familiar with. This can be more inviting than library Web sites which are (too often) hierarchical and difficult to navigate.

Social networking sites are also a free way to reach out to potential library users. By performing advanced searches, you can discover individuals at your institution who list "books" or "reading" as one of their interests, or if your employees are thinking of setting up a gaming night at your library, a search for "gaming" as an interest will provide you with a quick invitation list. Create an event and users will be able to confirm whether they are attending. Do you have a marketing budget? Consider purchasing "flyers" on *Facebook*—short advertisements that appear to users at your university. No money? You can still post bulletins on *MySpace* and notes on *Facebook* to let users know about upcoming events.

Whether or not to actively Friend library users is a debatable topic. Millennial students are used to receiving advertisements from corporations and organizations through social networking sites that allow such accounts. Therefore, organizations (such as libraries) can often Friend library users without appearing too assuming. However, individual librarians who

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actively try to Friend users may be perceived as pushy. So, it may be best to reach out to users through other means, and allow them to Friend you;

> However, this actually works out - students like counting faculty as their friends. If you've created a rich profile, it shows students that you care about Facebook, and use it somewhat regularly. With the advent of news feeds, students will broadcast the fact they've [F]riended you, and this will start the friend requests coming in. (Stutzman 2006)

Regardless of which tools or methods you choose to employ with social networking sites, they should be part of a larger marketing plan. The plan will ensure that information such as blog posts, pictures, and event invitations tie into the larger picture of the library.

Reference

Many of the same tools that can be used for marketing via social networking sites can also be employed to provide more traditional reference services. Messages can be sent directly between users (similar to email), so that direct, private questions can be asked. Public messages can be displayed on the user's profile (called “commenting” on *MySpace*, and “writing on a user’s wall” on *Facebook*). Also, groups can be created to give users a forum to ask reference questions. At Valdosta State University, I created an “Ask the Librarian” *Facebook* group. Groups in *Facebook* have both public message space, as well as discussion boards. Students ask questions in both of these forums, which allow other students to see both the questions asked and the answers provided (Landis 2007, 6). Some libraries choose to provide reference services directly within these social networking sites. In these instances, I strongly recommend that librarians make use of any email notification systems provided. These notification systems will alert staff to new questions immediately, so that they will not be forced to log in several times a day to check the social site for new questions. In addition to communication tools provided by the social networking services, some libraries (such as the Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County—http://myspace.com/libraryloft/) are using plug-ins and widgets to

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provide chat reference services directly from their profile, allowing users to seek reference help without leaving the page.

The largest risk associated with providing reference services through social networking sites is stretching services too thin. For example, creating in-depth reference discussion boards on several different social networking sites can dilute the service that users receive. An alternative is to set up a knowledge base at your library's Web site, and to allow users to (anonymously) post questions. A link to the knowledge base from each of your online profiles allows users to ask questions and search for answers.

Instruction

In addition to providing reference services via social networking sites, librarians can also provide instruction. In his blog post *Facebook as a Tool for Learning Engagement*, Fred Stutzman offers an introductory caveat regarding instruction in social networking sites:

> Facebook isn't Blackboard or any other course management system. It isn't a wiki, or a blog, or any sort of silver bullet tool. Facebook is the digital social center of the college campus. It is a social tool; its use is primarily the management of the social life at college. Of course, college life is geared around academics, so inherently the social worlds of college students intersect with academics—but only to a certain extent. (Stutzman 2006)

Keeping this information in mind, it should be noted that *Facebook* has been used by students for organizing study groups, and by professors to deploy course content. By making connections with users, librarians can embed themselves into both kinds of groups, offering users the instruction that they require at the point of need.

One of the laments of instruction librarians is that there is never enough time with the students. By mentioning your profile at the beginning and end of an instruction session, you can encourage students to contact you if they have any questions. This attention makes an impression on students; although they may discard handouts or neglect to write down an email address, a

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quick search for "librarian" will reveal your profile. Later, when students have research questions, they can ask for help and receive instruction at the point of need.

For the Other Folks in the Library…

Reference librarians are not the only potential beneficiaries of social networking sites. In the case of library technology, there is often a disconnect between the "front end" services and "back end" services of libraries—particularly when users want to report a problem or request a service. Social networking sites can often help to reduce this gap. By providing a forum for offering suggestions, the library can reach out to users and improve service.

In *Going Where Patrons Are: Outreach in MySpace and Facebook*, Meredith Farkas tells the story of Bennington (Va.) College's library director Oceana Wilson, who uses her *Facebook* profile to solicit collection development suggestions. As Farkas explains, "Although most libraries have an acquisitions suggestion form, students may not feel comfortable using it or may think the form is only meant for faculty. In this case, Bennington is coming into students' virtual space to say, 'We care about your opinion'" (2007, 27). This outreach is an excellent example of making the effort to remove barriers between users and library services.

Where Libraries are Headed—And How to Get There

Creating your Brand

Also on the topic of marketing, many libraries are looking at the concept of branding—in other words, tying all of a library's advertising efforts under a single slogan or icon. An excellent example is Ann Arbor District Library, whose Web site (http://www.aadl.org/) and *MySpace* profile (http://www.myspace.com/annarbordistrictlibrary) share the same color scheme and font. The *MySpace* page has a younger, funkier feel, but is still recognizable due to the consistency of

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the branding. When users visit these pages, they know that they are looking at Ann Arbor District Library, regardless of the Web site's URL.

As libraries create brand identity, they separate themselves from other sources of information and define what makes them different and valuable. This identity can then be spread throughout different social networking sites, as well as other Web-based and face-to-face tools (such as IM and Twitter icons, wikis, name tags, flyers, and library signage).

Your Friendly Librarian

Some services do not allow for the creation of institutional profiles (such as *Facebook* and *Hi5*). In these cases, librarians create their own profiles and engage with library users directly. It may seem tempting to create a fake "Marion the Librarian" profile, and to make "her" part of your library's brand, but this goes against the idea of social networking sites, which is to connect with people directly. So what do students really want to see on a librarian's profile?

> First, they want to know a little about you. They want to know some of your favorite books, movies and TV shows. You get no points for loading your profile with pretentious interests—students want to feel connected to you. If you like the Family Guy or Curb Your Enthusaism[sic], share it. Second, students like pictures.... The key in creating a profile is sharing a little bit of the real you - when you can make these connections with your students, you will engage them. (Stutzman 2006)

The personal profile of a librarian can do more than just stake your library's claim in a social networking site. Reference librarians are familiar with having students identify a particular librarian as "my librarian." The ability to Friend a librarian provides two significant benefits: the potential to reduce library anxiety and the ability to offer users a consistent human resource for research help.

Making the ILS Friendly

Integrated library systems are already changing to allow for more input from users. Libraries such as the Ann Arbor District Library (http://www.aadl.org/), are modifying their

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catalogs to allow users to write reviews and add tags. Other libraries, such as the University of Washington Libraries (http://www.lib.washington.edu/), are integrating WorldCat into their catalogs with WorldCat Local. At the same time, book lovers have created Web sites such as *LibraryThing,* which allows users to create their own profiles and catalogs and to Friend other users. This social site allows users to share their favorite book lists and receive recommendations for books they might like.

Features like these allow users to add value to the catalog, and improve the overall user experience. These efforts, of course, should always be designed as opt-in, allowing users to protect their right to read and their right to privacy. Yet many individuals are willing to set aside their privacy in order to interact and share in their interests with others.

Keeping up

If you are feeling a bit overwhelmed by all of this, do not worry. Wherever you can dream of going, a librarian is already there. In every social networking site I have joined, there is at least one group page created by librarians, for librarians. If you are curious, search a site for the word "librarians" or "libraries," and you will find your colleagues ready to help!

Conclusion

Social networking sites are taking reference services beyond the traditional reference desk. These sites allow librarians to reach out to users in a familiar interface, and to provide users with instruction, research help and the opportunity to have their voices heard. By joining users in "their space," librarians are able to reduce library anxiety, market their services, and stay connected to what users want and need. All it takes is being a good Friend.

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Sources for Additional Research

Casey, M. E., and L. C. Savastinuk. 2007. *Library 2.0: A Guide to Participatory Library Service.* Medford, NJ: Information Today.

Casey and Savastinuk provide an accessible guide to understanding and implementing an overall Library 2.0 plan. This book includes information on the underlying concepts and values of Library 2.0, technologies to consider (including social networking sites), achieving library-wide buy-in, and how to keep a 2.0 service plan running.

Farkas, M. G. 2007. Social Networking Software. In *Social Software in Libraries,* 109-124. Medford, NJ: Information Today.

Farkas provides an in-depth look at the origins, history, and variety of social networking sites. She also provides information on doing market research and outreach, and considers privacy and intellectual property implications of using social networking sites.

Library 2.0. http://library20.ning.com/.

Since its creation, the Library 2.0 network on *Ning* has quickly become a gathering place for librarians using technology to reach and serve library users. Explore this site to get an introduction to everything Library 2.0, and to start collaborating with other librarians.

Mashable: Social Networking News. http://mashable.com/.

Mashable is a community-written blog that carries all the latest news in the world of social networking sites. It is updated several times a day, so use the category tabs

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(*MySpace*, *Facebook*, *YouTube*, etc.) to read only those stories dealing with the social networking sites you are using. RSS feeds are available for each category.

McKiernan, G. 2007. *Friends: Social Networking Sites for Engaged Library Services*. http://onlinesocialnetworks.blogspot.com/.

The *Friends* blog will help you stay up-to-date on how libraries are using social networking sites, and what the media and academe are saying about them.

Schmit, A. 2007. *walking paper.* http://www.walkingpaper.org/.

Aaron Schmit's blog is a great resource for information on Library 2.0 technologies. He has written and presented extensively on libraries' use of *MySpace* and *Facebook*.

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