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Academic Libraries, Facebook and MySpace, and Student Outreach: A Survey of Student Opinion

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abstract: This study surveyed 366 Valparaiso University freshmen to discover their feelings about librarians using Facebook and MySpace as outreach tools. The vast majority of respondents had online social network profiles. Most indicated that they would be accepting of library contact through those Web sites, but a sizable minority reacted negatively to the concept. Because of the potential to infringe on students' sense of personal privacy, it is recommended that librarians proceed with caution when implementing online social network profiles.

Introduction

As online social network sites have exploded over the past few years, librarians have started to question and explore how this technology can be used in libraries. Most of the literature related to connecting to library users via social networks is anecdotal. To date, the question of whether college students want librarians to interact with them via Facebook and MySpace has not been addressed. This study asked first-year students at Valparaiso University how they felt about libraries having a presence on social network sites and using that medium to contact students. Although the students were asked about both Facebook and MySpace usage, this article focuses on Facebook more than MySpace since the former is the preferred social network site among college students.[1]

> To date, the question of whether college students want librarians to interact with them via Facebook and MySpace has not been addressed.

In order to understand how social networks can be used to reach students, as well as to understand the students' responses to this survey, some background is necessary. The popularity of online social network sites has resulted in a new lexicon. Within these sites, the word "friend" is used as both a noun and a verb. To friend someone is to send them a request asking them to become a friend on a social network platform. Once the recipient of the request agrees, the two profiles are connected as friends. Because the word friend is used as a verb in this context, variants of the word include "friended", "friending," or, if someone decides they no longer want their profile to be attached to someone else's, they can "defriend" them.

Facebook offers great flexibility with privacy settings. When users sign up, they must decide who can see their profile—all of their networks and friends, some of their networks and all of their friends, or only their friends. A network is usually a college or university but can also be an employer, high school, region, or other grouping. In order to join an educational network, a user must sign up under that college's e-mail address to gain admittance. Affiliates of multiple institutions can join all appropriate networks (for example, undergraduate and graduate institutions), as long as they have the required affiliate e-mail address.

Facebook allows academic users to further refine their privacy by specifying which types of users (undergraduates, graduate students, alumni, faculty, and staff) can view their profile. However, there is no way for Facebook to verify whether people list their correct status; people can lie in order to access profiles that might otherwise be blocked from view.

If Facebook users want even more privacy, they can enable the limited profile feature. Users can designate certain individuals who should only have partial access to their profile. For example, if a student wanted to be Facebook friends with a librarian in order to receive updates about the library but did not want the librarian to have access to all profile information, the student could add that librarian to his or her limited profile list. The student would alter their limited profile settings and decide what the librarian would be able to access (pictures, personal information, friends, and so on).

Within Facebook there is a feature called the "inbox." It is similar to e-mail; messages can be sent to individuals who have Facebook profiles, and those messages are only viewable by the sender and recipient(s). Inbox messages can be sent to almost anyone on Facebook unless the profile owner has blocked that feature; messages are not limited to one's friend circle.

A more public way to communicate with people is through their wall. By posting to someone's wall, a message could be visible to everyone in that user's friend or network circle (depending on their privacy settings).

Within MySpace, libraries and other organizations can have profiles; but, in Facebook, personal profiles are limited to individuals. Facebook recommends creating a page or group for organizations. Once created, Facebook users can join groups or become fans of organizations with pages. Group administrators can "message all members," whereas page administrators have a similar option to "send an update to fans." Fans or group members are not notified of changes to the library pages unless the administrator messages them; so, if libraries want to do outreach through groups or fan pages, these messaging options are essential.

Perhaps the best way to reach regular Facebook users is through status updates. These are available only through individual personal profile pages, not groups or fan pages. Each Facebook user can post status updates such as "Michael is delving into the catalog," or "Sarah is in New Orleans until tomorrow!" and those status updates appear in a list on their friends' pages. In this manner, users can catch up with many friends at once by quickly scanning status updates. If a librarian wants to let student friends know that she will be working reference from 3 to 5 p.m., she can update her status with that message and reach friends who log into Facebook while that status is posted. Status updates are a subset of news feeds. News feeds list not only friends' status updates but also other changes to profiles such as new friends, relationship changes, and groups joined.

In order for status updates and news feeds to work, a librarian must have student friends or else the messages will not reach their intended audience. It would be very unlikely that a non-friend student would be browsing through Facebook, discover the librarian's profile, and stumble across the status update. For this reason, a truly successful librarian profile requires friends. The questions this study address are how and whether students are accepting of librarian profiles and these communication methods.

Literature Review

Many articles have been written concerning social network Web sites and their users. For the purposes of this study, the subset of literature related to libraries reaching out to college students via these networks was of most interest. Some librarians have taken the approach of using social networks to contact students without considering how this contact will be received. For example, Brian S. Mathews, a librarian at the Georgia Institute of Technology, sent out more than 1,500 Facebook messages to undergraduate and graduate mechanical engineering students in his liaison area. He received 48 responses (3 percent); some of which were one-word responses.[2] He mentioned that "[w]hile it was satisfying to receive those messages, the response rate seemed low";[3] but, overall, Matthews seemed to feel that the venture was a success. It was not clear how the other 97 percent of students felt about those messages.

Robin Chan, a librarian at the University of Central Florida, maintains a MySpace page for the UCF Libraries and used unsolicited friending to increase exposure to the site. Chan wrote that "[e]ven if they denied our friend request, we would hope that they at least took a cursory look at our profile and saw what services we made available and then sought us out in the future."[4]

Librarian Beth Evans has also been proactive in the social networking arena. In December 2005, with the help of her daughter, she created a Brooklyn College MySpace page. The library then used three employees to sift through MySpace profiles to find 4,000 Brooklyn College students, faculty, and graduates.[5] Evans invited these affiliates to be the library's friends and seven months later had approximately 2,350 friends.[6] Evans wrote that "libraries have a chance to be leaders on their college campuses and in the larger community by realizing the possibilities of using social network sites like MySpace to bring their services to the public."[7] Evans did not mention any downsides to the Brooklyn College Library MySpace experiment and indicated that it had been well received by its audience.

In the article "Reaching Students with Facebook: Data and Best Practices," the authors recommended "that library professionals whose positions require them to interact with undergraduates seriously consider making use of Facebook."[8] The Penn State librarian authors tracked the reference questions they received via different methods, including Facebook, for the fall 2006 semester. Almost 29 percent of questions were received through Facebook, and all them were from undergraduate students.[9]

The Penn State authors did express concern with the technique involving friending as many institutional affiliates as possible. "While it might be tempting to seek out some of your students and add them as your friends on Facebook, it is our experience that this is not the best approach."[10] Instead, they recommend mentioning one's Facebook account in library instruction sessions and reference interviews and then letting the students find that account.

Marshall Breeding, the director for innovative technologies and research at Vanderbilt University, has also pondered the effect of social networking sites on libraries. He wrote about opportunities for library involvement and mentioned that the "most ambitious approach might involve using Facebook.com as a venue for the library's outreach to students."[11] However, he recognized that "[i]t may be unrealistic to think that large numbers of undergraduate students would want to count librarians among their Facebook Friends."[12]

Two newly minted librarians wrote about their Facebook experiments at their small liberal arts colleges in the September 2007 issue of *Computers in Libraries*. Sarah Miller and Lauren Jensen joined Facebook as college students in 2005. As librarians, Miller and Jensen have used the medium to reach out to students. In the article, they advocated a "Friend and Feed" technique,[13] by which librarians friend as many students as possible (student workers, instruction session participants, first-years at fall welcome, and so on) and then post regular status updates to keep friends up to date with library happenings.[14] Although it is true that updating the status or feed of one's Facebook profile is the best way to reach people in one's friend circle, the authors did not address how students felt about this aggressive friending technique.

When college student Scott Koerwer read Miller and Jensen's article, he expressed his concerns in his commentary entitled, "One Teenager's Advice to Adults on How to Avoid Being Creepy on Facebook." He encountered the Miller and Jensen article as an intern at Information Today, Inc. Initially, he bristled at the thought of librarians on Facebook. However, after digesting the idea, he "decided that there's no reason why a medium like Facebook couldn't work for librarians' purposes, if they went about it in the right way."[15] According to Koerwer, the right way excludes the practice of mass friending. He cautions, "Never Friend someone who isn't one of your library assistants."[16] The implication is that friending students en masse can make librarians seem creepy.

The Mississippi State University (MSU) libraries used a different approach than Miller and Jensen to reach out to students. MSU originally got involved with Facebook by creating closed groups for student employees. These closed groups were a success, with students using them to switch work shifts, communicate issues within the department, and develop a sense of community. Because of the success of these groups, the Library 2.0 Committee decided to develop an open group. They advertised this group through a fall welcome program, posters, and ads (but not through unsolicited friending)

and four months later had more than 180 members. They use this group to advertise upcoming library events to their fans. MSU also created a library Facebook application that patrons can add to their personal profile. This application combines their catalog, links to popular library services, and news feeds all into one interface that can be accessed via Facebook.[17] These approaches allow for those interested to participate but do not force the library on those not interested.

All the above articles are based on personal experiences and feelings, but there are also some research studies with quantitative results that relate to social network interaction between students and librarians. The first study, although not specifically about librarians, investigated students' perception of their professors' presence in Facebook. The authors studied two undergraduate classes at the Georgia Institute of Technology. The faculty members who taught both of these classes had Facebook profiles. The students were asked a series of questions to determine their rating of their professor, their involvement with Facebook, if they knew their professor had a Facebook profile, and if they were Facebook friends with their professor. The study revealed that "contact on Facebook had no impact on students' ratings of professors"; however, one-third of the respondents stated that they did not believe that faculty members should have a Facebook profile.[18]

This study provided insight about how students view people in positions of authority who use Facebook, but the student/faculty member relationship is different than the student/librarian relationship. Faculty members often interact with students on a daily basis and, therefore, know students much better than librarians. In the George Institute of Technology study, the two faculty members whose classes were studied were very popular with their students, which may have made those students more open to those two faculty members' presence on Facebook.[19] Since librarians have not built up a similar rapport with most students, they are at a disadvantage when attempting to develop relationships through social network sites.

Two Jacksonville State University librarians conducted a survey in the fall of 2005 to investigate librarians' attitudes toward Facebook. Participants were asked whether they felt Facebook had any academic potential. Most (54 percent) said no, only 12 percent said yes, and the rest were not sure.[20] Of those 12 percent who said yes, some were enthusiastic and suggested the libraries use social networks for outreach. However, the majority of respondents said no and expressed sentiments such as "Facebook should serve as a space exclusively for students. …Librarians, professors, administrators, police and other uninvited folks should keep out."[21]

In 2007, OCLC published an international survey titled *Sharing, Privacy and Trust in our Networked World*. This survey included responses from over 6,100 people aged 14–84 from around the world as well as a poll of 382 U.S. library directors. The report included a chapter entitled "Libraries and Social Networking"; and, although not specific to academic libraries, some relevant responses emerged regarding libraries in general. Most of the questions concerned libraries creating online social network spaces and not using those already in existence. Interest in library-created social networking opportunities was low. One British teenager responded that "the library is…a place where you can borrow books and sometimes use a computer, not for people's social lives."[22] The most commonly given reason from the general public for why social networking

is not the library's role was that the "library is for learning/information."[23] The library directors polled seemed to agree. "Less than 20 percent of U.S. library directors see a role for social networks in libraries."[24]

In their 2008 article entitled "The Problems and Potential of MySpace and Facebook Usage in Academic Libraries," Melanie Chu and Yvonne Nalani Meulemans surveyed students about their MySpace and Facebook usage. The surveyed students were asked if they used those two sites to discuss school, professors, and courses, and most did. The students were not asked if they would want to receive social network messages from the faculty or librarians, but several students added comments that they "weren't particularly interested in using MySpace/Facebook to communicate directly with professors."[25] The authors noted that some students felt that e-mail was the more appropriate method of communication to use with faculty.[26] Students surveyed were asked if it might be useful for a professor to have a MySpace/Facebook page, and 45 percent thought it might be useful, whereas 29 percent were not sure.[27]

Although some of the social networking literature was encouraging of the trend for libraries to use social networking as a method of outreach to students, others expressed caution when encroaching on this bastion of student expression. Other articles offered mixed reviews. However, at the time of this writing, no published studies have surveyed the intended audience—students—to see if they were interested in being approached by librarians through social network sites.

Background

Valparaiso University is a private, liberal arts university located in northwest Indiana, approximately one hour from Chicago. The student population numbers almost 4,000 when graduate programs are included. It is a predominantly residential campus, and most students are undergraduates.

All first-year and transfer undergraduate students, regardless of discipline, must take an introductory course their first year at Valparaiso University. At the upper levels, there are no classes required of all students across disciplines, so polling the first-year students in the introductory courses was the only way to reach a representative sample of students from various colleges and departments. The majority of the new students are in classes called the Valpo Core, but honors students take an equivalent course in Christ College, the honors college.

Methodology

For this survey, new Valpo Core and first-year honor students were targeted. In early January 2008, all 36 faculty members teaching these classes were contacted, given an explanation of the study, and asked for their help in distributing the survey. After the initial e-mail, 17 responded that they were willing to participate. Three weeks later, a reminder was sent to faculty who had not responded to the first inquiry, and the second e-mail elicited participation from five more faculty members. Once the faculty members responded that they were willing to participate and included their class sizes, they were sent surveys through campus mail.

Before distributing the surveys, the faculty members were asked to read aloud an included statement that explained to the students that their participation was voluntary and their responses confidential. Once the surveys were completed, the faculty members collected the papers and returned them to the author via campus mail. In all, 366 students out of 721 enrolled in those classes completed the surveys in January and early February for a response rate of 50.8 percent.

Results

The first two questions asked were designed to find out how many of the respondents had profiles on two of the most popular online social networks: Facebook and MySpace. Facebook was the more popular of the two, with 338 out of 366 participants using it, for a 92.3 percent saturation rate. A smaller but still sizable group of 151 (41.3 percent) responded that they had MySpace accounts. One hundred and ninety (51.9 percent) had Facebook but not MySpace, 145 (39.6 percent) had both, 22 (6.0 percent) had neither type of account, six (1.6 percent) had MySpace but not Facebook, and three (0.8 percent) indicated that they were Facebook users but did not respond to the MySpace question. Twenty-one of the 22 students who did not have an account on either network still completed the survey (see figure 1).

Students were then asked to think about the idea of a library social network profile that would be used for communication with students. They were asked two questions to gauge how they would react to such a profile. First, they were asked if they would add the library or librarian as a friend.

Some participants (63 or 17.2 percent) were very open to the idea and said that they would be proactive and invite the library to be their friend if they knew about the account. The majority of respondents (211 or 57.7 percent) said that they would not be proactive about it, but if the library friended them, they would accept the friend invitation. Another group of 92 students (25.1 percent) said that they would not add the library as a friend (see figure 2).

> **The majority of respondents (211 or 57.7 percent) said that they would not be proactive about it, but if the library friended them, they would accept the friend invitation.**

The last question that students were asked was, How would you feel if the library tried to send you announcements and communicate with you via Facebook and/or MySpace? They were asked then to select only one answer. More students (156 or 42.6 percent) answered that they would be more receptive to information received in this way than any other response. The second most commonly given answer (134 or 36.6 percent) was that "I would not pay attention but not mind this communication." A smaller group (45 or 12.3 percent) was more negative about the idea and said they would not pay attention to such communication and would resent the library attempting to contact them through this medium. Some students (30, 8.2 percent) answered "other" with a written explanation. Many of those responses indicated that the students' feelings would depend on the quantity and quality of communiqués:
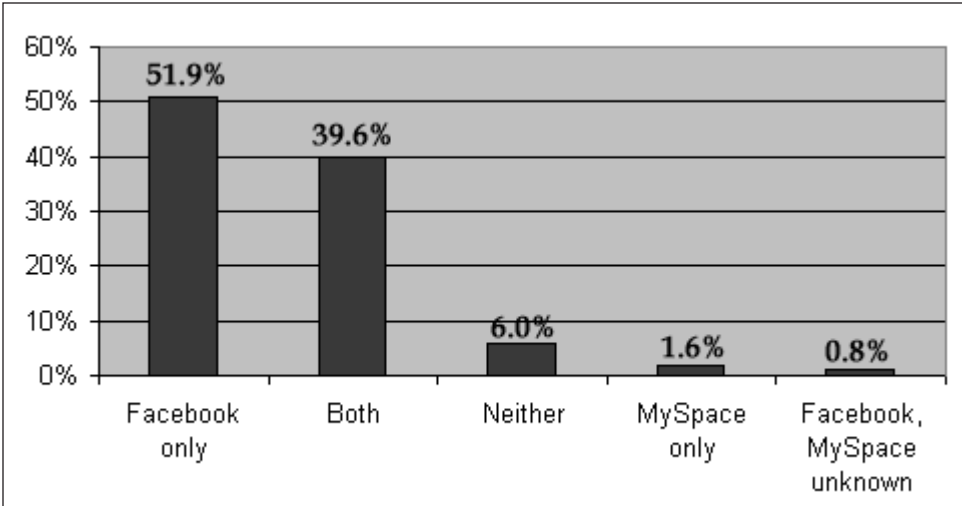
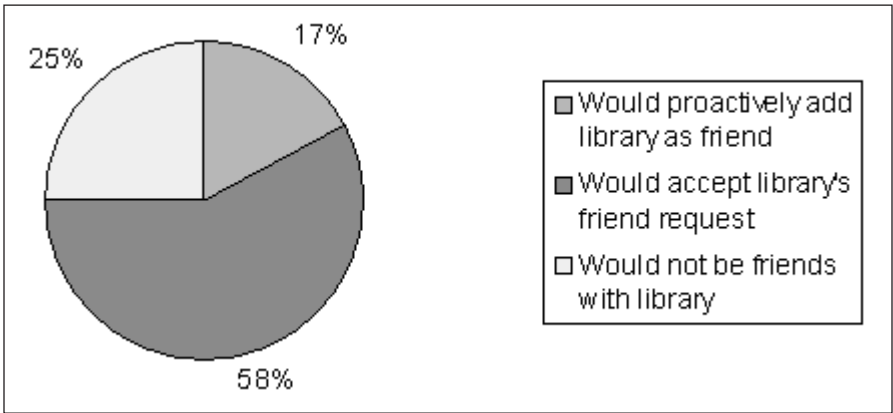Figure 1. Distribution of Facebook and MySpace Accounts Held.

Figure 2. Student Acceptance of the Library/Librarian as a Social Networking Friend.

- I would welcome USEFUL information happily.
- I would be fine with it if there weren't a large number of bulletins.
- I would welcome any info as long as it was necessary. I don't want anything useless.
- I would perhaps pay attention but would be annoyed if announcements were sent too much/often.

Some comments were more negative toward the idea:

- Why would they? I would think it is spam.
- If they sent me messages, I would "defriend" them.

- I like to keep my personal life separate from school administration.
- I would rather them send info to my Valpo e-mail, since it is school related.

One Facebook user addressed how the messages would be sent with this comment, "If they wrote me an inbox I wouldn't mind, but I would not like it on my wall." This indicated that the student would not want library messages visible to his/her friends but rather kept private between the library and student.

Finally, respondents were asked to provide other comments and 49 did. Most of those comments were positive:

- I think this is a really good idea because students check Facebook and MySpace before Groupwise [campus e-mail system] and CourseVU [Blackboard].
- Good idea, practically every other group/organization has one, you should too.
- Please do add students to a library Facebook. It is easy for the students to accept the library rather than searching for it. These communication efforts are appreciated. Thank you!

Some comments had to do with use or frequency of use such as "Facebook/Myspace are highly addicting, and that is why I do not want [accounts]," or "I never get on MySpace."

The negative comments were in the minority:

- This is a terrible idea. Pointless.
- I don't think that is going to be used for comments and announcements only. I believe that it is a spy tool to observe our lives.
- It's probably not worth your time unless the library does new and exciting things.
- Facebook is to stay in touch with friends or teachers from the past. E-mail is for announcements. Stick with that!!!

Not surprisingly, students who were more accepting of adding the library as a friend were generally more accepting of receiving announcements via social networks and vice versa. There were some exceptions. For example, four students who said they would proactively add the library as a friend also said that they would resent the library using social networks to send announcements. Conversely, seven students who said they would not add the library as a friend said they would welcome library announcements via social networks.

Discussion

What was apparent from these results was that a one-size-fits-all model does not work when it comes to using social network sites for library outreach. As Miller and Jensen noted, the easiest way to reach students within Facebook is through the news feed feature.[28] Because the news feed is only visible to the user's circle of friends, if the library wants to make use of this feature, having a large circle of friends is necessary. However, the results of this survey made it clear that some students will resent a library/librarian's intrusion into their private space. Therefore, perhaps indiscriminate friending is

not a good idea. It is important not to annoy students but rather let them come to the library on their own terms.

Because many students seem receptive to the idea of a library presence on social network sites, librarians should consider creating profiles for marketing and publicity purposes. One advertising technique that has worked well for some has been word of mouth through library instruction sessions, freshman orientations, blogs, and the library Web site. When mentioning the profile, librarians can invite students to friend them and ask questions through the social network platform. Thus, students will know the option is there but not be pressured by the more obtrusive friend request.

It was somewhat surprising that the majority of students were willing to accept a friend request from the library because by accepting the friendship request they grant the librarian access to much, if not all, of their profile (depending on their privacy settings). One of the students who said he/she would accept a library friend request addressed this issue with the comment "I would probably block some settings that the library could view." Still, by accepting the friend request on any level, users are allowing access to some information. As Mack et al. noted, "Students are far less concerned with privacy than many librarians assume they are."[29]

Students made it clear in their responses that they do not want their time wasted. Superfluous e-mail or wall messages will be seen as spam and may even cause students to defriend the library. Status updates are easier to scan and are generally shorter but should not be used in excess to avoid irritation. As Norwich University librarian Meredith Farkas said, "A big difference exists between being where our patrons are and being useful to our patrons where they are. A profile should be designed to offer something to patrons, so they will keep coming back to it."[30]

Conclusion

Library and librarian profiles on social network sites would be welcomed by many students and, therefore, should be strongly considered. In recent years, Facebook has been the social network Web site of choice for college students, and this study supported that site's prevalence. Academic libraries considering experimenting with social network sites might have better success with Facebook than MySpace because of the former site's popularity with students. When creating Facebook profiles, libraries must exercise caution and let students set the parameters of the social network relationship. If students contact the library via Facebook, by all means, the library should respond in the same fashion. Mass friending should be avoided because it is a technique that may repel more students than it attracts.

Library and librarian profiles on social network sites would be welcomed by many students and, therefore, should be strongly considered.

Librarians who have social network connections with students must be aware that the method of communication within Facebook also matters. If a student asks a reference question via a personal message, it is not appropriate to respond by posting a response to that student's wall. The wall is a public means of communication and, therefore, is not an appropriate medium for private

messages such as reference question responses. In the same vein, a librarian wanting to let friended students know when he or she will be working the reference desk should do so via the status update instead of sending out messages to that effect. It would be discourteous for a librarian to send out the equivalent of an e-mail every time he or she worked reference, but the same is not true for unobtrusive status updates.

There are several areas of research related to this study that warrant further exploration. First, this study surveyed only first-year students. Would upperclassmen have different feelings regarding social networks and libraries than their younger counterparts? Secondly, this survey focused mostly on librarians or libraries as friends, as opposed to library groups or fan pages. The students who were not interested in becoming friends with libraries might be more interested in fan or group pages because, through these, they can maintain their privacy. Finally, there are some remaining questions that arose through students' comments that cannot be addressed through the survey format. For example, what were those students thinking who said they would proactively friend the library but then later said they would resent the library using social networks to send announcements? A focus group format would help address some of these questions. It is unlikely that social network sites are going to disappear anytime soon, so it follows that libraries need to learn as much as possible about the best methods for interaction with patrons using these tools.

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Notes

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