

INFORMATION LITERACY AND THE SOCIAL NETWORK: MEETING THE NEW CHALLENGES OF USING FACEBOOK AS AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL

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INTRODUCTION

In the past several years, academic libraries have increasingly relied on social networking tools like Facebook and Twitter to promote and raise awareness of their resources and services. Using Facebook as a marketing tool for the library has long been recognized as one of the main benefits of having a Facebook presence (Jacobson, 2011). Many academic libraries have also used Facebook to promote information literacy. Examples of this practice include linking to research guides and tutorials, promoting events like Open Access Week or Banned Books Week, or running contests that involve using library resources.

Successfully reaching and engaging library users with this kind of information through Facebook can be challenging. Facebook's News Feed algorithm is designed to reward more engaging content by having it appear more often in users' News Feeds. Effectively planning Facebook content that generates user engagement is necessary to reach the library's community with both promotional and educational content. This paper seeks to explain how Facebook currently defines and measures engagement, how libraries can provide promotional and educational content that reaches the broadest audience possible, and some ways librarians can use Facebook and other social media platforms tools to teach information literacy concepts.

FACEBOOK ENGAGEMENT

In Fall 2012, the Kimbel Library Social Media Working Group was tasked with developing a strategic plan for social media at our library. Before deciding on any one strategy, the group first reviewed Kimbel Library's Facebook Insights to gather more information on the success of our previous content. Facebook Insights is a free tool provided by Facebook that

measures user engagement and other related metrics. The main assessment measures used by Facebook include:

- *Reach*: measured by how many people see a post in their News Feed.
- *Engaged Users*: the number of people who click on a specific post. Examples of this would be a person clicking a photo to make it larger or following a link to a story.
- *Talking About This*: the number of people who create a story with a Facebook post by liking, commenting, or sharing the post.
- *Virality*: the number of people Talking About This divided by the overall Reach of the post.

After several weeks of monitoring the library's Facebook Insights and reviewing data from previous months and years, the Social Media Working Group began to suspect that the overall reach of our posts began declining in the fall of 2012. Rumors that Facebook had made changes to its News Feed Algorithm quickly spread on the web. In response to those rumors, Facebook released a statement saying, "In the fall we made a quality adjustment to the News Feed algorithm to reduce negative feedback on stories from people. This meant that some Pages saw a drop in Reach on their less engaging posts" (Fact Check, 2013). Facebook's News Feed algorithm is the tool Facebook uses to determine what posts will show up in a Facebook user's news feed. The exact algorithm that Facebook uses is not published, but Facebook uses several factors to determine which posts the most users will see. According to Facebook, "The news feed algorithm uses several factors to determine top stories, including the number of comments, who posted the story, and what type of post it is (ex:

photo, video, status update, etc.)” (“How Facebook News Feed Works,” 2013).

To give an example of the effects the News Feed algorithm can have on reach, when Kimbel Library posted a link to our Election 2012 LibGuide, no one liked or commented on our post. As a result, only 80 people saw that post in their news feed. Conversely, our photo album from the Banned Book Read Out received 10 likes, 3 comments, and 2 shares and was seen by 230 people, a 187% increase in views. This example showed the Working Group that for our library to continue to promote information and information literacy via Facebook and have our message reach the broadest audience, the group would have to work harder to make engaging content.

CREATING ENGAGING, EDUCATIONAL CONTENT

After considering the implications of these changes to the Facebook News Feed algorithm, it became clear to the Kimbel Library Social Media Working Group that fundamental changes would have to be made to the way the library approached using Facebook. To this end, the group began researching Facebook use in libraries in order to develop an appropriate content strategy that would help the library reach the broadest audience possible on Facebook while still proving engaging, educational content.

A previous study of Facebook engagement showed that many academic libraries struggled to get users to engage with Facebook posts in the form of likes and comments (Gerolimos, 2011). In a white paper on using social media to engage students, Galiardi and Mathews (2011) identified featuring photos, videos, links, and questions and targeting a freshman audience as effective ways to engage an audience. Talking about things other than the library and running contests, quizzes, and offering prizes have also been suggested as ways to boost impact (Glazer, 2012). Keeping these suggestions in mind, the Kimbel Library Social Media Working Group experimented with several different strategies in order to create more engaging Facebook content. The following strategies were the most successful:

- *Take a Photo*—The Facebook Help Center page on How Facebook News Feed Works (2013) points out that posts with photos are more likely to show up in more users’ News Feeds. Facebook can easily measure how many people click to enlarge a photo, so it make sense that this is used as a factor when calculating engagement and, by extension, whether a post will appear in a users’ News Feed. In situations where you would write a text-only status update, ask yourself if there is a way to take a picture of what you are trying to say as well.
- *Capture Library Events*—People like to look at photos of themselves and their friends. If your library hosts an event or photo booth, post the pictures to Facebook. Some of our most popular posts have been photos of things we were already doing, making this suggestion

great for library staff with time constraints. Check into your university’s marketing or communications requirements and make sure to have participants sign a media release form if needed.

- *Ask for Feedback*—Ask students a question and request that they respond in the comments. Examples of questions that worked for us include, “Who is going to the win the Oscar for Best Picture?” and “If these literary characters were running for president, who would you vote for?” The question does not necessarily have to be library-related, though many questions about books and movies can be tied back to the library collection.
- *Give Away Free Stuff*—College students love free stuff and Kimbel Library has had success giving away vouchers for free coffee drinks to students who answer a trivia question about the library or relating to a current event. Facebook has very strict rules about running contests through its site, so be sure to familiarize yourself with their rules before venturing into the area of contests and prizes.
- *Visualize Your Data*—People will find facts about your library much more interesting if you visualize the data. For example, rather than tell our community that our library was busy, we created a bar graph of the number of people in the library by hour. The Working Group was surprised by how many users found the graph interesting and commented on it. This post is our most popular post to date.
- *Utilize Student Workers*—Ask your student workers to pose for photos. If they create a story from the post by liking, commenting on, or sharing it, their friends will see the photo in their news feed thus increasing your potential audience. If you can, involve a trusted student worker in content creation or developing a strategic plan.
- *Develop Your Voice and Brand*—When people visit the library’s Facebook page, it should feel “branded” and like a unified presence is being presented. In some ways, the library’s Facebook page should feel like an extension of its physical space. If multiple people are posting to the library’s Facebook page, make sure everyone is on the same page when it comes to content creation. Use your school’s colors when you create graphics and design cover and profile photos.

However, creating more engaging content was only half the story for Kimbel Library’s Facebook page. We also wanted to create content that served the purpose of educating the library community about services, resources, and information. A subtle shift in our approach to educational content was needed. For example, the library recently wanted to promote access to our educational peripherals, including around 100 puppets that can be checked out. Rather than posting a status update that said,

“Kimbel Library has puppets!” we instead explored ways to promote the use of our puppets in a way that would create engagement on Facebook. Ultimately, we decided to take a photo of our library staff with several puppets. Then, we used the photo as the base of a trivia question that asked our library community to guess how many puppets the library owned. By re-framing our post idea in a way that promoted engagement, we were likely able to reach more News Feeds with our educational content than if we had posted a simple status update.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY

The process of creating a Facebook content strategy that considers both engagement and educational use has inspired the author to use social media to teach information literacy concepts in the credit-bearing environment. Facebook can be used as a conversation starter with students to discuss issues such as privacy, copyright, fair use, and broader issues of finding and using information in our current environment. To give an example, Facebook’s News Feed algorithm is an almost perfect example of the “filter bubble,” as discussed by Eli Pariser (2011). Pariser defines the filter bubble in this way:

If you take all of these filters together, you take all of these algorithms you get what I call a filter bubble. Your filter bubble is your own personal unique universe of information that you live in online. And what's in your filter bubble depends on who you are and it depends on what you do you. But the thing is that you don't decide what gets in, and more importantly you don't actually see what gets edited out. (para 7.).

Pariser’s filter bubble TED Talk was shown to students in our library’s credit-bearing information literacy course during a lesson on the differences between searching in Google and searching in library databases. After watching the video, the teacher prompted the students to discuss the various filter bubbles in their lives, including the Facebook News Feed, Google search results, and even the library’s discovery service (which only searches information available from our library).

After the class session, students were asked to journal their thoughts on how access to information and research results might be affected by the filter bubble, what filter bubbles exist in their daily lives and if that concerned them, and what steps they have taken, if any, they have taken to guard themselves against online filter bubbles. While many students were bothered by the presence of online filter bubbles, many were also ambivalent and expected a certain amount of interference from corporations.

CONCLUSION

Creating engaging content that results in a high number of likes, comments, and shares is currently one of the most effective ways to ensure Facebook posts are seen by the widest audience possible. Chances are high that Facebook will

continue to update and tweak its News Feed algorithm in order to determine what stories show up in users’ news feeds. It is also possible that sometime in the future Facebook will change its structure entirely and the News Feed will be a long forgotten memory. Academic libraries that use Facebook will have to stay current with Facebook’s changes and adapt their models to continue to use Facebook effectively. In the meantime, Facebook and other social media platforms can be used as a starting point to discuss information literacy concepts with our constituents.

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