MySpace and Facebook: Reaching Our Students With Their Technology of Choice

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Background

MySpace calls itself "a place for friends," with approximately 71 million MySpace profiles (myspace.com). Upon creating an account, a user can customize a profile cosmetically, establish security parameters, and enter information such as schools attended, birthday, marital status, personal headline, favorite music, as well as upload photos. Options to customize MySpace are innumerable with HTML code. A Google search on "MySpace code generator" or "MySpace profile editor" will provide lists of web sites where users can find HTML code that can be pasted into various portions of a profile.

Once a profile has been established, a user can search for people and invite them to be "friends," as well as receive invitations via email. Becoming a "friend" with another user can allow access to that user's blog and/or bulletins. Along with a personal profile, groups can be easily created and friends invited to join groups.

Facebook calls itself an online directory in which college students can: "look up people at your school, see how people know each other, and find people in your classes and groups" (facebook.com). Unlike its predecessor MySpace, Facebook requires an email address ending in ".edu" to create a profile. With approximately 7 million users at over 2,000 colleges, it is now the 7th most-trafficked site on the Internet (Levy & Stone, 2006).

Like MySpace, information fields can be completed. Information fields specific to Facebook are campus status (undergraduate, grad student, alumnus, faculty or staff) and course schedule. Kushner (2006) notes, "Ostensibly, this gives the site academic potential…using it for stuff like Chaucer study groups and car pools to ichthyology lab." Again, like MySpace, Facebook users can invite "friends," and join or create groups. Facebook also allows for the posting of events visible only to your campus (e.g. parties, meetings, field trips, etc.). Facebook, however, has a consistent profile template not customizable with HTML code.

Literature Review

Recent news coverage on MySpace and Facebook has been difficult to miss. Stories have covered pedophiles with false identities luring young MySpace users (Mayer-Hohdahl, 2005); parents, schools and communities educating youth on issues of privacy and internet safety (Gordon, 2006); college administrators holding students accountable, and disciplining for, their behaviors posted (or pictured) on Facebook; and campus libraries blocking access to sites (Bugeja, 2006). Employers investigate job candidates' MySpace/Facebook pages (Read, 2006). High school students organized immigration legislation protests on MySpace (Gold, 2006). Local bands and famous musicians create MySpace profiles to promote their work (Pemberton, 2006). Even politicians create profiles (Wedge, 2006).

Online innovations, like MySpace/Facebook, continue to transform library policy and practice in delivering instruction, reference, and collections. Librarians have embraced advances in technology to the extent that academic libraries are constantly redefining their roles and "service paradigms" (Moyo, 2004, p. 229). Online tutorials reinforce or supplement concepts taught in traditional instruction, as well as supporting online-only curriculum and distance education students (Yi, 2005). Chat, in various forms of live reference, has had widespread adoption to augment existing reference models, increasing hours of available reference via consortium, and supporting users who prefer online communication (Ward, 2005). Most recently, blogs, instant messaging, RSS feeds, and pod-casts are other ways to reach students through popular technologies (Balas, 2005; Bell, 2006; Stephens & Gordon, 2006). As Ward (2005) noted, students choose chat and other technologies primarily for reasons of speed and convenience—they are "already online" (p. 36). MySpace/Facebook may emerge as yet another technology added to librarians' repertoire.

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While as of this writing there appears no scholarly literature focusing on MySpace/Facebook, there is some information on how similar social networking technologies and computer-mediated communications (CMC) are used to facilitate information flow and develop relationships.

CMC's are most often used to strengthen already existing ties (connections/relationships between people) but can be used to establish weak ties (e.g. online communities) (Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001). Haythornthwaite (2005) offers a good introduction to the research on CMC's effects on strengthening strong ties while also providing an opportunity to establish new, weak ties. This is reflected in findings from the authors' survey and focus group. Relationships with strong ties often utilize multiple CMC's; weak ties often utilize only a single type of CMC to communicate. Weak ties participate less frequently with a social network, but are more likely to provide new and different ideas (Wellman, et al, 2001). One might argue, then, that librarians have an appropriate role and opportunity as a weak tie.

Particular MySpace/Facebook features can support and strengthen ties in the academic arena. Bulletin boards (a feature of MySpace/Facebook) have been shown to facilitate student-student and student-faculty communication, and may also support students' social life (Weskkirich & Milburn, 2003). Bulletin boards may also allow students an opportunity to determine their "self-presentation" and therefore, students may feel more comfortable in contributing to course discussions/communications (Kelly, Keaten, & Finch, 2002). MySpace's major feature is the customizability of virtually every aspect of a user's page; "self-presentation" could be determined by customizing one's page. Eveleth, Eveleth, and Sarker (2005) also found evidence that an online community can provide significant support among students in a class. Online communities for city residents have also been shown to strengthen community engagement, feelings of belonging, and the cultivation of social network ties (Kavanaugh, Carroll, Rosson, Zin, & Reese, 2005). The research on CMC's indicates that MySpace/Facebook has the potential to support student learning.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The following provides a brief summary of the authors' methodology, data, and analysis. Further documentation is available upon request.

California State University San Marcos (CSUSM) is a baccalaureate and Master's level university with approximately 7500 students. As of this writing, there were 3608 MySpace and 1352 Facebook profiles by individuals who identified themselves as current CSUSM students. CSUSM usage data among first-year students was gathered using a web-based survey instrument. One hundred and five responses were gathered; 89 responses were usable. Of 89 responses, 38 students have a MySpace page, 2 students have a Facebook page, and 49 students have both MySpace and Facebook pages. A fair, positive correlation was found between number of visits per day and time spent per visit ($r(89)= .4$). Fifty-three percent of users reported using MySpace/Facebook to network with friends, and 70% reported using it to

"find people" (e.g. old friends). Several comments in both the survey and focus group reiterated this trend that pages are being used to communicate with friends known offline. Of those who reported they had both a MySpace and Facebook page, 90% said they use it to communicate with others about school, professors, or courses. Fifty percent with only a MySpace page said they use it to discuss school professors or courses.

To supplement and complement the survey, a focus group was convened to discuss usage of Myspace/Facebook. In an one hour session, focus group participants responded freely to several discussion points on MySpace/Facebook: first contact with/adoption of technology; description of a typical session; benefits/problems of usage; usefulness/appropriateness in an academic setting; role on a commuter campus; and recent headlines and press coverage. The discussion was transcribed and analyzed.

In the focus group, two participants were first year students, one junior, and one senior in a variety of majors. Two students have both MySpace and Facebook pages, and all have a MySpace page. Focus group findings on usage reiterated survey results. Students indicated a high level of awareness regarding issues of internet safety, privacy, and media coverage on MySpace/Facebook. All participants discovered MySpace/Facebook via word of mouth, and several have experience with similar networking sites (e.g. Hi5, Friendster).

A typical session includes checking email notifications and "top" friends' pages (reading their blogs and viewing pictures), looking for and listening to music, and decorating one's MySpace page using HTML code. Benefits of the technology include keeping in touch with existing friends, re-connecting with former friends, and learning about new people and music. The focus group findings support the literature on CMC— participants use the technology to keep in contact with people they already know. Noted drawbacks include: interpersonal "melodrama" arising from use, decrease of face-to-face interaction, and consumption of time. In fact, all focus group participants agreed "it would be a good thing" if CSUSM blocked access to Myspace/Facebook. The students indicated they would prefer Myspace/Facebook for course discussion and assignment reminders rather than the campus course management software (WebCT). WebCT is not as user-friendly, they explained; they are "already at" MySpace/Facebook. One participant acknowledged that some students might be "weirded out" by faculty presence on MySpace/Facebook. Focus group participants were split on the future of MySpace/Facebook: two indicated it was a passing "fad," two said it was "the next email" and here to stay.

PRACTICAL INTEGRATION

Integrating MySpace/Facebook into an information literacy program (ILP) can include the establishment of a librarian's own page, a page for a course (in collaboration with an instructor), or a page for students in a discipline. Assessment of instruction could be conducted via short quizzes or questions that can be posted to a librarian's page. As seen in the literature, strong ties

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are often characterized by the utilization of many different types of CMC. A librarian's presence to support a class can be seen as even stronger with a MySpace page.

Much has been written about "point-of-need/just in time" reference assistance. MySpace can indicate if a person is online and available; students can easily find if a particular librarian is available to assist them. Facebook does not have this option. However, both have blog and bulletin features. Adding a MySpace/Facebook page to an existing repertoire of email, phone, and the reference desk may contribute to strengthening existing ties and establishing new ones. If a librarian is part of a Psychology student group, a bulletin posting tips on using PsycINFO could be posted and viewed by all students. The authors suggest that the same convenience found by Ward (2005) and others can be found with MySpace/Facebook, providing students with multiple ways of accessing a librarian. Certainly, these technologies require much less risk and effort on the part of students to ask for help than at the reference desk.

MySpace/Facebook can further the outreach efforts of any university library, much in the same way other technologies have extended the library's presence— chat, blogs, instant messaging, and so on. MySpace/Facebook can be utilized as an additional promotional venue, to create awareness of library services and events via blog postings and event announcements. Effectiveness can be measured by noting any increase in attendance. Profiles can be created for libraries, rather than individual librarians, to present a uniform identity while enabling multiple librarians to contribute to the maintenance of the page. Students can post comments on the library's page in lieu of, or in addition to, a traditional comments box.

MySpace/Facebook may also contribute to retention of students, particularly first year students in a largely commuter campus, by creating cohorts via groups of common interest, links to classmates, professor and librarian, and facilitating a sense of belonging to campus. Librarians can stay abreast of campus issues by viewing student and group pages. As MySpace/Facebook and comparable sites become more popular and established, librarians may continue to find new opportunities for integration.

Conclusion

There are innumerable opportunities for further research into how MySpace/Facebook can be used in the context of the academic library. Research into MySpace/Facebook's adoption on residential versus commuter campuses as well as differences in adoption by age and degree of adoption (i.e. frequency of use, amount of use) could shed more light on the population using these services and for what specific purposes. Case studies as well as more systematic research on using MySpace/Facebook in content delivery, reference assistance, outreach, and information literacy instruction can provide a more comprehensive idea of where these tools will ultimately fit into academic librarianship. As with other new technology, libraries should proceed in adoption appropriate to their campus after analysis of the user population.

The authors opine that Facebook will emerge as the main social networking site for colleges and universities. MySpace is being rapidly adopted by the general public, but Facebook serves a solely collegiate audience. The authors submit that these technologies show signs that they will stand alongside email and the web as vital tools in academic librarianship. In the very least, a greater understanding of what these technologies are and how students on a particular campus are using them can facilitate a better connection to the campus community that libraries support.

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