Social Networking, Its Uses, and The Implications for Information Professionals

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One of the prominent features of the new "Net Generation" is that of online social networking. A social network is a network of users that are linked together either through similar interests or who one may know in real life or virtually. Joining a social network involves creating an online profile with your personal information and gaining friends. One can gain friends either through joining similar online interest groups or through requesting persons, with whom you interact with, to join your network.

It seems that Facebook has managed to corner the market in this regard with more than 500,000,000 registered users in 2010 (Facebook, 2011). Twitter has also gained popularity, especially among older individuals and professionals, but less so among teens. In fact research has shown that teens are not using Twitter in large numbers; only 8% of internet users ages 12 -17 use Twitter (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010 p. 5). This same research indicates that 73% of wired American teens now use social networking websites, a significant increase from previous surveys (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010 p. 2).

With so many teens using online social networking sites there is an opportunity for libraries to market their services specifically to our young adult patrons by connecting and networking with these teens in very much the same way that the teens themselves connect with their friends, regardless of the type of library. Indeed as Hill (2010) indicated, social networking tools are critical to librarians, since rather

than hoping the teens will simply come to the library, the library must go to the teens.

Braun (2009) believes that because of the static nature of the average library website that many function mainly for cataloguing purposes. She advocates for the use of social networking tools to handle the outreach activities that libraries engage in. Thus, the reason that information professionals should engage in active use of social networking tools is to attract teens to the library by existing in the same online space as their patrons.

Several library systems have taken steps to develop an online presence on the most popular social networking sites. For example, Halifax Public Libraries on its teen page provides a link to its teen Facebook page, and the National Library and Information System Authority in Trinidad & Tobago provides links to its Facebook, Twitter and YouTube content via its homepage. There is, however, a disturbing trend that in spite of the library's presence on social networking sites, these library pages are not well subscribed to. For example, though Halifax Public Library serves a large community their teen Facebook page has a mere 102 fans. What could be accounting for the low numbers, despite these institutions engaging in

technological innovations and existing in the same digital space as their clients? The new generation of library users will not simply come to a library's Facebook page but rather the library has to actively engage the user. Being an information professional involves being proactive in connecting to your users, and that means being as dynamic and outgoing digitally as the users with whom you are trying to interact.

The popularity and variety of Facebook pages makes this medium one of the better ways that a library can connect with its younger patrons. On Facebook a library can either create its own page or establish a group to begin developing its online presence. Alternatively, individual librarians can cultivate a presence on their personal pages. Information about these different Facebook presences is outlined below:

After an organization creates a Facebook page, users can "like" the page to become a fan, and updates and messages about the library will then appear in their newsfeeds. Many Library systems have created a main page for the organisation and a separate page specifically for young adults.

One can create a Facebook group, which your patrons can join. After joining, patrons will be able to receive messages from the

group, but updates will not be seen in members' newsfeeds. Groups are no longer as widely used as organizational pages but they are used in some high school libraries, because of the option to make group information private to members.

Some proactive information professionals may wish to create an individual profile page to "friend" their teen patrons. This page is professional in nature and is separate from any personal Facebook page that an information professional may have. This is a good idea as some teens may not wish to be a fan of the library as an organization, but if they choose to be friends with the librarians, they may gain access to updates and information in this manner.

All these different Facebook presences are used with varying degrees of success. Organization pages work well for big library systems that seek to have a wide reach. Groups work well with smaller, close-knit libraries where the information displayed would be relevant to only certain people, rather than the wider public. Individual profile pages are also a good idea, since they have the effect of personalising the library's connection with teen patrons.

Miller and Jensen (2007) offer some suggestions on how to connect with your

patrons. In spite of their focus on the high school library, some of their suggestions

> Libraries can create three types of Facebook presences:
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> - Organization/business pages
> - Facebook groups
> - Profile pages for individual librarians

may be applied to public libraries as well. Their first suggestion involves librarians becoming Facebook friends of all the student library workers; after this, you can send the suggestion to join the library's Facebook page or group. Also, encourage these teens to tell their friends to also join the library group or page as well. This way, the library's Facebook presence gets more visibility. Miller and Jensen (2007) also suggest that you display and market your library's Facebook profile page during instructional and library programming sessions. In fact, Connell (2009) indicates that patrons will generally accept a request to "like" the library, but fewer will proactively seek out the library's page on their own. By getting other teens to become a fan of your library's page and getting those to encourage their friends to join, the fan page will have the effect of word-of-mouth marketing, which will cause more interested teens to join the fan page.

However, in some ways, getting fans is the easy part of engaging teen patrons on Facebook. The second and more active part is to be continuously on the mind of the student by being one of the items on their news feed. To do this, the information professionals must update the Library's page regularly. The information professional must consider this as part of their routine. One can become a fixture on the newsfeed by changing various aspects of the page, such as adding new photos and videos. Facebook also allows users to post events which all fans can be invited to. If a library is having a teen program, the patrons can be invited and reminded by Facebook about the event before it takes place. These notifications will appear in the news feed of the teens.

Social networking tools can be used to add value to the services that the library offers to

the client. The more tech-savvy librarians have been able to create Facebook applications on the Library's page that either link to the Library's online catalogue, which can be searched within Facebook itself, or link to online databases that the library has access to.

However, though proactivity is encouraged, some degree of caution is required, because if a library (or information professional) is overbearing or if the updates are not seen as valuable, teen patrons may consider the updates from the library as pointless. Email or wall posts will be considered spam, and therefore the student will then leave the fan page of the library. A careful balance between the sharing of information and invading their personal (digital) space must therefore be struck. A Facebook profile should be designed to offer something to the patron, so that they keep coming back to it (Connell, 2009).

Spotlight on Safety

In a study on online safety conducted by the PEW Research Centre (2007) among the teens who have social networking profiles, 66% of them say that their profile is not visible to all internet users. However, many users of Facebook and other social networking sites will accept friend requests from anyone who asks, regardless of whether the person is actually a real-life acquaintance. This means that while most teens are aware of the need to protect their personal information, there are still a number of teens at considerable risk as they are not aware of how to protect themselves online. In several cases, the personal information of teens are available for anyone to see; though Facebook has enhanced privacy tools available, users must dig through the site to access their privacy settings, and all information is set to "Public" by default.

Teen and young adults need to be coached in maintaining safety online. There is an opportunity for information professionals who deal with teens to teach teens about safe social networking.

YALSA's social networking programming ideas:

- Host Do-It-Yourself Days for teens where they learn about a variety of social networking technologies. You might have a day for photo-sharing technologies, another day for friend building, and so on. During each of the sessions you can talk with teens about how to make decisions about safe use of these technologies.

- Use Flickr as a platform for creative writing exercises with teens. Upload your own, or teens', photos to Flickr and then have teens write their thoughts, ideas, and feelings related to photos that you've uploaded.

- Invite a technology expert in to talk with teens about how social networking tools work.

- Build a library Facebook space with teens. Have teens meet to plan the space, including what it should look like. Work with them to build the site, and develop guidelines for blogging, commenting, and making friends. As a part of this project, talk with teens about how to decide whether or not to accept friend requests. Add value to your presence through links to online safety and library resources.
  (YALSA, 2009)

Conclusion

Social networking sites are being used by libraries to establish an online presence in order to tap into the new generation of library user. However, since its inception, concerns over the pervasive use of social networking sites by teens have given it center stage in debates over its use and value. School libraries as well as public libraries have been questioning if the use of social networking sites should be allowed on their computers. Halifax Public Libraries, for example, allows the use of Facebook on their computers while the National Library system in Trinidad & Tobago has blocked patrons from accessing all social networking sites on their computers in spite of having a Facebook page themselves. However the research suggests that social networking tools can be useful tools, which the library can use to engage and connect with their teens. Additionally, information professionals should have knowledge of social tools themselves so that they will be able to teach teens and Young Adults how to avoid destructive online behaviour and practices. To teach your users how best to use social networking tools, one has to be actively engaged in the use of social networking themselves. It also means that the librarian still has a role to play in ensuring that students are information literate; the increasing use of web technologies in particular have made students avid seekers of information, but many are poor at filtering out what information is accurate. Proper use of social networking tools can help students be more information literate and help them exercise caution while online.

STOP There are several useful sites that can teach teens and adults about the responsible use of social networks. These are included below:

- www.nsteens.org

- www.ikeepsafe.org

- kids.getnetwise.org

- http://www.connectsafely.org/safety-tips-and-advice.html

- http://www.ila.org/netsafe/SocialNetworkingToolkit.pdf

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