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LS 501 - Assignment 3

Do you have a MySpace? Are you on Facebook?:
Social Networking Sites in Academic Libraries and Society

Unless you have been living under a rock, chances are you have heard of MySpace or Facebook. Formed in 2003 and 2004, respectively, these two websites have become incredibly popular among people under 25, and increasingly among individuals of all ages. This paper offers a brief discussion of these full-featured social networking web sites; their impact, benefits, and drawbacks in relation to society as a whole; and their impact, current and potential uses, and potential problems in relation to libraries specifically. Though the focus here is on the two most popular sites, it should be noted that numerous other smaller sites exist. Some of these fill a particular niche—such as LinkedIn, which emphasizes professional networking—while others appeal to a general audience for a general purpose. This paper does not attempt to address other websites with a social component that lack some or all of the components described below, including Flickr (where users share and tag photos) and del.icio.us (a social bookmarking site allowing users to save, tag and share web links).

MySpace and Facebook are the largest and most popular social networking web sites. These sites allow users to create a profile, a customized personal web page or a digital representation of themselves, for the public or selected people to view. Profiles usually include photographs, demographic information (age, location, relationship status, religion, etc.), and personal description of the user's likes, dislikes, hobbies, etc. Users then form connections with others in the community by requesting that they be "friends." If another user agrees to the friendship, they will be listed on each other's profiles in a friends list of some kind. Users can search for new friends using a number of criteria that varies site to site. The "friends" may be known to the user offline or may strictly be known online. They may be true friends, acquaintances, or strangers. Users can communicate with their friends and others through announcements sent to all friends, personal

messages sent to a select friend or friends, and publicly posting messages on another individual's profile – all of which are facilitated within the site. They can further participate in the community by posting Blogs (online journal entries) or joining groups based on a shared interest.

The segment of society most impacted by online social networking is teenagers and young adults, as they make up the majority of users.[i] This is likely because young people are digital natives: They have grown up with technology and the internet playing a central role in their lives. For them, the line between real life and online interaction is blurred.[ii] There is no significant difference between calling a friend, sending messages via MySpace, or hanging out with friends in person. Even if a young person does not directly participate in online social networking, it is very likely that they have friends who do and that they will know all about it. Of course, not all online social networking users fall within this youth demographic. Anyone who participates regularly in online social networking and who has incorporated that participation into their social lives, regardless of their age, will feel the impact of this online culture. Furthermore, the locus of impact extends to those who are close to a MySpace or Facebook user, such as a parent, older friend or family member. Responsible parents monitor what their children are doing online and are concerned about the risks of their child's involvement in online social networking. These risks include social isolation, cyber bullying, stalking, sexual predators, and access to pornography.

Parents and others concerned about the risks of online social networking may be unaware of the distinct benefits such sites provide. For many users, MySpace and Facebook are used primarily to reinforce and augment their current relationships. Their most notable strength is their ability to keep people connected, regardless of distance, by fostering communication in a number of ways. It can provide opportunities to create new connections or revive a lost connection. The sites encourage user creativity and self-expression through profile creation, Blog writing, and in the sharing of artwork (music, written word, photography, paintings, etc). In many ways and for most people, the benefits of online social networking outweigh the risks, especially when precautions are taken to reduce the potential risks. The table below outlines the most significant benefits and drawbacks of online social networking sites.

Table 1: Benefits and drawbacks for society

Benefits	Drawbacks
New avenue for communication with peers, professors/students, colleagues, church groups[iii] and other social or support groups[iv].	Sites may foster social isolation if people may spend too much time socializing online and not enough interacting socially in person.[v]
Maintain and renew connections between people who normally would lose touch due to distance, relocation, changes in life circumstances, etc.	Risk of being a victim of cyber bullying[vi], stalking, identity theft[vii] or sexual predators[viii], especially when detailed personal information is posted publicly.
Meet people outside social circle for the purposes of dating, collaborating on research, becoming pen-pals, etc.	An unknown user with whom one communicates may be using a false identity, may be a convicted criminal or may be sex offender.
Learn more about acquaintances, love interests, future employees, and monitor the online behavior of one's children.	Posted information, pictures, blogs, etc. may be used against the author by potential employers[ix], by school administrators[x], police, courts[xi], etc[xii].
Ability to create online groups with discussion boards and other features allowing users to connect around a common interest or need.[xiii]	Networking sites can be used to create networks and groups that promote hate[xiv], racism, violence, drug abuse, gang activity[xv], etc.
Ability to analyze profiles to conduct social science research[xvi] or gather demographic data.	Hidden links in individual web pages may guide unknowing users to pornography.[xvii]
Contributes to the development of identity and social skills of youth.[xviii]	A new forum for peer pressure where young people are encouraged to post provocative pictures or pictures of them engaging in underage drinking and other risky or illegal behaviors.

Social networking sites have impacted the institutions of our society in addition to individuals and families. A variety of organizations have developed profiles and established a presence on social networking sites in order to connect with young people where they go. Advertisers have created groups on Facebook and profiles on MySpace in order to connect with users on their turf.[xix] Credit unions are among the many businesses that have created profiles in order to reach the young American demographic.[xx] Meeting and event planners[xxi] and attorneys[xxii] are also connecting online in impressive numbers, showing that a variety of professionals are using the sites increasingly as well.

Academic institutions also have a role to play in social networking sites. Universities and social networking sites largely share the same clientele since the vast majority of college students possessing a profile on either Facebook[xxiii] or MySpace or both. Because most social networking site users are under 25, such sites are also filled with potential future college students and universities could take advantage of reaching out to them using these sites.[xxiv]

Similarly, academic libraries can take advantage of online social networking to connect with students after they have been recruited to the university. Creating a MySpace or Facebook profile allows the library to go where the users are, to present the library in the profile format the students are familiar with, and allow for a more participatory library experience. Effective profiles might provide a library catalog search field, blogs about topics relevant to students, library tutorials, and research guides. See Table 2 for other ways libraries can utilize social networking sites.

Table 2: Ways a library can use its profile and the communication vehicles provided by the site to connect with and serve students

Initiate contact with students	Post tutorial videos and research guides
Provide catalog search box in the profile	Execute formal user surveys about library services
Post library events	Use profile to educate patrons about online risks
Solicit patron involvement in submitting library pictures, videos or stories	Provide reference services either linked from the profile or using the profile email function
Suggest appropriate resources to students based on their major as listed in their profiles	Obtain user feedback in informal ways, such as analyzing their profiles to see what they might need/want and getting unsolicited feedback.
Post pictures of library building, staff and events	Post hours, maps, etc.

Ideally, a presence in MySpace and Facebook would help the library establish a modern image for students (as in, not stuffy, boring and all about books). It would open lines of communication and encourage students to utilize library resources. Potential challenges include students refusing to be "friends" the library, thereby resisting the library's presence, and resistance within the library organization. In addition to creating and building connection with students, librarians can use the sites to connect the staff within their own library and to connect professionally with librarians across the U.S. and around the world. The benefits and drawbacks of all three types of connections (students, internal and external professional) are outlined below.

Table 3: Benefits and drawbacks for libraries

Benefits	Drawbacks
Establish a positive relationship with students, be more approachable and accessible to users	Students may not want the library to know their personal details
Create a modern image for library	
Open a line of informal communication with students	Users may think it is not cool to befriend the library, many users may not be responsive
Present information in a format patrons are accustomed to (i.e. MySpace profile) instead of requiring them to adapt to the library website	With many libraries blocking on-site access to MySpace and Facebook, students may be hostile toward the library or not understand their presence
Take on the role of equal, reduce the authority figure image	May be internal resistance; some librarians, staff or administrators not supportive
When used internally, can improve relationships and communication between library staff	Staff and librarians may be resistant to join the sites
Librarians can use the sites for their own professional networking	Those with personal profiles may not want to mix personal and professional life

Overall, the benefits of social networking sites outweigh the drawbacks, both for society and

potential for library use, especially when precautions are taken to reduce the risks. It is unlikely that such

web sites will disappear any time soon so society and libraries will benefit more from embracing them than

from resisting them. Most individuals, regardless of age, most organizations, and most institutions can reap

benefits from the online social networking phenomenon. Librarians as individuals, professionals and

representatives of their organizations are no exception.

Endnotes

[i] Clemmitt (2006), 640. Also Guo (2008), 617.

[ii] Hempel & Lehman (2005).

[iii] Mehlhaff (2008) writes about the ways churches are using social networking sites.

[iv] DeWolfe (2007) discusses a charitable organization that spread rapidly across the U.S. and the world using MySpace to connect volunteers and to get the word out. Also, Guo (2008) mentions social networking sites allow campus organizations and clubs to advertise their events in a number of ways.

[v] Clemmitt (2006) discusses how these sites can isolate individuals rather than connect them (633-634). There must be a balance of in person and online interaction in order for online interactions to remain a healthy and helpful supplement to relationships.

[vi] Cyberbullying is the act of using the internet to harass, threaten or otherwise bully another person. On social networking sites it often occurs when a person makes a fake profile using the victim's name, information and/or picture that says embarrassing things or gives false information in order to spread rumors and otherwise impact the victim's life offline. Kornblum (2008) discusses recent instances of cyberbullying of this kind.

vii Identity theft may be financial or personal. Personal identity theft usually involves a personal taking photos and/or information from a public profile to create a fake profile. The profile may be used to damage the reputation of the person portrayed (cyberbullying) or may be used as a cover for a person wishing to appear to be someone else (such as a 50-year old male wanting to appear to be a 17-year old girl).

viii Guo (2008) provides this definition: "An online sexual predator is someone who uses the internet to sexually exploit vulnerable individuals, typically under-aged youths" (625). The author then gives an excellent discussion of predators, their methods, and their targets (625-627). Clemmitt (2006), points out that children can just as easily be a victim of sexual predators offline as online and that it is statistically not very likely to occur based on online contats (628-629). Similarly, Hinduja & Patchin (2008) suggests that "an exponentially small proportion of [MySpace] users have been victimized" (125). Their research shows that most youth on MySpace are careful about publicly disclosing personal information.

ix Brandenberg (2008).

x Hubbach (2008), Pratt Dawsey (2007), and "School suspends 20" (2006) are a few examples of MySpace profiles leading to school disciplinary action.

xi Wilson (2007) discusses the ways in which "prosecutors, defense attorneys, and law enforcement officers" use social networking websites such as MySpace to "investigate crimes and prepare for trial" (1203). Menzies (2008) advises trial lawyers to be aware of the contents of their clients' profiles. Clemmitt (2006) also discusses ways in which law enforcement is using MySpace (643).

xii Spencer (2007) describes how reporters are using social networking sites for background research for their stories.

xiii Groups may be entirely social such as those consisting of students at a particular college, members of a fraternity, people who play a particular online game. Many are based around politics or activism, such as local democrat or republican groups, groups supporting or opposing abortion rights, or those taking action against global warming, homelessness or some other issue. Groups can also provide support for individuals including recovering addicts or cancer survivors. Essentially any club, group or association that takes place offline can have an online presence as well. Clemmitt (2006) briefly discusses groups (638-639).

xiv "School suspends 20" (2006) discusses a MySpace group called "I hate (girl's name)."

xv Oder (2007) describes a NC library system's decision to block MySpace due to patrons using the site "to recruit gang members, to sell or purchase drugs, or to view or post pornography." Also, "School suspends 20" (2006) describes a MySpace group based around hatred of a particular student.

xvi For example, Moreno, et al. (2008) discusses using data from youth profiles for conducting adolescent health research.

xvii Clemmitt (2006) discusses problems with pornography on MySpace.

xviii Hinduja & Patchin (2008) discuss the ways in which youth use MySpace and how it contributes to self-discovery, helping them learn about themselves, while also providing lessons in interacting with others. They assert that using the site helps youth develop "self-control," "tolerance" and respect for the viewpoints of others, healthy self-expression, and "critical thinking and decision-making" (131). Similarly, Clemmitt (2006) says social networking sites facilitate social development as well as creativity and literacy skills (630).

xix "Apple runs Facebook" (2006).

xx Jepson (2007).

[xxi] Allan (2007).

[xxii] Price (2008).

[xxiii] Gibbons (2007) cites a "case study of four universities" that found "94.4% of students had a Facebook page" (82).

[xxiv] Sevier (2007).

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