

ENHANCING USERS' EXPERIENCE: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF 12 UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES FACEBOOK PROFILES

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Abstract

Facebook has become one of the most prominent tools for social networking over the last few years. Since its establishing in 2004, more and more players have made use of it: not just ordinary users willing to find their old friends and to get back into contact with them, but also, for example, more and more players from the cultural scene. These latter ones include cultural institutions willing to experiment with new ways of getting in touch with their traditional audiences but also willing to attract new audiences (like a younger audience, who is supposed to be more present on such social media); artists, who use it to create a community to share information, to promote their own creations but, more recently, also to collaborate on common project; and finally also libraries.

This paper intends to explore the use of Facebook in university libraries by making an empirical analysis of current practices. In doing so, the paper builds on the knowledge gained in a previous study on the way in which Flemish cultural institutions make use of the possibilities offered by social media to communicate with their audiences and to promote themselves [2]. The analysis on current uses we performed will help us sample existing practices and help us derive some general ideas for future best practices. And this will help libraries to better profile themselves and communicate better with their old and new audiences.

Keywords: academic libraries; social networking platforms; Facebook; Facebook academic library pages.

1. Introduction

As academic libraries strive to reposition themselves in the digital environment and try to reconfigure their role, librarians experiment the use of social tools of the Web 2.0 to advocate, promote, and raise awareness about library collections and services.

One of the most popular social networking platforms is Facebook (FB [1]). Originally developed by Mark Zuckerberg, Dustin Moskovitz and Chris Hughes in 2004 at Harvard University in order to provide Harvard students with a place in which they could keep in contact with their classmates and, most importantly, could share study-related information, Facebook "burst beyond its roots" by opening its membership to high school networks first, in 2005, and to all the net users later, in 2007. In the last few years, Facebook has globally developed into one of the most prominent tools for social networking altogether.

Since its establishing in 2004, more and more players have made use of Facebook: not just college students or ordinary users willing to find their old friends and to get back into contact with them, but also, for example, more and more players from the cultural scene have started to use Facebook. These latter ones include cultural institutions willing to experiment with new ways of getting in touch with their traditional audiences but also willing to attract new audiences (like a younger audience, who is supposed to be more present on such social media [2]); artists, who use it to create a community to share information, to promote their own creations but, more recently, also to collaborate on common project [3]; and finally also libraries.

The use of Facebook in libraries is starting to be investigated (see in [4, 5, 11, 14, 16, 17, 19]) as well as the use of other social media. Studies like the ones mentioned above focus on the tools and applications available in Facebook for librarians and make recommendations about the way libraries could benefit from using Facebook. Such applications include a Facebook Librarian [6], i.e., a virtual librarian service providing links to books and other resources; Books iRead [7], to share books with the friends in your own network; tools like the World Cat Search [8]), and several ad hoc Facebook groups [9].

This paper instead intends to explore the use of Facebook in university libraries by making an empirical analysis of current practices in 12 selected

academic libraries. In doing so, the paper builds on the knowledge gained in a previous study on the way in which Flemish cultural institutions make use of the possibilities offered by social media to communicate with their audiences and to promote themselves [2]. For that analysis, a two-phase, empirical and qualitative evaluation of social media use was carried on. In a first phase, a survey was conducted on as many cultural institutions as possible in order to identify the role social media play in their current communication practices. In a second phase, the focus was narrowed down to a very specific set of institutions selected on the basis of the previous analysis for which the Facebook pages were analysed in terms of the content on each page, the updates, the degree of users' participation and the ways in which these institutions were handling users' participation, and the fidelity issue, both as it is perceived by the cultural users and as it is handled by the cultural institutions.

The results of this study show that there is a very low degree of personalisation among the cultural institutions that were analysed, although their focus and scope was intrinsically different. We noticed additionally that Facebook itself was used rather poorly, i.e., mainly to promote events or to show pictures of past events. But what was really interesting, was the fidelity issue associated with these institutions: the Facebook pages of the cultural institutions were visited by many serendipitous users, but there were very few regular and faithful ones.

With the present paper, we would like to further extend the results coming from this study and apply it to academic research libraries. The analysis on current uses we performed will help us sample existing practices and help us derive some general ideas for future best practices. And this will help libraries to better profile themselves and communicate better with their old and new audiences.

2. Facebook in academic libraries. Literature review

Since 2007, Facebook popularity is steadily advancing among colleges and universities students. Kerry estimates that 85% of undergraduates in USA have a Facebook profile [9].

Academic libraries have since then started to explore how this technology could be used in their libraries to contact and attract students, despite the fact that some very early reactions from students about the use of social networking services were not that positive at the beginning.

Enhancing users' experience: A content analysis of 12 university libraries Facebook profiles

As a matter of fact, in an OCLC report from 2007, 6100 people aged 14-84 and 382 US library directors did not see "a role for the libraries constructing social sites and would not be very likely to contribute content" [10]. In the literature on FB in academic libraries, many librarians also express their concern about the use of social networking platforms in libraries. Charnigo and Barnett-Ellis [11], for example, found that librarians were wary about the academic purpose of FB. 54% of 126 librarians surveyed by the authors stated that it did not serve an academic purpose. 12% only was positive on this fact, and the rest were not sure. Marshall Breeding, the director of innovative technology at Vanderbilt University, wrote about the enormous opportunities of adopting Web 2.0 tools in academic libraries [12]. However, he recognized "that the very nature of Facebook works against this scenario. The natural circle of Friends centers on one's peers [...] and it is unrealistic to think that large numbers of undergraduate students would want to count librarians among their FB Friends" [12].

In many instances academic librarians adopt FB pages for their libraries but are worried about the best way to approach students. Miller and Jensen [13] advocate the aggressive "Friend and Feed" technique by which librarians "friend" as many students as possible, while Powers et al. [14] are more cautious about the practice of "friending" students. A better approach to them is to recommend mentioning one's Facebook account in library instruction sessions and reference interviews and then letting the students find that account.

In a few articles we indeed found success stories of the use of social networking platforms in academic libraries: Beth Evans [15], for example, 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. Evans invited these affiliates to be the library's friends and seven months later had approximately 2,350 friends. Evans did not mention any downsides to the Brooklyn College Library MySpace experiment and indicated that it had been well received by its audience [16]. Successful are also the results of the experiment led by Mack et al. [17], who promoted their FB library page profile for the reference service. During the fall of 2006, their librarians received 441 reference questions and 126 of these were collected through Facebook, followed by e-mail (122) and in-person consultations (112).

Studies like those mentioned above focus on the librarians' attitude and experiences with the use of FB in academic libraries, while others investigate

tools and applications available in Facebook for librarians and make recommendations about the way libraries could benefit from using Facebook 5]. In 2008, Ellissa Kroski listed in her blog iLibrarian the top ten Facebook applications for libraries [18]: Books iRead to share books with the friends in your own network, LibGuides Librarian, Librarian, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) Library Catalog, del.icio.us, JSTOR, MyWikipedia, LOLCats, Slideshare, and MyFlickr. Hendrix et al. [19] also provided a different perspective to the studies of FB in academic libraries. The authors used a survey to investigate health libraries' use of the popular social network. 72 librarians responded to the survey: 12,5% (9/72) maintained a Facebook page. Libraries used FB mainly "to market the library, push out announcements to library users, post photos, provide chat reference, and have a presence in the social network" [19]. Librarians had a very positive attitude towards the future of their FB pages although its use was currently rather low.

To date, the only study focused on actual Facebook library pages use and their content is the one from Jacobson [4]. The author investigated 12 FB academic libraries using the Site Observation methodology. Results showed that FB library pages are a useful tool to market the library "and it may be valid to assert that this is currently the best use in the library realm. Whereas uses for communication from patrons or "fans", communicating library needs, and as a forum/discussion space for users may not be an ideal use" [4].

3. Scope and methodology of this study

The present paper investigated the level of use of Facebook in twelve UK research universities libraries. The scope of the authors in performing this study was:

- to assess whether FB can be an effective new tool to communicate and promote the academic library services, to outreach students, both undergraduates and graduates, to fidelize them, or whether other solutions should be preferred (i.e. a personal librarian's profile);
- to assess what the most used sections and services of a FB academic library page are;
- to highlight the potentiality of FB as a new channel to implement value-added services for students (i.e. asynchronuos reference, training courses and tutorials);

Enhancing users' experience: A content analysis of 12 university libraries Facebook profiles

- to verify whether there is any positive correlation between the use of FB library pages and the number of FTE students enrolled in a university or any other possible variables (i.e. a new library building, active libraries hosting many events and exhibitions)

- to assess any differences in the use of FB central library pages and FB branch libraries pages.

To this end, we selected 12 UK research university libraries and classified them according to the following criteria:

1. libraries in universities with less than 10000 students
2. libraries in universities with more than 10000 students
3. branch university libraries.

This resulted in 4 libraries per category.

In order to perform some statistics (i.e., t-tests and some basic descriptives, see next section), we developed a coding instrument in line with the one used by Jacobson [4] for her analysis. Coding focused on the FB page developed by each library (number of pictures or videos, number of fans, links to social software), the kind of updates present (i.e., via blogs, newsfeeds or fans updates), the possible use of the wall (by whom, and how frequently), the presence of library applications or tools, the presence of information other than library-related one (i.e., links to external events or to possible sponsors), and whether the FB page is used for internal employees communication or announcements.

We recorded data for each library for 8 days over a period of two weeks (from 29 March 2010 to 9 April 2010), once a day, at 23 hrs, to make sure that all libraries would be already closed and that therefore no more updates from the library staff were possible.

4. Results

A quantitative analysis of the data collected with our coding instrument was processed for some descriptive statistics and correlations. In this section, we report some of the most prominent results.

First, we wanted to verify the frequency of wall use. Table 1 reports our findings: just less than 50% of the FB library pages use the wall.

Table 1: The wall is used

		Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	No	49	51,6	51,6	51,6
	Yes	46	48,4	48,4	100,0
	Total	95	100,0	100,0	

Moreover, over half of the wall postings are about a year old or older. That seems to indicate that the activity on the wall is not very well kept up to date or it means that the popularity of the platform for the library is already wearing out.

We looked at the time when postings are posted on the wall (Table 2). Table 2 shows that wall postings are usually updated by the end of the month (around 65% is done just around day 1, 2 or 30-31 of the month). Updates in-between are not really frequent.

Posting wall updates at the end of the month seems to be an explicit decision: it is bigger and more active libraries that do post at the end of the month, as to indicate that there is a communication strategy behind this choice and that the library has ad hoc staff in charge of it. Branch libraries just have postings at month edges.

Table 2: When postings are posted on the wall

		Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	1	8	17,4	17,4	17,4
	2	2	4,3	4,3	21,7
	6	6	13,0	13,0	34,8
	7	2	4,3	4,3	39,1
	8	5	10,9	10,9	50,0
	9	3	6,5	6,5	56,5
	30	1	2,2	2,2	58,7
	31	19	41,3	41,3	100,0
	Total	46	100,0	100,0	

If we look at the number of pictures in the FB library pages, we found that that libraries publish between 0 and 49 pictures: it looks as if the profiles differ quite a lot in this respect. The average number of pictures does not seem to be quite a good indicator of library behaviour on FB. By selecting only the FB pages that carry at least two pictures, then almost half of the profiles fall away. However, it seems that the profiles that remain really use those pictures (i.e., profiles seem to have either 0, 1 or 4 or more pictures incorporated). It seems that the FB profiles that carry more than two pictures really use these pictures. For the others, it seems the pictures are just an occasional and quite haphazard addition. The mean number of pictures for the FB profiles that really and intentionally use pictures is almost 26.

As for videos, most libraries use videos very limitedly. But if they put more than one video on their FB page, then they use them a lot (between 11 and 22).

The number of fans ranges between 6 and 1004. Most libraries seem to have 0 to 250 fans, and again, libraries that have a reasonable amount of fans (i.e., over 25), have very much fans (minimum 46, mean over 365). Because our data were dichotomous, it was not possible to measure the number of fan posts. Our data show that 71 out of 95 units contain updates: given the fact that not all libraries have a reasonable amount of fans, this value seems to indicate for the libraries that do have fans that these fans indeed also do posts. Although it was not possible to carry on specific demographics, it seems there are more male fans than female fans. Librarian posts are quite common (81 out of 95), instead.

As for the kind of library applications that are present on FB, we could identify that most libraries use either OPAC or database searches: it looks as if OPAC or database searches are more or less comparable services. No other applications are as successful.

5. Discussion

If we combine the results described in the previous section with a qualitative analysis of the data collected with our coding instrument, the following characteristics in the use of FB by academic libraries become more evident:

Enhancing users' experience: A content analysis of 12 university libraries Facebook profiles

- Among the FB elements present on the library pages, the only one that is truly active is the wall.
- Wall activity however differs depending on the library size and profile: the bigger the library, the more active the wall. Branch libraries also use the wall scarcely.
- Wall activity is nevertheless still limited to an average of a couple of postings per day, in the best cases. The wall is used to post information on new libraries activities, change in the opening hours, availability of learning rooms and in one instance to promote a new collection. Very few are the postings by fans. Where the wall is active is thanks to the librarians' activity.
- Although it was almost impossible to derive some demographics of the fans for each library (since some have a high fan number), we had the impression that women are more active than men on the library walls (although in minority, see above). This statement (that can not be proved from our data) is however confirmed by Schrock [20] who claims that women are more active in social networks *tout court*.
- Most FB library pages include some library applications (e.g., OPAC or database search, JSTOR, book advice, etc.), but, again, the richest offer of library tools applies to the bigger libraries.
- The FB pages of the libraries we analysed have very few links to other social software: Flickr, YouTube or del.icio.us. There are no links to other external sites.
- The FB pages are not used to promote external events and only scarcely for internal communication for employees.

Although we must admit that our conclusions are based on a very small sample of FB academic libraries pages, our observations indicate that FB might be a very powerful library communication and promotion tool but at the moment its actual use is neither extensive nor advanced.

It is clear that the big libraries which are most active in cultural and learning events are also more active on FB. It is also clear that it is a librarians' task to keep the FB pages alive and that this activity might be time-consuming. According to Hendrix [19] "the time spent maintaining and updating a library Facebook page ranged "from no weekly maintenance to 120 minutes a week". Therefore, we suggest that librarians who wish to create a FB library page should consider carefully if they have enough time to dedicate to its maintenance.

Librarians should consider if it is more effective to create a FB library page or a personal librarians' profile to outreach to students. For very proactive

reference librarians, for example, this might be a better strategy as FB is mainly perceived by users as a virtual personal space.

Generally speaking, for libraries to assess the best approach "to be where the users are" qualitative pre-tests and post-tests performed both on users visiting the library and on remote users might be helpful.

From these findings we can conclude that two kinds of libraries can be identified:

- those with a very active FB profile and who invest on their FB pages a lot. They have a higher number of fans, pictures and of videos which generate a higher return in terms of fans' involvement and participation.
- Those who do little either because they do not seem to appreciate the added value of having a FB page well enough or because of resource limitations.

6. Conclusions

These observations do not clear out how effective and efficient it is for libraries to develop a page on FB and if a FB page helps them achieve their goals to outreach to students. Unfortunately, we could not match these findings with a survey whereby librarians would have explained what their intentions were with opening a page on FB.

Although FB is a space made for people [10], something that our findings confirm by pointing out how the personal and the professional area seem to remain separate for FB users, we can positively conclude from these observations that FB pages help increase the communication with the students if librarians are proactive and keep the wall alive, but there is no evidence that at the moment content delivery or services delivery, i.e., reference assistance have been improved in this way.

However, the only way to profit from the added value provided by FB is to invest in it and to be rich and active: the more active, the better and higher return on investment in terms of fans' participation and involvement.

We nevertheless believe that in a few years' time social networking platforms will become more effective for academic libraries to communicate with students and to deliver them new types of services. As technology evolves, social networking platforms become more and more diffuse, pervasive, and advanced and students get used to the idea that FB might also have an institutional function/goal.

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Enhancing users' experience: A content analysis of 12 university libraries Facebook profiles

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