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Reconsidering Facebook

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Last year there was a <u>revolt against Facebook</u>. Lots of people were weighing the pros and cons of becoming a Facebook dropout, including <u>librarians</u>. For many of these detractors and potential detractors of Facebook, the disjunct structure of personal and professional identity was no longer holding up under the pressure of Facebook's urgings to reveal all and merge personal and professional spheres into one. Those who have attempted to draw this line by creating multiple Facebook accounts are all too familiar with <u>Facebook's stance</u> against more than one individual account (and others have written about the tension of treating your Facebook account as a personal, professional, or hybrid space, e.g., <u>Rogers</u>, <u>2010</u>). Identity issues aside, many users didn't have time to devote to figuring out how to manage the dynamic and fickle privacy settings of their Facebook identities to get things back under control. Some were simply frustrated that Facebook offered no consistent and clear assurances on how their information and online habits would be used. A lot of people left Facebook, including myself. Until recently, I didn't think I was missing out by not being on Facebook.

Backing up a bit

Most librarians first joined Facebook when it was limited to universities and colleges. For many academic librarians, it was the latest cool thing to experiment with to enhance engagement with students. Many librarians on Facebook published profile updates and expressed their interests as they related to their jobs and educational backgrounds. Their aim was to "be where the students were" and to explore the new world of social networking via Facebook. The choice of whether to seek out students and invite them to be Facebook friends worked for some and didn't work for others (e.g., see the review and survey results published by Connell, 2009). On most accounts, Facebook has been considered a low cost, minimal effort venue for engaging with current and potential library users. In fact, many blog posts,

white papers, and conference proceedings (but surprisingly few articles, e.g., <u>Jennings and Tvaruzka</u>, <u>2010</u>) have been published about how librarians and libraries may leverage Facebook for outreach and engagement.

Much has changed in just a few years as Facebook opened beyond academia. Since September 2006, when Facebook was opened up to allow anyone to join, the number of active users has grown by over 4000%. Millions of business websites are connected via Facebook (e.g., the current most popular business on Facebook is Coca-Cola with over 22 million fans). These days, Facebook users can get personalized content delivered to them on websites affiliated with Facebook (aka "instant personalization"). Facebook is packing on more and more corporate investors and making itself more attractive and lucrative for businesses. By leveraging strategies that push "instant personalization" across the web, Facebook is encouraging the community on Facebook to change their expectations of what should (and shouldn't) happen on Facebook. While most librarians are still feeling the sting of students' early reactions that "friending" a librarian on Facebook was "creepy," there appears to be a shift in this perspective. Roblyer, et al. (2010) report that students' perceptions about interacting with faculty and librarians are morphing to suggest that they do expect these interactions to be just as likely in Facebook as they are in more traditional communication venues.

While there are valid reasons for maintaining a wary stance regarding a personal/individual Facebook account, there are also compelling reasons to use Facebook to fulfill your obligations as a librarian. It should be noted that many libraries are creating or updating their presence on Facebook, and that the concerns around a business or organization presence may not be as alarming as they are for individual Facebook accounts.

Benefits of being a Facebook Dropout

For many, the decision to drop out of Facebook suggested that they might gain some control over their online identities and reinstitute the distinction between their personal and professional spheres. Just a few months before "Quit Facebook Day" (May 31, 2010), Dan Yoder posted his top ten reasons to quit Facebook. There are several reasons posted by Yoder that resonated most with many users' decisions to deactivate (or even delete) their accounts:

"Even your private data is shared with applications." In April/May 2010, Facebook introduced the Open Graph Protocol in an effort to support the aim of providing more opportunities for instant personalization experiences for Facebook users. The Open Graph API enables an owner of a website to paste in a bit of code into their site that will help the site align better with your personal preferences and habits that you have made publicly available via Facebook. For example: if my Facebook account included information or patterns of use indicating that I like Thai food, then when I visit a website that has the Open Graph API, it may deliver content targeted toward my preference for Thai food. Companies such as Pandora, Yelp, ABC News, and Simply Hired are taking advantage of this new way to engage users. Some users view the instant personalization experience as a time saver and a convenience, while others find it to be too close for comfort.

"Facebook is pulling a classic bait-and-switch" and "Facebook has flat out declared war on privacy." Taken together, these two complaints reiterate that any personal or professional information that one presents on the web can and probably will be mined and regurgitated in some way for profit. The trouble with Facebook is that users expect to have more control over their information and online habits — because you must log in to participate in the social network, you expect the information to be somehow under your control.

"Facebook's Terms Of Service are completely one-sided." The crux of this complaint is that Facebook owns the data that you release to it, share within it and that others share about you within the service. This may be one of the most compelling arguments for not having a Facebook account. Even so, most librarians do realize that information about them and their consumption patterns of information, merchandise and services is valuable to a lot of online organizations (e.g., Amazon). The issue that has irritated a lot of privacy-conscious librarians is that Facebook seems to be a little less clear about customer privacy. Revealing information about your self in Facebook or in Facebook applications that function outside Facebook could be a potential threat to your sense of privacy due to the shifting tension between Facebook's ever-changing privacy controls and their aim to enhance sharing and engagement of users and their information.

Drawbacks of being a Facebook dropout in Light of the Evolution of Facebook

At the most fundamental level, the duty of librarians is to remove the barriers to information for the members of the community to which we belong. We are also responsible for staying aware of the trends and issues impacting these various user communities – what they are studying, where they are seeking information, how they are sharing information, and what barriers they encounter as they go about their scholarship. Alongside the casual, social interactions, Facebook is one of those places where this collection of scholarly activity is happening. As more and more information providers/publishers, libraries and librarians have been getting in on the action with users on Facebook, librarians who are absent from Facebook may actually be missing a lot more than they think. To support this perspective, in response to Dan Yoder's reasons to leave Facebook, David Lee King posted "10 reasons to not quit Facebook." Several of his points resonated with me and my decision to return to Facebook.

"Your customers are using Facebook" and "Your community is on Facebook." Mathews (2006) described the initial results of his outreach campaign via Facebook to engineering students at Georgia Tech. He was able to answer patron questions including which software was available on library computers, how to renew items online, recent building changes, and information about library study spaces. A little closer to home, my colleague, Orion Pozo, uses his Facebook account, the NCSU Libraries EngLibrary Twitter account and the Physical and Engineering Sciences News blog to simultaneously broadcast and rebroadcast information about NCSU engineering and the NCSU Libraries. Like Mathews, through his "friend" connections with NCSU engineering graduate students and faculty, Pozo has been able to answer questions about how to use subscriptions that the Libraries maintains for the NCSU community. In one instance, he showed a grad student how to search SpringerLink's website for ebooks that the NCSU Libraries had acquired (helping to mitigate delays in getting the MARC records into our catalog). In another case, he helped a grad student access the NCSU Libraries online subscriptions from offcampus. While these transactions solve relatively simple problems, the ability to provide good customer service via Facebook has helped to underpin the support that the NCSU Libraries aims to provide to our community. Reaching out to users (where-ever they may be) who may otherwise go away frustrated sends a strong message to our users and to our stakeholders that the NCSU Libraries is clued into their needs and expectations.

"Did I mention free marketing?" With Facebook's population hitting around 500 million active users, half of which log in to Facebook every day, with each user being connected to an average of 130 other users, this venue becomes a very compelling place for a business or organization to be. Facebook is working hard to make it an even more profitable and worthwhile place for businesses and organizations to be as well. With their social plugins and business integration features (e.g., Open Graph API, mentioned previously) companies are able to generate more comments, discussion and interest than occurs on their own websites.

"Publishers may be concerned about losing advertising revenues if people are spending time on a Facebook fan page rather than generating page views on the brand's website. But many publishers have shown that a strong presence on Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn can actually drive more traffic while increasing engagement. —Behling, 2010.

Facebook members can click on a "Like" button for any Facebook page or any website that has a "Like" button installed (via the Open Graph API) and automatically be connected to information about that page. For example, I could indicate that I "Like" the D.H. Hill Library on the North Carolina State University campus, joining the other 800 people on Facebook who have also publicly declared their "Like" of the D.H. Hill Library. I will be connected to updates about the D.H. Hill Library and other people will know how I feel as well. Now, if the NCSU Libraries website (including the D.H. Hill Library) took advantage of Facebook's Like button and other social plugins, then the NCSU Libraries website would be able to connect with me leveraging some of my personal preferences (via Facebook) and perhaps even offer me a more personalized experience when I visit that website (or push alerts to my Facebook account) letting me know about new services, events or collections that might be relevant to my interests.

"Start conversations." Most issues affecting librarians and libraries, such as changes in databases, journal subscription rates, and publisher mergers are commonly aired out on discussion lists in conjunction with meetings at national or regional conferences. The tide may be turning to include Facebook for those kinds of discussions and debates. One example: a few weeks ago, librarians began hearing about the possibility that the publisher McGraw-Hill may pull popular engineering reference works from the online full-text database Knovel. It is these popular engineering reference works that provide much of the value to the Knovel database. McGraw-Hill wants to make their reference works available online exclusively through their own platform – yet another product for which libraries must find funding in yet another year of budget cuts. While the details aren't critical to this discussion, what is interesting is that librarians are discussing this issue and are voicing their concerns to McGraw-Hill via Facebook (see posts from "Just Others" from December 2010)! Facebook's role in facilitating this kind of interaction between librarians and publisher/providers may be in the early stages, but this example suggests that Facebook does indeed play a significant part in the relationship between libraries and resource acquisition.

Taking Some Hints from Businesses on Facebook

Below is a sample of publishers and providers of journals and databases to which many libraries subscribe. The data show popularity of these publishers/providers on Facebook as of January 25, 2011. The number of Facebook users who have declared their "Like" for these publishers/providers is indicative of the engagement power of Facebook. Perhaps this new kind of engagement is due to the shift in Facebook's community demographics and/or that Facebook users have started thinking differently about their interactions within Facebook. When users align themselves with non-academic entities on Facebook, this suggests that their perspectives about who they wish to engage with is shifting from solely student-to-student interaction to user-resource provider interaction – and that interaction is not necessarily the library or librarian!

Publisher/Provider	Facebook popularity
Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE)	122,822 Likes

JSTOR	76,924 Likes
Knovel	16,020 Likes
McGraw-Hill Education (Asia)	15,929 Likes
Public Library of Science (PLoS)	8,038 Likes
ProjectMuse	3,010 Likes
Society for Applied Mathematics (SIAM)	1,770 Likes

In scanning through the Wall posts and Discussion boards on these publishers/providers Facebook pages, I see many gaps where libraries and librarians should be present. Take JSTOR's Facebook page for example. Since early November 2010, there were at least 12 separate Wall post questions from users (whether they are students or faculty is sometimes difficult to distinguish) about how to access or search for JSTOR articles. A similar set of questions about access exist on the Discussion boards in JSTOR's Facebook page. In most of the cases, a representative from JSTOR pointed out how to access JSTOR articles from the users' home library subscriptions or suggested that the user request that their library subscribe to JSTOR content. Users also asked JSTOR for help finding articles on things like African music and behavioral finance (separate queries). But most of all, users were piling on the love for JSTOR: "Jstor saved my life: D" and "Where have you been all my scholastic life? Jstor is my hero!" and, my favorite "If I ever have twins, I want to name one of the J, and the other Stor, so when I call their name I will be reminded of sweet, sweet, JSTOR." I haven't heard of instances where a library user declared this level of adoration for a library, but I would certainly like to hear about any examples. Likewise, it would be interesting to see a study documenting how libraries (not just individual librarians) are leveraging the social networking power and intel-gathering force of Facebook to better engage with students.

Summing Up

A lot about the way that Facebook supports the profession of librarianship has changed in the past few years and even since the mid-2010 uproar that led to many users deciding to decommission their Facebook accounts. While I am not aware of any studies that measure the trends in librarian presence and interaction on Facebook, anecdotal evidence suggests that in addition to other communication venues (discussion lists, Twitter, etc.), many librarians are on Facebook and this is where considerable discussion about issues relevant to librarianship are happening. A librarian colleague reported using her Facebook account to brainstorm with her librarians' group about work-related project plans and publication advice. I suspect that this kind of professional networking on Facebook happens more often than we think and that the value of having all of those relationships in one place is understated.

By tapping into the Facebook accounts of their community members and the pages of publishers/providers, librarians can stay up-to-date on domain-specific research, learn about changes to publishers' content, and engage in the conversations that are happening in these spaces. But there might be more value for libraries to be involved with Facebook beyond keeping their librarians up-to-date. Libraries might leverage the social plugins made easily available via the Open Graph Protocol on their websites to automatically tap into a visitor's likes and dislikes and offer up personalized services and content. Initiatives such as the Open Library Environment project led by Kuali with a handful of sponsoring institutions is interested in creating similar types of instant personalization experiences between libraries and patrons.

For me, the benefits of being on Facebook (e.g., keeping myself in the loop about issues that impact my job, staying connected with publishers/providers, other librarians and members of my campus community) outweigh the risks of being on Facebook (e.g., finding time to manage my account, monitor privacy settings, deal with a glut of "gifts" of virtual garden vegetables and getting "poked"). For the time being, I'm keeping Facebook in my toolkit of communication and professional social networks.

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