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Technology Left Behind — Making Friends Online: Library Use of Social Networking Services

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Column Editor's Note: *In the February 2007 issue of **Against the Grain**, Karen Christensen discussed a variety of social media and their uses. This column will take a more in-depth look at one particular social media, social networking Websites such as **MySpace** and **Facebook**, focusing on how libraries are using these sites to connect with their patrons and each other. — CF*

In her article "Balancing the Online Life" in the January 2007 issue of *American Libraries*, **Meredith Farkas** defines social software as "applications that enable the formation of online communities at the grassroots level." **Farkas** highlights a number of ways in which people are using social software to build relationships online, mentioning activities such as "building spaces that allow others to comment on or even edit our content," "networking and communicating with friends, colleagues, and patrons, online, both synchronously and asynchronously," "producing audio and video content and making available to the masses," and creating "profiles of ourselves, lists of the music we listen to on our **iPods**, collections of our photos for people to comment on, spaces where we share our thoughts and more." She goes on to mention a variety of social software technologies that facilitate the building of online communities, including blogs, wikis, instant messaging, including some discussion of how librarians are using these technologies to reach their patrons.

Social networking services, briefly mentioned in passing by **Farkas**, can also facilitate the creation of online communities. Key to the success of a social network is the ability to make connections with people in your network. While different social networking Websites call connections by different names (**MySpace** and **Facebook** both use the term 'friend'), the general idea is to link your profile to the profiles of your friends, colleagues, co-workers, etc., building an online community with which you can interact. Social networking Websites bring together under one umbrella a variety of relationship management tools in an easy-to-use, free interface, allowing users a variety of methods for keeping in touch with each other. Common features include:

- profiles that allow users to describe themselves and their interests,
- the ability to upload pictures, music, and / or video content,
- an internal messaging system allowing users to communicate within the social networking framework,
- a utility to post messages to all of your 'friends' at one time, and
- the establishment of groups bringing together users with common interests.

There are a large number of social networking Websites, many catering to a specific audience. Each one offers slightly different functionalities and allows users varying degrees of customization. As young users flock to these sites to build their own online communities, libraries are increasingly turning to social networking sites themselves to connect with their patrons and with each other. For the purposes of this discussion of social networking services and how libraries are taking advantage of them, I will be focusing on two specific social networking web sites, **MySpace** and **Facebook**.

MySpace

MySpace, billed as a 'place for friends,' defines itself quite simply as "an online community that lets you meet your friends' friends." (<http://www.myspace.com/Modules/Common/Pages/AboutUs.aspx>) New **MySpace** users create profiles of themselves, with as much or as little detail as each user prefers. A profile could include information about the user, his general interests, hobbies, taste in music, education, and employment. Profiles can also be customized with graphics, music, video, and pictures. The **MySpace** interface provides a number of networking tools in a simple and relatively self-explanatory interface, including facilities that enable users to send messages back and forth to each other, blog, post bulletins to friends, leave comments for other **MySpace** users, and instant message.

Many libraries have seized upon the networking opportunities **MySpace** affords, building their own profiles and connecting with users. A quick search of the **MySpace** site using just the search term 'library' reveals a large number of libraries, both public and academic. I contacted a few of the libraries I came across on **MySpace** to see what prompted them to build a **MySpace** page, how they are using the profile, and what the reaction has been from patrons.

Beth Evans, Electronic Information Services Specialist at **Brooklyn College Library (BCL)**, was inspired to create a **BCL MySpace** page by her then 15-year-old daughter **Nell**, whom **Evans** describes as **MySpace**-addicted. **BCL** officially launched its **MySpace** page in December 2005. Through some concerted efforts on the part of two interns and a student worker, by May 2005 **BCL** had over 1700 friends on its **MySpace** page, the vast majority of which were **Brooklyn College** students. **BCL's** total number of friends as of March 2007 is over 3,200.

BCL uses the **MySpace** blog feature to post messages about events and collections at the library. **Evans** feels that students primarily use the **BCL MySpace** page to receive such announcements. She has found that very few

reference questions come through the library's profile page. **Evans** also notes that **BCL** students have sometimes used **MySpace's** internal email and commenting functions to carry on discussions. Overall, the feedback on the **BCL** page has been positive.

Robin Chan, Sr. LTA and Government Documents/Ask A Librarian at the **University of Central Florida Libraries**, maintains the **UCF Ask A Librarian MySpace** page, which was created in April 2006. Similar to the **BCL** page, the **UCF Ask A Librarian** page provides information about the **UCF Libraries'** services and collections, highlighting popular resources and tutorials on how to use the library. **Chan** and a colleague at **UCF** entered the **MySpace** arena and built the **UCF Ask A Librarian** profile with the goal, says **Chan**, of creating "a promotional tool that would create awareness among our patrons who have profiles on **MySpace**." **Chan** went on to say, "Even if they denied our friend request, we would hope that they at least took a cursory look at our profile and saw what services we made available and then sought us out in the future (not necessarily through **MySpace**)."

Demonstrating that **MySpace** can be used to connect with people beyond a patron base, **Beth Hoeffgen**, Branch Youth Services Facilitator at the **Public Library of Mount Vernon and Knox County/Ohio**, created her **MySpace** page primarily as a vehicle for a presentation to the **Ohio Library Council** entitled, "Using the Web to Support YA Services." She says, she "also wanted to network (reach other librarians with similar interests) and help educate librarians who are just getting started with Web 2.0 services for teens." Her page, which has been live since August 2006, has been viewed a little over 600 times, and she has accumulated over 300 friends. (**Beth** added me in March 2007, and I now count myself amongst her **MySpace** friends.) Like **Evans**, **Hoeffgen** has also made use of the blog feature, providing an outline of her upcoming presentation to the **Ohio Library Council**, as well as information on a variety of other topics.

It is important to note that academic libraries are not the only libraries using **MySpace** to connect with their users. **Stoneham Public Library (SPL)** in Stoneham, Massachusetts launched its **MySpace** page in April 2006. The pages creator, **Theresa Maturevich** was inspired to build the page after hearing news stories about the negative aspects of social networking and at the same time observing a number of the teens and 'twens in her library using **MySpace**. (Note: **Maturevich** has since left Stoneham, but still maintains the **SPL MySpace** page in the interim.) Says **Maturevich** of the initiative, "I thought it would be a great opportunity to both tap into

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a new trend in technology to publicize the collection, programs, and services and use it as a conversational tool to address Internet safety concerns with my young patrons.” SPL’s **MySpace** page was introduced in conjunction with two library programs about social networking, demonstrating how **MySpace** pages can be integrated into library programming. One program catered specifically to teens, demonstrating some of the fun things that could be added to **MySpace** pages (layouts, slideshows, etc.), also touching on techniques for making a profile and online activities more safety-conscious. The other program was an Internet safety presentation geared towards adults, focusing on understanding and reducing the risks for children and teens online.

Facebook

As a social networking Website, **Facebook** is very similar to **MySpace**. Like **MySpace**, **Facebook** users create profiles of themselves by posting pictures, providing information about their musical interests, education, and other factors. Also similar to **MySpace**, **Facebook** offers users the ability to message each other, post messages to a bulletin board-type feature, blog, and join groups. Although, **MySpace** allows users a greater degree of customization in terms of the appearance of the profile, actual functionalities do not vary to a great degree across most social networking Websites.

One of the principal differences between **MySpace** and **Facebook** is the primary audience. **Facebook** was originally built as a social network for college students. While **Facebook** has recently opened itself up to other organizations and age groups, the vast majority of **Facebook** users remains college age students, making it an ideal interface for college and university libraries looking to connect with their patrons. **Bloomsburg University Library (BUL)** has taken advantage of this opportunity, creating its own **Facebook Group** in the Fall semester of 2006. The **BUL Facebook Group** page is managed by **David Magolis**, Reference Librarian and Webmaster at **BUL**.

Magolis says the idea for a **BUL** group grew out of an online class he was teaching. As the instructor, **Magolis** found his students were somewhat isolated both from each other and from him because of the online nature of the class. As a result, says **Magolis**, “I tried to devise a way where students could have a degree of personal contact similar to a face-to-face classroom but in a virtual environment. Therefore, I required the students to sign up for a **Facebook** account and we used this communication medium throughout the semester.” The **Facebook** experiment proved very effective for the online class; student interaction increased and the student feedback **Magolis** received was positive. Consequently, he “decided to create a group that was open to the university where students could access a librarian on their time and place but most importantly in their environment where they are comfortable.”

At this time, the **BUL** group is geared predominantly toward **BUL** students, but **Magolis** is willing to provide library services to anyone who contacts him, regardless of whether or not the individual is a **Bloomsburg University** student. The **BUL** group page does not generate a great deal of traffic, a fact that **Magolis** attributes this to the discussion board format of the communication. He notes, “I think that patrons might be intimidated by the discussion board nature of the group where individuals can go back and see what questions have been posted.” However, **Magolis** has seen a significant increase in the traffic to his email address. He says, “I get the sense that patrons see my email address attached to a help site and proceed to use it as a means of connecting with a librarian. The questions that I now receive via email have increased by 60+ percent.”

Does Your Library Need Its Own Social Network?

David Magolis indicates that the **Bloomsburg University Library Facebook Group** page has been well-received and students are excited about the new avenue of communication with the library. He says that he “would encourage libraries to offer this easy, user-friendly, and most importantly FREE service to our patrons!”

If you are interested in creating an online community for your own library using a social networking Website, you are not alone, and there are resources out there to help you get started. **Wikipedia** provides a fairly robust list of social networking Websites (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_social_networking_websites), including a very brief description of the focus of each site. If you are interested in one particular social networking site, I would suggest contacting the libraries and librarians that are already using that site. The libraries and librarians I contacted regarding their **Facebook** and **MySpace** profiles were very willing to share information about their pages, how they are using their profiles, and how they promote them.

For libraries just getting started using **MySpace**, **Robin Chan** at **UCF** manages the **Libraries on MySpace Group**, which has been set up as a resource to aid libraries and librarians who are interested in creating pages on **MySpace**. The site acts as a forum for libraries to discuss their successes and challenges. The page also provides links to several sites that offer **MySpace** editors or pre-made **MySpace** layouts for users that would like to have a customized page without having to spend the time creating it themselves, allowing even the most technically unsavvy users to edit and customize their pages.

Beth Evans at **Brooklyn College Library** wrote a helpful article, “Your Space or **MySpace**?” for *netConnect* outlining some of the ways that **BCL** and other libraries have used their **MySpace** pages to connect with patrons and promote services. (See the list of references for the complete citation.)

I highly recommend giving social networking Websites a closer look. All of the librarians I contacted about social networking reported receiving positive feedback from their patrons

and users, and as **David Magolis** points out, the sites are easy-to-use and free of charge. You have nothing to lose and only ‘friends’ to gain.

Websites and Profiles of Interest

Facebook — <http://www.facebook.com>

MySpace — <http://www.myspace.com>

Brooklyn College Library — <http://www.myspace.com/brooklyncollegelibrary>

UCF Ask A Librarian — <http://www.myspace.com/ucfaskalibrarian>

Ohio YA Librarian — <http://www.myspace.com/ohioyalibrarian>

Stoneham Public Library — <http://www.myspace.com/stonehamlibrary>

Bloomsburg University Library — <http://furman.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2221364457>

American Library Association — <http://www.myspace.com/atyourlibrary>

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www.the-aps.org

Resources

Evans, Beth. “Your Space or **MySpace**?” *netConnect*. (Fall 2006). <http://www.library-journal.com/article/CA6375465.html>

Farkas, Meredith. “Balancing the Online Life.” *American Libraries* 38, no. 1 (January 2007): 42-45.

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