Review of "Social Networking Tools for Academic Libraries"

Alison Hicks (alison.hicks@colorado.edu)
University of Colorado, Boulder

Social media has a checkered history in higher education. From the early adopters who raved about the possibilities to connect with users, to the accusations of creating creepy treehouses,[1] and even legal challenges from universities keen to protect their online image,[2] the use of Facebook and similar programs has not always been straightforward. Libraries have been equally quick to start liking, tweeting, + 1-ing and friending for a variety of reasons, on a variety of platforms. In fact, the field is so well established that there is even a LCSH "Online social networks -Library applications" with 31 titles, according to Worldcat. As Google + is finding out, the world of social media is a crowded field.

As such, at first glance the paper by Samuel Kai-Wah Chu and Helen S. Du, "Social Networking Tools for Academic Libraries," (see: *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, http://lis.sagepub.com/content/early/2012/02/16/0961000611434361) that aims to investigate the use of social media in academic libraries, appears to offer little to the reader. The authors surveyed 38 libraries on the social media tools they were using (defined as sites that are not primarily for content-sharing, such as Youtube), as well as gauging reasons for use, challenges and training offered. However, unlike other surveys that have been done on social media usage in libraries, this survey was sent to universities across the globe, including the UK, the US, Hong Kong, China, Canada, Singapore, Taiwan, Korea, Germany and Japan. In this way, although the subject sample was small, the survey provides an unusual snapshot of social media usage in academic libraries, as well as raising several interesting points.

Firstly, despite the existence of different national social media tools such as Bebo and Orkut, Facebook and Twitter remained the most popular services. While the article did not break down popularity by country, it is surprising that ISSUU[3] (a blog tool) and QQ[4] (an instant mes-saging tool) were the only services reported that are not widely known in the West. Unfortunately, there was little analysis of potential reasons for the importance of Western tools, or contextual details that may affect responses such as censorship or government blocking of material. Secondly, two open ended questions provided useful information about the reasons and purposes of using social media. A wide variety of reasons to use the tools were mentioned, from promotion to enquiries to staff development. Similarly, the tables highlight the multipurpose utility of Twitter, which is popular throughout the library. Unfortunately, again, this is not analyzed in light of statistics that often show overwhelming student preference for Facebook.[5]

Lastly, while this was not the aim of the paper, the research also highlights some fascinating insights into the attitude of librarians who manage these services. Survey respondents overwhelmingly complained about the challenges of keeping up in the field of social media. While many libraries have been hit with staff shortages, it is particularly frustrating to keep hearing the same excuses about being unable to understand changing technologies. As Jenica Rogers pointed out so forcefully, "it's not ok to be clueless ... anymore."[6] Social media forms part of the rich environment of scholarship within which researchers work in the 21st century, and a librarian who does not take the time to grasp these changing conceptions is doing herself and her patrons a disservice. Librarianship does not constitute a "steady-state body of knowledge in a steady-state profession" and it is vital that we stop making helpless noises.[7] Similarly, it was surprising that librarians did not mention the educational purposes of social media more, for instance, in embedded librarianship, in digital scholarship or in learning analytics. Beyond the hype, social media has many interesting uses for teaching and learning, and it is vital that librarians join in this conversation.

Ultimately, "Social Networking Tools for Academic Libraries" is useful but not game changing. While the focus on international usage of social media was interesting, the paper did not push the barriers of analyzing social media use in the library. Future research could build on this paper by asking for patron feedback on library use of social media. As Abby Bedford demonstrates, social media effectiveness can be overstated.[8] Similarly, if most libraries are using social media for promotion and outreach then usage should be analyzed as part of the wider framework of community engagement rather than on its own. It is an exciting field of research though and the impact of social networks on all aspects of knowledge creation and dissemination should not be underestimated. Library usage has only just started to scratch the surface.

Endnotes

[1] Michael Feldstein, "The Creepy Treehouse" *e-Literate*, May 22nd, 2008. http://mfeldstein.com/the-creepy-treehouse/

[2] Inger Mewburn, "Academics behaving badly: Universities and Online Reputations" *The Conversation*, September 27th, 2012. http://theconversation.edu.au/academics-behaving-badly-universities-and-online-reputations-9827

[3] http://issuu.com/

[4] http://www.qq.com/

[5] Pew Internet, "The Digital Revolution and Higher Education" August 28th, 2011 http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/College-presidents/Report/Part-3.aspx

[6] Jenica Rogers, "Killing Fear" *Attempting Elegance* 5th July, 2012. http://www.attemptingelegance.com/?p=1680

[7] Library Loon, "Steady-state vs. expanding-universe librarianship" *Gavia Libraria* 22nd July, 2012. http://gavialib.com/2012/07/steady-state-vs-expanding-universe-librarianship/

[8] Abby Bedford "Twitter: Helpful or Hassle" 18th May, 2012

http://www.slideshare.net/bedforda/twitter-helpful-or-hassle-12985899