

“I Don’t Even Know! This Person.”

Academic Libraries on Facebook

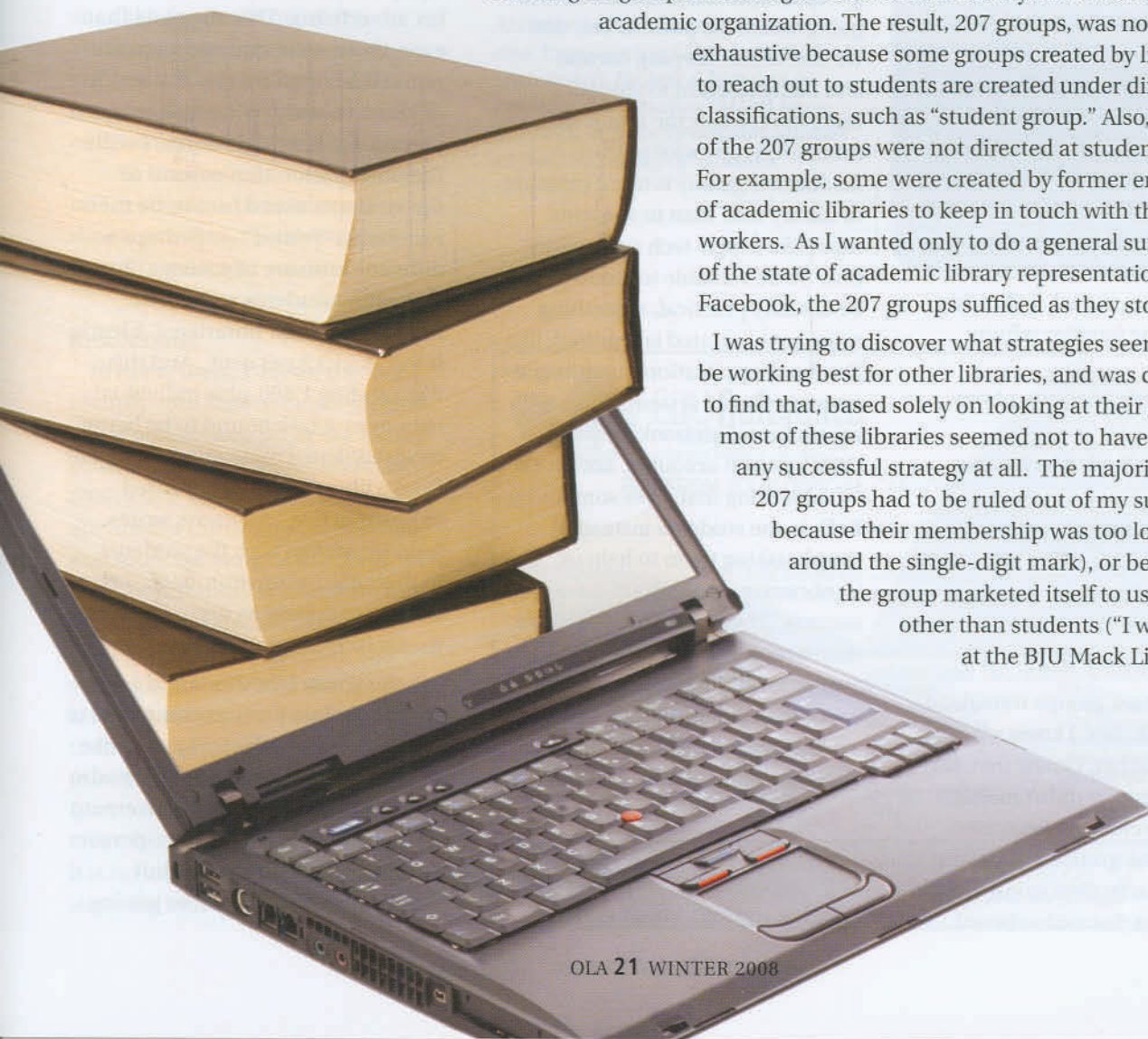
I was recently hired as a reference assistant at the Steacie Science and Engineering Library at York University. One of the first projects assigned to me was to investigate academic library Facebook groups and, in a few weeks, to create a group for our own library. As a Facebook user who still considers himself to be fairly young, this sounded like great fun. As a librarian, however, I found the experience to be more troubling.

What Are Other Libraries Doing?

Facebook is increasingly being used in and by academic libraries, so I started out by searching for groups matching the search term library and the classification academic organization. The result, 207 groups, was not

exhaustive because some groups created by librarians to reach out to students are created under different classifications, such as “student group.” Also, some of the 207 groups were not directed at students at all. For example, some were created by former employees of academic libraries to keep in touch with their co-workers. As I wanted only to do a general survey of the state of academic library representation on Facebook, the 207 groups sufficed as they stood.

I was trying to discover what strategies seemed to be working best for other libraries, and was dismayed to find that, based solely on looking at their groups, most of these libraries seemed not to have found any successful strategy at all. The majority of the 207 groups had to be ruled out of my survey because their membership was too low (i.e. around the single-digit mark), or because the group marketed itself to users other than students (“I worked at the BJU Mack Library”),



By Ricardo Laskaris

or because the focus of the group was clearly not one of outreach (e.g. "livin' at the library"). Only 22 of these groups were either large enough (i.e. in the double digits) or had enough content to be considered applicable to my survey, and these had an average of 31 members each. I also considered groups that had no content, as it evidenced the difficulty in establishing a meaningful Facebook presence for academic libraries.

I found that, in general, most of the more relevant groups — the kind most like the group I was tasked with creating — featured photos and contact information of their respective libraries, and were administrated by librarians eager to interact with students. The librarians posted messages on the Wall, invited students to contribute suggestions and comments, made general announcements about events at the library, and initiated discussion topics. But that was as far as it went. The vast majority of these groups seemed, despite their membership numbers, to be actively populated largely only by their administrators, and the level of participation varied. I shortly recognized the familiar refrain:

Photos

No one has uploaded any photos.

Videos

No one has uploaded any videos.

Posted Items

No one has posted any items.

Discussion board

There are no discussions.

The Wall

No one has said anything...yet.

Basically, most groups were dead. As a Facebook user, I knew why this was. As a librarian, I knew that, for the same reason, it didn't matter. The groups were dead because most Facebook groups are. If your attempt to start a discussion on your library group's discussion board

fails, it is not a reflection of the quality of your group or your library, but a reflection of Facebook culture.

Miller and Jensen (2007) observed that "becoming part of a Group is just a simple way to express an opinion." The act is a way of fleshing out your virtual identity. For example, I am a member of the group Bring Back Fastlane!!! because it's one of the greatest TV shows of all time. But I never post to the group, or even visit it. It just sits there in my list of groups to say I am the kind of person who likes the show.

Judging by the groups I surveyed, I concluded that a library's presence on Facebook as a group (distinct from an application) seemed to be valuable more as a public relations device than as a practical means of service delivery. Having a Facebook group demonstrates that we are going where the patrons are, that we care about keeping current and being relevant to students. But a library-specific group with discussion topics for patron feedback arguably is more valuable to library staff than to students, more like a high-tech suggestion box. To be valuable to students, to be actually practical, something more sophisticated is required, like a Facebook application that integrates with our library system to provide access from Facebook into the OPAC, patron accounts, and so on — something that gives something back to the students instead of simply asking them to help us. This is, of course, an arbitrary measure of success. There are currently more than a dozen such applications available for different libraries. As for their practicability, that's a whole other question... and I have too many of those already.

Conflicts

So I asked myself whether creating a group would matter.

Chances are, very few people would join it, and even if they did, they would more than likely not contribute to it. And what would having a professional presence on Facebook mean to me? Should I create a second, professional profile for myself? Should I even have to? Did it matter? Did I feel comfortable representing an organization in a network designed for connecting individuals? Was it appropriate? Did my comfort matter? As a former student of philosophy, I found myself with more questions than answers.

Brian Mathews (2006) attempted library outreach by sending messages through Facebook to 1,500-plus mechanical engineering students. He received 48 responses (< 3.2 per cent), a response rate comparable to cold calls or bulk fax advertising. This suggests that even those 48 responses were not remarkable, but merely the result of sheer volume. Mathews tempers these discouraging numbers with the observation that several of the students asked him to be their Facebook "Friend" — perhaps a different measure of success. But how many students want to be friends with their librarians? Clearly, fewer than 3.2 per cent. And this was sending 1,500-plus individual messages, a task bound to be better received than a mass announcement from a library group. "I wanted to be proactive," Mathews writes, "and to interact with the students in their natural environment. I also wanted to appear as myself, rather than a faceless organization."

In the group Librarians and Facebook, Tara Stevens comments to much the same effect. "I just spoke with a group of undergraduates who said they felt university involvement on Facebook on a person-to-person [level], was a little 'creepy,' but that they would be open to joining

a Facebook group created by a librarian or their prof" (Stevens, 2007). This brings us back to the question of whether their joining the group accomplishes anything. This approach seems rather futile, and, dare I say, wrongheaded. I am forced to agree with Scott Koerwer (2007) that "[t]he weirdest thing to happen to Facebook is legitimate, serious business people attempting to integrate it as some sort of business tool. That just doesn't make sense to me." Facebook is defended as a social space — organizations are expressly disallowed from creating profiles. If we must go where the patrons are, where do we draw the line? Why are we not in World of Warcraft? Or, for that matter, the local pub?

Is there no hypocrisy here? Libraries flock to social networking sites like Facebook in order to attract patrons to their bricks-and-mortar establishments, the libraries themselves, whose no food or drink/no noise/no cell phones — and, ironically, in some libraries, no Facebook — policies seem to shout, or rather, to whisper the contrary message: we are not social.

Resolutions

In many ways, I am on the fence. I identify with Koerwer's perspective as a younger user, yet at the same time, I agree with Meredith Farkas (2007) that going where the patrons are "makes the library more visible and more convenient to access," and not just more convenient, but more comfortable. Anonymously IM'ing a reference librarian and visiting a library's Web site are both less threatening than walking up to the reference desk in person to ask what one believes is a stupid question. Being on Facebook takes this a step further, because it is no longer a case of students stepping into our (virtual) space.

We are stepping into theirs. And, paradoxically, the very vulnerability of such a move may be its strength, because it puts librarians and patrons on a more equal footing with each other than they are on in any other environment.

So, on the surface, creating a library group may not be a resounding success in and of itself, but it won't discourage students from using the library either. The effects will be small, if we could even determine what measures creating a group would affect. All of my questions probably don't need to be answered, and "will it matter?" is a vacuous one, because in the end, as much as it might matter to you if your library is on Facebook, it doesn't matter to the students.

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