Social Networking and the Library

Jason Griffey

Abstract

Much has been written in the last few years about the rise of online social networks and the assumption that this rise results in a decline in privacy. At the same time, libraries and librarians have deeply held beliefs about patron privacy, and they attempt to forestall access to the information habits of their patrons. These two conflicting stances—assisting in access to networks that potentially damage privacy while desiring to protect information about their patrons—will be the focus of this chapter of Privacy and Freedom of Information in 21st-Century Libraries.

M uch has been written in the last few years about the rise of online social networks and the assumption that this rise results in a decline in privacy. Nearly every new Web property in the last three years has had some form of social connectivity in it, and even established Web brands like Google have tried (and sometimes failed) to take advantage of the newly social Net. Libraries have navigated this new terrain by creating identities for themselves, interacting with patrons within the various sites, and providing access and sometimes even training on how best to use sites like Facebook, Twitter, FriendFeed, and more. At the same time, libraries and librarians have deeply held beliefs about patron privacy, and allowing access to the information habits of their patrons is something that libraries attempt to forestall. These two conflicting stances, that of assisting in access to networks that potentially damage privacy and that of desiring to protect information about their patrons, will be the focus of this chapter.

What we consider an online social network site dates back to the early days of the Internet, with the advent of a website called SixDegrees.com in 1997.[1] The history of social networks online is, however, one of rise and fall, with one site rising in popularity only to be overtaken by another when the whims of the online audience find a reason to move. This cycle started with Friendster in 2002, moving to MySpace in 2003, and then on to the current market leader, Facebook, in 2005. As I'm writing this, it's mid-June 2010, and Facebook is expected this week to announce that it has crossed the 500 million user mark, something that no other website has ever accomplished.[2] I'm not sure that anything in history has had 500 million active participants; that's a full one-twelfth of the entire population of the planet. If Facebook were a country and its users citizens, it would be the third most populous country in the world, behind only China and India.

What makes something a social network site? Danah M. Boyd and Nicole B. Ellison in their seminal 2007 article "Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship" define a social network site as "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system."[3] There are sites for which the entire point is the socialization and limitation or control of your information, such as MySpace and Facebook, and then there are sites that have some other central purpose like Flickr (sharing photos) and YouTube (sharing videos). There are also interest-specific or topical sites with extensive social networking features, such as LibraryThing (discussing books), Babycenter (motherhood and parenting), Ravelry (knitting and crocheting), and Disaboom (living with a disability or functional limitation). For any given hobby, at this point on the Web, there is probably a social network site that caters to it.

Social networks have grown in popularity in the last five years, with the Pew Internet reporting that 82 percent of teens 14–17 have used a social networking site.[4] The same report shows that young adults age 18–29 are also huge social network users, with 72 percent of them reporting regular use.[5] After 30, social network use drops precipitously (to 40 percent), but that is likely a generational effect and not a direct age effect; it's happening because of the time during which the people surveyed were 30 or over, and we can expect that as the current 25–29-year-olds march past the 30-year mark that average social network use will rise as well as the generation that is comfortable with them ages.

For libraries, there are two sides to the use of social networks: use by patrons and use by the library. Both of these uses of social networks are sometimes in conflict with long-held positions about patron privacy, and it isn't clear whether it's possible for libraries to both hold on to their ideals and be a part of the modern online world. Let's look at a few scenarios for specific uses of current social networks and see how they hold up to patron privacy.

The central tension between libraries and social networks is simple: a social network gains usefulness when you are identifiable (people know who you are) and you share information about yourself (people know what you like). Libraries have, for years, operated under the general guideline that both of those pieces of knowledge are no one's business but yours. The American Library Association's Code of Ethics says in its third statement, "We protect each library user's right to privacy and confidentiality with respect to information sought or received and resources consulted, borrowed, acquired or transmitted."[6] In fact the ALA Policy on Confidentiality of Library Records is so strong, I felt that I should quote it in its entirety here:

> The Council of the American Library Association strongly recommends that the responsible officers of each library, cooperative system, and consortium in the United States:
>
> 1. Formally adopt a policy that specifically recognizes its circulation records and other records identifying the names of library users to be confidential. (See also ALA Code of Ethics, Article III, "We protect each library user's right to privacy and confidentiality with respect to information sought or received, and resources consulted, borrowed, acquired or transmitted" and Privacy: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights.)
> 2. Advise all librarians and library employees that such records shall not be made available to any agency of state, federal, or local government except pursuant to such process, order or subpoena as may be authorized under the authority of, and pursuant to, federal, state, or local law relating

> to civil, criminal, or administrative discovery procedures or legislative investigative power.
> 3. Resist the issuance of enforcement of any such process, order, or subpoena until such time as a proper showing of good cause has been made in a court of competent jurisdiction.[7]

When patrons were just checking things out from the library, and the library itself was the owner and manager of that transactional information, these rules were easy to understand. But when patrons started accessing social networking sites on library computers and using a library's network, it became difficult for the library to manage the privacy of the patron in the same way. There are significant difficulties in protecting patron information when there are several layers of networks to content with, and to top it off, some portion of the information being shared is being shared intentionally by the patron. Libraries have never tried to regulate whether patrons could voluntarily give up their own privacy . . . we don't really care if someone keeps a public list of the books he's read, as long as it is his list.

In addition to the library privacy issues, there are serious concerns among school and public libraries about the safety of minors on social networks. The same sorts of peer pressure, bullying, abuse, and other social minefields that were once confined to school hours are now extendable outside of them and onto social networks. Some libraries and school systems have chosen to limit access to social networking sites for content-based reasons, something that seems at odds with the American Library Association's *Library Bill of Rights*, especially the first three policies:

> I. Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.
> II. Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.
> III. Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment.[8]

Taken at face value, as they relate to social networks, library ethical policies can be interpreted as directly contradictory to the above privacy statements. Libraries have chosen, at times, to value privacy over access to social networks when these are in conflict. If the privacy of the patron is compromised via social networks, one possible answer is to attempt to limit access to those networks, which flies in the face of open and free access to information.

For instance, the highly publicized banning of Facebook, MySpace, and other social network sites by the Mishawaka-Penn-Harris Public Library in Indiana in 2008 was met with a huge amount of discussion online about how the library approached the issues that led to the banning. In this instance, the reasons given for banning access were all related to teen activity in the library, but the result was that social networks simply weren't available from the library.[9] Wake County, North Carolina Board of Commissioners decided in early 2007 to ban MySpace across the entirety of the public library system in the county, calling it an "attractive nuisance."[10]

In 2006, Representative Michael Fitzpatrick of Pennsylvania introduced the Deleting Online Predators Act, or DOPA, a law that would have made it necessary for libraries that received federal funding to block social networking sites from minors in the same way that the Children's Internet Protection Act requires that certain libraries filter pornographic material from their computers.[11] The rationale for the law as given in multiple interviews was to protect children from the possibility of being preyed upon by adults. The fact that social networking sites were singled out speaks to the degree to which they were misunderstood at the time and also to the conclusions to which adults will jump when presented with a medium that they do not fully understand.

Libraries, especially public libraries, continue to struggle with providing access to social networks for any number of reasons. Library boards can place great pressure on libraries to limit access to Internet resources in the same way that they can press for collection development limitations and individual book bans. It is surprising that often libraries and librarians will react less strongly to the limitation of information on the Internet and World Wide Web than they would to the limitation of print material.

The other issue at hand with social networks and libraries is whether libraries should themselves be using social networks as part of their toolbox of outreach and patron services online. Libraries have a long history of trying to effectively use any new technology that emerges for extending their services, from the rise of the bookmobile to phone reference to the huge variety of communication mechanisms now available on the Internet (instant messaging services, e-mail, blogs, wikis, etc.). It's only natural that when presented with the opportunity to put themselves in front of their patrons in a new way, libraries would experiment and see how the patrons respond.

Libraries saw several problems arise quickly with their use of social networks, specifically Facebook. The first was that, at the time libraries started experimenting, Facebook offered only "accounts" and not pages or other content types. The terms of use at the time specified that Facebook accounts were for use only by actual individuals and not by fictional characters, groups, businesses, or schools and libraries. Some libraries spent time creating accounts within Facebook, friending and being friended by patrons, pushing content into Facebook, only to literally go in one day and find their accounts gone. This just highlights issues with trusting library information and communication channels with nonlibrary controlled sources and shouldn't necessarily be seen as a condemnation of social networks in general.

The second, less-expected problem was that libraries began to see pushback from patrons about their very presence. Not just libraries, but any organization that was seen as "outside" the social circle of the patrons, was quickly identified and seen as suspect. It took some time, and some evolution of the social networks, for this reaction to change, and it appears that now the idea of organizations as parts of social networks is one that the public is comfortable with. Facebook has pages for organizations, and Twitter and other social networks simply treat libraries as if they were just another account holder.

Both of these initial problems have been solved, and libraries are fully ensconced in social networks at this point, with library mainstays like the New York Public Library, the Library of Congress, and even the ALA Library having Facebook pages. Libraries are experimenting with other social networks like Flickr and Twitter, and librarians are using nearly every social network to be found on the Net in one way or the other.

Library Facebook Pages

New York Public Library
www.facebook.com/newyorkpubliclibrary

Library of Congress
www.facebook.com/libraryofcongress

ALA Library
www.facebook.com/alalibrary

This isn't to say that there aren't ongoing issues with social networks. Facebook, the clear leader in the current social network ecosystem, continues to make decisions about privacy and data that make many people, not just librarians, uncomfortable. Through its history, Facebook has increasingly made its default privacy settings more and more public, and less and less protected.[12] At this point, Facebook has had a series of instances where it has added a new service and the default setting is for the new service to be public to the world instead of limited to just a user's network of friends. This is largely driven by a conflict of informational use for Facebook itself; it gains trust and users because it purports to limit the information you share to a limited network of friends, but that very

insularity limits it to the rest of the Web. Without exposing some of your information to the Web, it is very difficult for Facebook to make money via advertising, which is still its primary method of revenue generation. So unless Facebook finds a way to get your and your patrons' information into the public, it makes less money . . . but also runs the risk of alienating users. It's a delicate balance, and one that Facebook has seemingly successfully navigated, given its growth in users.

Given the history of social networks, there will come a time when Facebook goes just a bit too far, or maybe something more attractive will come along, and the exodus to another site will begin. Or maybe the promise of a distributed social network from something like the Diaspora Project will take shape, and people will be free to develop their own networks that will all interconnect seamlessly, erasing the problems of a single point of failure that exists in something like Facebook. If this happens, it will become even more difficult to control the access to this sort of information online, since having a noncentralized site means that it will be much more difficult to find ways to limit access to the resource.

Diaspora
www.joindiaspora.com/index.html

In this all-too-short chapter, we didn't get a chance to examine all of the niche social networks that were mentioned earlier. But the same basic tensions can be found for any of them. Problems revolving around youth culture and the acceptance from adults of a new form of communication or media production and consumption can be found with any new social network. In addition to the simple generational gap, there are objective reasons at times to limit access to some forms of media for network or other infrastructure reasons; for example, some libraries limit access to YouTube not because of its content or because it's a social network, but because the bandwidth simply isn't there to support it. Understanding and exploring social networks should be well understood at this point in history for libraries. This doesn't mean that we shouldn't be very careful in how we approach and interact with them, but it does mean that we need to think of them as another information object of interest to our patrons and carefully consider how we want to deal with them. Social networks aren't going away, and the future of the Web in general is going to be largely social: libraries need to be a vibrant part of that future.

Notes

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4. Amanda Lenhart, Kristen Purcell, Aaron Smith, and Kathryn Zickuhr, Social Media and Young Adults, Feb. 3, 2010, Part 3: Social Media, "Teens and Online Social Networks," Pew Internet and American Life Project, www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Social-Media-and-Young-Adults/Part-3/1-Teens-and-online-social-networks.aspx?r=1 (accessed Aug. 31, 2010).
5. Ibid., Part 3: Social Media, "Adults and Social Networks," Pew Internet and American Life Project, www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Social-Media-and-Young-Adults/Part-3/2-Adults-and-social-networks.aspx?r=1 (accessed Aug. 31, 2010).
6. Office for Intellectual Freedom, Intellectual Freedom Manual, 8th ed. (Chicago: American Library Association, 2010), www.ifmanual.org/codeethics/ (accessed Sept. 24, 2010).
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12. Matt McKeon, "The Evolution of Privacy on Facebook," http://mattmckeon.com/facebook-privacy (accessed Aug. 31, 2010); Kurt Opsahl, "Facebook's Eroding Privacy Policy: A Timeline," April 28, 2010, Electronic Frontier Foundation website, www.eff.org/deeplinks/2010/04/facebook-timeline (accessed Aug. 31, 2010).