

Social Software in Libraries

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SURVEY RESULTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Social software, software that enables people to connect with one another online, is a well-established phenomenon that has continued to grow and develop since the inception of the Internet. While Facebook and MySpace are relatively new types of communication venues,¹ computer users have been chatting in online forums such as IRC² or the WELL³ and communing in virtual worlds and using wikis⁴ since the 1980s. Social software has, however, become much more accessible to the casual computer user since the development of the World Wide Web in 1994. The Web enabled online communication to transition from a strictly textual format to the visual, facilitating the development of the user friendly media sharing sites, wikis, blogs and other types of social software that we are familiar with today. Related to social software is the idea of “Library 2.0,” or enhancing library resources and services using social software, to reach users outside the walls of the traditional library. While many libraries had been experimenting with social software prior to 2005, this philosophy of extending services and communication beyond traditional models became very prominent in the literature and practice after this date.

In the last few years the use of social software has grown enormously in society. MySpace.com attracted more than 114 million visitors in June 2007, a 72% increase in one year, while Facebook grew 270%, to 52.2 million visitors. While a growing number of libraries have adopted social software as a way to further

interact with library patrons and library staff, many things are unclear about the use of social software in ARL member libraries. This survey was designed to discover how many libraries and library staff are using social software and for what purposes, how those activities are organized and managed, and the benefits and challenges of using social software, among other questions. For this study social software was broadly defined as software that enables people to connect with one another online. The survey asked about ten types of applications: 1) social networking sites; 2) media sharing sites; 3) social bookmarking or tagging sites; 4) Wikis; 5) blogs; 6) sites that use RSS (Really Simple Syndication) to syndicate and broadcast content; 7) chat or instant messaging (IM) services; 8) VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) services; 9) virtual worlds; and 10) widgets.

Background

This survey was distributed to the 123 ARL member libraries in February 2008. Sixty-four libraries completed the survey by the March 14 deadline for a response rate of 52%. All but three of the responding libraries report that their library staff uses social software (95%) and one of those three plans to begin using social software in the future. The other two completed the survey at this point. Fifty-nine libraries provide user assistance via chat or instant messenger (94%), 54 use wikis (86%), 53 employ RSS to disseminate information to users (84%), 52 blog (82%), 45 use widgets such as MeeboMe (71%), 44 participate in so-

cial networking sites such as Facebook (70%), 35 have implemented tagging (55%), and 39 libraries make use of media sharing sites such as Flickr or YouTube (62%). Survey results indicate that the most broadly adopted social software, chat or instant messaging, was also the earliest implemented social software. While one respondent was using instant messenger for reference and another was using chat for internal communication as early as 1998; the earliest use of this type of social software dates back to 1993.

While chat and instant messaging have been in use for several years, use of other types of social software in libraries is very recent. Beyond isolated cases, a steadily increasing number of ARL member libraries began implementing social software in 2005, with the largest rate of adoption being in 2007. For example, one of the responding libraries was blogging in 2001, but others adopted it much later; 13 institutions began using blogs in 2005, another 16 began blogs in 2006, and 17 others started in 2007. RSS was adopted by 19 libraries (30%) in 2006, though one was experimenting with RSS as early as 2004. Five libraries reported using wikis as early as 2004. Use of wikis has steadily grown; six respondents report using the software in 2005, 15 in 2006, and the largest number, 22, in 2007. While many libraries (13) were experimenting with social networking sites in 2006, the majority (20) began using Facebook and other sites in 2007. Other social software, such as media sharing sites, tagging or folksonomies, and virtual worlds, were largely adopted in 2007. The type of social software with the highest rate of adoption in this past year was widgets. In 2007, thirty of the responding libraries deployed software such as MeeboMe chat widget, catalog searching plug-ins and the LibGuides widget on their Web sites.

Social Software Beginnings

When asked about the impetus for implementing social software, 80% of the survey respondents said it was a grassroots effort by individual librarians or other staff. Slightly more than half said it grew out of a pilot project in a specific department (probably

reference based on the IM, chat, and virtual reference software that was used first by many respondents.) Twelve (20%) said it was a recommendation from library administration and ten (16%) that the IT department recommended it. Only five (8%) said that library users requested it.

Overall, libraries hope that the use of social software will increase user awareness of library collections and services (56 or 92%), help deliver services to library users (53 or 87%), and establish rapport with users in online environments (48 or 79%). Nearly 60% hope to support faculty in teaching and learning, and 41% want to gain a better understanding of users' online behavior. Several respondents also wanted to enhance staff communication.

Types of Social Software or Networking Used

At the time of the survey, all but a few of the 61 respondents (54 to 60) were using chat or IM, RSS, blogs, and wikis. The majority (43 to 48) were using widgets, social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace, social bookmarking or tagging sites such as del.icio.us and LibraryThing, and media sharing sites such as YouTube and Flickr. Fewer libraries are using Voice over IP services (25 respondents) or have a presence in the virtual world Second Life (21 respondents). Twenty-three respondents reported the use of a variety of other applications, including the LibX toolbar in their Firefox browser, podcasting, Twitter, Google maps, SharePoint, and LibGuides, among others.

Examples of Social Software Used

For each of the ten types of social applications, respondents were asked to provide an example of the site, software, or service used, the year it was first used, a description of how it was being used, and the goal for using that particular tool. Following is a brief summary of each type of application.

Social Networking Sites

Thirty-three of 43 respondents (73%) currently have a Facebook page and four (9%) have one in develop-

ment. Two of these also have a MySpace presence. Most respondents implemented their site in either 2006 or 2007. Typical uses include promoting library resources and services, communicating with staff and users, and searching library catalogs and other online resources. For example, several libraries place ads promoting services and events in Facebook; one used an ad “to recruit for focus group participants.” Many are embedding applications in social networking sites that will search the catalog or databases, and widgets that connect to the local Ask A Librarian service. The main goals for using this tool are to connect staff with users, users with users, and staff with staff to share information, market library services and facilitate communication.

Media Sharing Sites

Thirty-nine respondents report using media sharing sites. Flickr and YouTube are the most popular (20 or 50% and 11 or 28%, respectively). Only two use iTunes University. Most began using these sites in 2007. Libraries are posting photo tours, promoting events and exhibits, showcasing digital collections, marketing services such as Ask A Librarian, streaming instructional videos, and providing updates on building or renovation projects. For example, one institution posts photos from the university archives on Flickr, “to provide access to them in a space where users might be more likely to find them and comment on them.” The main goal is to connect staff, users, alumni, and the general public to share information.

Social Bookmarking or Tagging Sites

Thirty-four respondents use bookmarking or tagging site, mostly del.icio.us (22 or 61%). Three report using LibraryThing. One or two mentioned Connotea, Digg, and tagging within the library catalog. Librarians are creating subject guides and bibliographies, even using such software as a way to create course-specific instructional guides “on the fly” using course numbers as tags. Tagging is also used to promote new acquisitions, and track answers to difficult reference

questions. The goal of tagging is most often to enable discovery of and share useful information with users.

Wikis

Fifty-three respondents report the use of Wikis in their libraries. One was implemented in 2002 and several more began in 2004 and 2005, but the majority of Wiki users (37 or 70%) started in either 2006 or 2007. Three began in early 2008. Most of the Wikis are used to support staff communication, training, and projects. A few libraries have turned the library FAQ into a Wiki. Others support chat reference or instruction. For example, one library uses a wiki to provide reference assistance to an undergraduate class of 7800 students in their research assignment, taking the “pressure off the Reference Desk.” The main goal for using Wikis is to share information, facilitate communication, and create content among library staff and to a lesser extent between staff and users and between staff at different institutions.

Blogs

Fifty-two of the responding libraries have implemented one or more blogs, mostly between 2005 and 2007. Many blogs are used to announce library news to the general user community; others are targeted to specific departments or user groups. One library blog features “research ideas ripped from the headlines” for undergraduates. Some blogs are for library teams or committee work. Not surprisingly, the main goal of blogs is to share information among staff and users.

RSS

Fifty-three respondents have enabled RSS on their library Web pages. Implementation began in 2003 and reached a peak in 2006 and 2007. RSS is used to alert users about new services, collections, events, and faculty publications; to report services outages; and to provide another connection to library blogs, subject guides and course pages. As with blogs, the main goal of RSS is to share information among staff and users.

Chat and Instant Messaging

All but a few of the respondents have implemented a chat or IM service. These services began as early as 1993 and have experienced fairly steady growth since then, reaching a peak in 2007. Commercial IM services include AOL Instant Messenger, Yahoo Messenger, GoogleTalk and Windows Messenger. Vendor-based chat services include QuestionPoint, LiveAssistance, Tutor.com, and LivePerson. Meebo was also frequently mentioned as an IM aggregator, enabling librarians to easily monitor multiple IM services simultaneously. The distinction between chat and IM is blurring and the terms are now often used interchangeably. These tools are primarily used to provide reference service and enable timely communication.

Voice over IP Services

Only 18 respondents reported using a Voice over Internet Protocol service. The earliest reported use of VoIP was for an intra-university service, "CU-See-Me" in about 1996. This was a point-to-point communication device for patrons to ask reference questions. Today, most respondents are using Skype. They use this service to communicate with international project partners, distant education students and faculty, and off-campus team members. The main goal for using this tool is to share information between staff at different institutions.

Virtual Worlds

Eighteen respondents have a presence in the virtual world Second Life. Eleven of these implemented the presence in 2007. Most respondents admit that they are still experimenting. Already librarians are providing reference service, access to the library catalog and Web site, virtual meeting and lounge space, and weekly brownbag sessions in this online environment. Their main goal for Second Life is to provide virtual training and meeting opportunities for staff and library users.

Widgets

Forty-six libraries report using widgets. Most are using chat widgets, primarily MeeboMe; a few are using search widgets such as iGoogle and browser toolbars. Meebo widgets are being integrated into Web pages, library guides, and course sites to enable easier communication between library users and staff. Facebook widgets have been developed that allow users to search the library catalog. iGoogle widgets allow users to embed a search box for library resources in their own Web page. For example, "many subject librarians are adding the Meebo widget to their online profile pages to allow users to communicate with and contact them more easily." The main goal of these tools is to facilitate communication between library staff and users.

Organization and Management

Almost half of the respondents reported that social software initiatives and activities are not coordinated, rather individual staff are responsible for their own activities. Only ten libraries have a standing or ad hoc committee or other group that implements or manages these initiatives. Management falls under a specific department at four libraries. Sixteen respondents described another management structure. Most indicate that responsibility for these activities is spread across the library.

Staff participation in the use of almost every social software application is voluntary. When participation is required, it is most likely to be for chat and IM for reference librarians or Wikis for committee work. The survey asked whether voluntary use of these tools is encouraged and if so, how. Eighty-two percent of respondents said they do encourage staff to participate. Workshops and other presentations have been used most often to demonstrate the software and discuss how it can be used. Training programs, practice sessions, and one-on-one training have been effective. Several respondents mentioned the importance of strong administrative support, too.

The survey asked how many library staff (FTE) participate in each of the ten types of social software

activities. It then asked what percentage of the total number of staff that FTE represents. The number of FTE ranged from as few as .10 to as many as 280, depending on the type of activity. The FTE averages indicate that more staff participate in Wikis, VoIP, chat or IM, blogs, and social networking sites. Similarly, the percentages of total staff ranged from .10% to 100%. These averages confirm that more staff are using VoIP, Wikis, chat or IM, blogs, and social networking sites. It was difficult for respondents to estimate how many hours per week individual staff members spend on social software activities. Estimates ranged from half an hour to 20 hours per week with a mean of 3.2 and a median of 2 hours.

Staff Training

All 59 respondents said that self-study is how library staff have learned about social software. Fifty-seven (97%) also report on-the-job experience as a training method. Other common methods include workshops taught by local librarians, professional development workshops, and webinars. Eleven report that the parent institution provides training.

Promoting Social Software to Users

All but a few of the respondents use links on the library Web page to promote social software participation to users. A majority also makes announcements during orientations and instruction sessions, send e-mail notices, and distribute flyers, handouts, and bookmarks. Just under half provide training for interested users and embed ads and links in social software sites. Slightly more than a third include links in courseware. Other promotional methods include newspaper articles, screen savers on public workstations and coffee shop screens, and “word of Web.”

Assessment

Just over half of the respondents have attempted to evaluate the use of social software. The 30 that have primarily rely on the volume of hits or level of participation to measure success. Other methods that have been used to assess the effectiveness of social

software activities include surveys, analysis of chat and IM transcripts, and usability analysis.

Benefits and Challenges

Respondents were asked to list up to three benefits and three challenges of using social software in their libraries. The top three benefits, by number of responses, are enhanced visibility/presence/access, communication, and marketing/promotion/public relations. Other benefits include better collaboration, improved service, and resource discovery. The top two challenges are finding the time to learn and use the tools, and developing staff expertise/training staff. These are followed by the related challenges of competing priorities, getting staff buy-in, and keeping up with technology.

User Privacy

More than half of the respondents (33 or 57%) expressed some concern with the privacy implications of social software usage in their libraries. Most concerns are about the privacy of users’ personal information and how that information is tracked and stored. Few report that there have been any problems, so far, but some are looking at developing policies for social software use. Others are attempting to educate users about the implications of sharing personal information in online environments.

Conclusion

It is clear that the use of social software in ARL member libraries has rapidly increased—from two institutions in 1996 to 63 institutions in early 2008. The range of social software applications has also diversified in that time span—from chat and instant messaging in 1996 to ten, or more, types in 2008. Accompanying this diversification, social software has also been streamlined to some extent. A decade ago libraries implemented one, or perhaps two, applications. Today, libraries implement multiple applications as part of larger integrated tools, e.g., subject guides that are part wiki, part blog, part instant messaging, part social tagging, etc., and social networking sites that

are part widget, part media sharing applications, part instant messaging, etc. While the data in this survey offers a snapshot of the past, it also offers a glimpse of the future. Whatever the future holds, it is certain that ARL libraries will continue to offer and expand upon the social software offerings of today.

Notes

¹ Yadav, Sid. "Facebook – The Complete Biography." *Mashable: Social Networking News*. August 25, 2008.

<http://mashable.com/2006/08/25/facebook-profile/> Viewed July 18, 2008.

² Ronan, Jana. 2003. *Chat Reference*. Libraries Unlimited, p. 2.

³ The WELL. 2008 Salon Media Group Inc. 101 Spear Street, Suite 203, San Francisco, CA 94105

<http://www.well.com/aboutwell.html> Viewed July 18, 2008.

⁴ "Social Networking Timeline." *Searcher* 15 no. 7 (July 2007): 38.