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Balancing Outreach and Privacy in Facebook: Five Guiding

Decisions Points

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## Balancing Outreach and Privacy in Facebook: Five Guiding Decisions Points

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### **Introduction**

Because Facebook is both the fastest growing social networking site (SNS), as well the one that has a reputation for significant privacy concerns, it will also be the focus of this paper (Cohen, 2008; Schonfeld, 2008). As libraries attempt to navigate the world of SNSs, they are increasingly forced to make decisions about particular features within Facebook that affect the privacy of their patrons and staff. Doing so in an ethical manner requires that libraries have a firm understanding of how Facebook works, and what kind of presence they want to have within the framework it creates. The ethical decisions about privacy are real, and need to be made locally. In that context, this paper will highlight five decision points intended to serve as guideposts for librarians attempting to conceptualize their own efforts within Facebook.

Facebook creates a unique set of challenges for librarians who are dedicated to the principles of both outreach and privacy. The potential for outreach is difficult to ignore. A recent Pew study found that 35% of all adults, 75% of adults aged 18-24, and 65% of teenagers maintain a presence on at least one social networking site. Perhaps more importantly, the number is growing (Lenhart, 2009). Facebook and other social networking sites are new spaces where library patrons already are, and therefore provide opportunities for libraries to reach out to them. At the same time, interacting with Facebook sites involves putting library content on a third party website, which is run by companies who have historically demonstrated a different conception of

privacy than librarians might prefer. Facebook has tendencies and restrictions that can be troubling for librarians committed to a certain conception of privacy (Fernandez, 2009).

Each decision point highlighted in this paper is an opportunity to consider the implications of a particular decision in light of the privacy concerns created by Facebook. Rather than attempting to be exhaustive, it is an attempt to give a broad overview of the places that librarians should focus their attention.

### **Decision #1 The Tone:**

Content and tone are inexorably linked on any webpage. Usually content dictates the tone, but the situation becomes more complex when trying to merge the relatively professional content of a library website with the constraints of Facebook's page creation software. The tools Facebook provides allow for a more limited range of expression than is possible on conventional websites. Facebook does not give its users access to a neutral space, and its tools and the types of content it allows are designed to influence users to adopt an informal, revealing tone.

In addition to personal profiles, Facebook also allows for institutional pages but encourages administrators of institutional pages to have personal profiles as well. It is, however, possible to create an organizational page without a personal profile attached. This allows staff members to access the account using a single username and password. However, once a personal profile has been created and associated as the primary administrator of the institutional page, there is no way to undo this relationship. Because of this, librarians must be purposeful when deciding what kind of tone they wish to adopt.

Library uses will guide a number of related decisions that affect privacy. For instance, if the library decides to strike a personal tone, then it logically makes sense to encourage individual librarians to maintain accounts on the site as well. However, Facebook's terms of service prohibit users from maintaining more than one account. This raises a number of questions. What kind of content should the resulting profiles contain? Should the library administration encourage librarians' to link their pre-existing personal profiles to the libraries Facebook site? Topics such as favorite musicians, restaurants and hobbies are the staples that regularly make up a profile on a social networking site. This seems like an odd thing for a library to ask of its employee's to reveal to the public at large. Alternatively, having a more professional page, one that contains only information about the libraries services, allows the library to sidestep many of these concerns.

### **Decision #2: Patrons as Co-Developers**

Libraries must determine how seriously they are prepared to embrace the interactive nature of SNS. Social networking sites are part of the Web 2.0 movement and as Tim O'Reilly pointed out in his seminal article on the subject, Web 2.0 means "Trusting users as co-developers" (O'Reilly, 2005). The primary function of a library website is rarely to simply engage or entertain the user, but rather to convey selected information. The creators of social networking sites however, actively encourage their users to be able to freely interact with their site. This functionality is one of the major advantages of Facebook, and at least part of the reason for its popularity. Attempting to fight this tendency will only make the page creation more

difficult.

Facebook interactions raises a host of questions for libraries such as how to handle potentially hateful speech, to relatively simple things, like what to do if patrons post false, or otherwise problematic information to the site. When a library allows or encourages its patrons to contribute to any part of its site within Facebook, that information will also be tied to the patrons Facebook profile. As a result, the library has an ethical obligation to be aware of potential abuses, and determine how it wants to regulate the interactions that occur on its site. If patrons use the libraries Facebook profile as a meeting place, then it can also be a meeting place where the typical violations of privacy can unwittingly occur (Grimmelmann, 2009).

### **Decision #3 “The Wall, News Feed & Privacy Settings”**

By default, Facebook makes “The Wall” the first part of the page that a new user sees. Along with the News Feed, The Wall is one of the central communication tools available in Facebook. The Wall is the central place to add new, pictures, web links, and other content, which by default, are sent out to other users through News Feeds. Patrons can also post comments or questions on The Wall, which are then publicly displayed. While the Wall is the default starting point for users looking at someone else’s page, the News Feed is the starting screen for users logging in. Once a controversial feature, this page compiles all of the actions taken by others in their network, filters them through the privacy settings of the users involved, and posts them to a single stream (Westlake, 2008).

The Wall and News Feed functions combine to make Facebook what it is today, and in many ways form the heart of the social, interactive experience that this site provides. For libraries, they are the primary mechanisms that allow the library to push its content out directly to users who have become “fans” of the library, and joined its social network. Exactly how they work can be molded and tweaked according to the privacy settings of both the library and the users.

To maintain any semblance of control over who accesses what information, through The Wall or otherwise, users must be familiar with privacy settings. The powerful suite of privacy tools and accompanying documentation can be intimidating. These tools offers users extraordinarily granular control over who can interact with the information provided on the site, as well as what information is automatically displayed on The Wall and through the News Feed (Magid, 2009). While these tools may be a missed opportunity for many users, most libraries using Facebook for outreach will want to keep their settings relatively open, or risk creating barriers for potential patrons who visit the site.

Many actions taken by the library within the site are automatically pushed out to users, and unaware libraries may inadvertently display information they thought was private. Depending on what a library’s stance on monitoring content on their site is, the privacy settings are how the library would be aware of what they can and cannot do to proactively control or promote certain types of communication.

**Decision #4: Other Applications**

In addition to Facebook options and tools, other applications can be created and shared by users adding to the interactive nature of Web 2.0. Some libraries have been able to add personalized tools, such as searching the library opac to their Facebook site.

Anyone that chooses to make use of additional applications must also acknowledge Facebook's terms of service, which give program access to the user's full profile in order to operate. This allows applications to exploit or expose user information that would otherwise be hidden by privacy settings. A recent BBC report noted that these applications do not always provide the same level of privacy protections that Facebook does. Poorly written or malicious programming can reveal personal information about anyone who utilizes the application (Kelly, 2008). Libraries do not always have the technical expertise to ensure that any information conveyed through Facebook remains secure. Although the risk appears to be minimal, libraries need to evaluate their use of these applications in the Web2.0 environment.

**Decision# 5: Site Maintenance**

Once the Facebook page has been created, it's important to have a maintenance plan. Who will be responsible for adding updates, and what kinds of information will be posted on the site? At its most basic, a library's Facebook page can plug into pre-existing resources. Direct messages and Wall posts can be funneled into a local e-mail account and updates can be announced through automated RSS feeds. This approach saves time, but fails to fully take



advantage of the features that made the website a popular destination in the first place.

## **Conclusion**

Libraries, just like patrons, are confronted with similar privacy concerns within Facebook. Privacy concerns associated with Facebook must be balanced with the benefits of the platform. That balance will vary according each library's situation goals of utilizing social networking sites. This author hopes that the decision points discussed in this article serve as a starting point for dealing with social networking privacy issues.

A library's commitment to using Web2.0 strategies for outreach will require a need to consider privacy issues eventually. By ensuring that these factors are considered as informed decisions, rather than simply following the easiest path that Facebook creates, libraries can guarantee that they uphold their mission and bring their services to these online spaces. Libraries concerned about Internet privacy issues can consult information on the American Library Association's *Privacy Revolution* website ([www.privacyrevolution.org](http://www.privacyrevolution.org)).

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