The Fine Art of Throwing Sheep: How Facebook Can Contribute to Librarianship and Community at Theological Institutions

by Michelle Y. Spomer

o you Facebook?" Inquiries on these lines are becoming commonplace amid the growing proliferation of social networking tools. But is Facebook more than a trend in web-based interaction? Will it have long-term significance? While it's still too early to answer these queries with complete certainty, librarians have already been creating innovative uses for this technology. The strongest attraction to Facebook for theological librarians may not be all the gimmicks and features, but its potential as a tool for connecting with individuals and creating community.

THE FACEBOOK PHENOMENON

There are strong indications that Facebook has staying power. With more than 58,000,000 active users and an average of 250,000 new registrations per day since January 2007, Facebook is the sixth most trafficked site in the United States, and more than half of active users return daily. Perhaps most significantly for academic librarians, Facebook maintains an 85% market share of 4-year U.S. universities. These statistics are quite compelling, and when considered with other factors, Facebook is certainly something with which librarians ought to be familiar, if not proficient.

Wikipedia, itself one of dozens of Web 2.0 technologies, defines social networking services as "[focusing] on the building and verifying of online social networks for communities of people who share interests and activities, or who are interested in exploring the interests and activities of others, and which necessitates the use of software." Early examples of such services include Classmates.com (launched in 1995) and Epinions.com (launched in 1999). Current services include Xanga, Friendster, Faceparty, Xianz, Imbee, and LiveJournal to name a few. The most popular of these, by far, are MySpace and Facebook.³

Social networking services share the goal of connecting people and building communities. However, the respective emphases of these services are quite diverse. Vox, Xanga, and LiveJournal focus on blogging. Faceparty caters to British teens and young adults, while Imbee is a "parent approved, teacher endorsed social networking site appropriate for kids and 'tweens.'" BlackPlanet and Cyworld provide online communities for African-Americans and South Koreans, respectively. Social networking sites exist for particular occupations, such as Sermo (for physicians), as well as unique interests, such as LibraryThing (for those interested in cataloging their personal libraries).

Facebook falls into a broader category for social networking services, aiming for a much more diverse user base. Mark Zuckerberg, a 20-year-old Harvard student, launched Facebook in 2004. The intent was to provide a way for Harvard students to get to know one another, and it was patterned after the print "facebooks" that many schools provide. Facebook quickly expanded to other Ivy League schools, then to most colleges and universities, and then to high schools. In 2006, Facebook was made available to businesses and all individuals over 13 years of age.

When a user signs up for Facebook, she must then customize her profile. Users are first encouraged to join a

- ¹ Facebook, "Press Room Statistics," Facebook, http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics. [Accessed December 28, 2007]
- ² Wikipedia, "Social Network Service," Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_networking. [Accessed December 28, 2007]
- ³ Wikipedia, "List of Social Networking Websites," *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List of social networking websites. [Accessed December 28, 2007]
- ⁴ Imbee, "Welcome to Imbee," *Imbee*, http://www.imbee.com. [Accessed December 28, 2007]

particular network or networks. These can be related to geographical regions, colleges and universities, workplaces, or high schools. By joining a network, users can automatically access most of the personal profiles in that network (though not in the cases where strict privacy settings are in place).

Profiles have several standard areas and functions (called "applications"), which users can then modify. The "Education and Work" area contains information similar to what one would find on a résumé. Users can list contact information, interests, favorite music, favorite books, and other such things in the "Information" section. The user can provide as much or as little information in these sections as she would like. Applications include photo sharing, event postings, group listings (groups the user has joined), posted items, a "wall" (friends can write public messages on it), video sharing, and a few others. All Facebook features and applications have customizable privacy settings, which allow users great control over who sees what in their profiles.



Figure 1: Author's Facebook profile

What makes Facebook stand out from other social networking services is not only the sheer number of applications available for users to add to their profiles, but the fact that Facebook now allows any user to be a Facebook programmer. Whereas initially Facebook created all the applications, now a user can submit an original application of her own. As a result, there are now thousands to choose from. These run from the useful (like the MediaFire application, which is used for sharing all sorts of media) to the purely-for-fun (like SuperPoke!, which can be used

for hurling cartoon sheep at friends as a hello-I'm-thinking-of-you gesture) (Figure 4). Sifting through the dozens of available applications can sometimes be overwhelming, yet finding those few that are of immediate and practical use can be worth the effort.

Once a profile has been created, the user is then free to accumulate "friends" by sending friend requests. In this context, a "friend" is someone who is allowed to view your profile and use the profile applications. A user cannot access an individual profile without being a "friend" of the person whose profile the user wants to see.

In addition to profiles, users can create Facebook "groups" and "pages." Groups are created for particular interests, occupations, humorous topics, organizations, etc. Group creators can allow any user to join or can limit membership to only certain users. Groups come with some standard applications (video sharing, a "Wall," posted items, etc.) that are also available with profiles. Applications cannot be added to groups. Facebook pages are a sort of hybrid of profiles and groups, and are to be created for particular businesses, products, musical groups, public figures, and other group entities. Pages also come with standard applications. Unlike group creators, however, page creators can add applications (see the "JSTOR Search" application in Figure 2).



Figure 2: WSU's Holland and Terrell Libraries Facebook page

One significant feature that sets apart Facebook from MySpace, for example, is the news feed. The news feed utilizes RSS technology to provide users with a way to keep up with their friends by sending "news stories" that highlight their friends' various activities. For example, if a user adds a new group to his/her profile, this will show up in the news feeds of his/her friends. The news feed is highly customizable. Users can block certain information from showing up, and even block all news from a particular friend. The news feed only publishes stories from profiles, not from groups or pages.

There are many specific searches available to aid users in finding people, groups, and pages in Facebook. Groups, networks, and applications all include dedicated search boxes. A more general search, which searches everything in Facebook, is also available. Browsing, sorting, and filtering features can be used, though none of them appear to be terribly sophisticated. For example, if the name "Ron Reagan" is entered in the general search box on the left, the first three results include profiles for Ryan Lippitt, Ronald Reagan, and Mike Slemmer. In the other 80+ results, there are several variations of the name "Ron Reagan" (like "Ronny Reagan") in addition to names that contain neither "Ron" nor "Reagan." In cases like this, it's difficult to determine how the results were obtained.

It is no surprise that there is a catch to this "free" service, and that this catch is in the form of advertisements. All Facebook profiles, groups, and pages will include an ad, relatively unobtrusively located on the left side of the page. "Beacon," a controversial Facebook feature for advertisers, sends news feeds to a user's friends whenever certain external websites are visited. This is an automatic feature that Facebook users can disable for themselves in their privacy settings.

How Librarians are Using Facebook

Facebook is alive and well in the library profession. At present, marketing and reference seem to be the major areas in which Facebook is useful for library work. While there are several intriguing and promising possibilities, there haven't been many quantitative studies to date on the results of using Facebook for these areas. There are at least a few reasons for this. For one thing, Facebook doesn't provide usage statistics for profiles, groups, or pages. In addition, applications and Facebook features are being created and disappearing so frequently that it's difficult to keep up with what's new, let alone to do an in-depth study on something that may change or even vanish the next day.

When Facebook opened up its services in 2006 to everyone over the age of 13, librarians immediately began to explore the possibilities. Initially, it was possible to set up profiles for libraries. The obvious advantage of creating a profile rather than a group was the ability to add applications, as well as making use of the news feed. As Facebook has changed, librarians have had to adapt. In late 2006, Facebook shut down all profiles representing libraries and other group entities, despite protests from many librarians. Facebook argued that profiles should represent only individuals, not groups of people, organizations, or businesses. Librarians who had created library profiles were then forced either to create groups or to use their own profiles for the purposes of their libraries. Facebook pages are the latest option for librarians, and were made available in late 2007. Facebook pages are unique and are a sort of hybrid between personal profiles and groups. While pages allow the addition of applications, any changes made to pages will not be included in news feeds. Though many librarians who created groups for their libraries are switching to pages, they can also be found using profiles, groups, and pages for library purposes.

In their article on connecting libraries with students through Facebook, librarians Sarah Miller and Lauren Jensen strongly advocate the use of personal profiles for outreach and library promotion. ⁵ They found groups to be "one of the weakest communication methods," and they went on to point out that "students join a multitude of groups but do very little to participate in any of them." The authors then describe a method they call "friend and feed," which involves accumulating friends and then keeping library information in front of these friends by making use

⁵ Lauren A. Jensen and Sarah Elizabeth Miller, "Connecting and Communicating with Students on Facebook," *Computers in Libraries* 27, no. 8 (September 2007): 18-22. http://web.ebscohost.com.

⁶ Ibid., 18.

⁷ Ibid., 18.

of the news feed (a feature which Facebook groups don't have). This approach to using Facebook for library work has the advantage of allowing students to know their librarians more personally, as well as the ability to make use of the news feed feature.

Reference librarian Eric Frierson,⁸ in his *Some Librarian* blog, says that he sees Facebook as "less of an outreach and a 'first-contact' tool than it is another method of communicating with students." He mentions such strategies as buying Facebook flyers to advertise library services and advertising your Facebook profile at the end of an instruction session.

Other librarians are taking the approach of creating groups or pages for their libraries (see Figure 1). While a Facebook group is more limited than a Facebook page, it is generally adequate for providing basic information, such as posting library hours and contact information, creating discussions, posting URLs, and the ability to send messages to all group members. Pages have all the same basic features as groups, but are more customizable. Current library pages have added such applications as "JSTOR Search," which allows qualified users to search for articles, and "Meebo Me," an application that allows users to engage in chat reference with a librarian. Another interesting application is "My HTML," which some librarians have used to add library catalog and other search boxes to their library pages (see Figure 3). "My RSS" makes it possible to add news feeds from the library website and any other desired website with RSS feeds. (See *Appendix: Library Pages & Useful Applications in Facebook* at the end of this article.)



Figure 3: Binghamton University Libraries' "My HTML" Facebook application

⁸ Eric Frierson, "Glut of Facebook Traffic," *Some Librarian Blog*, posted May 1, 2007, http://somelibrarian.blogspot.com/2007/05/glut-of-facebook-traffic.html. [Accessed December 31, 2007]

In addition to creating profiles, groups, and pages, there is a wealth of information that can be gleaned from institutional networks. Membership in many networks, including institutional ones, is open to anyone with a valid email address. Once a user joins a network, she has automatic access to numerous profiles (with the exception of those with strict privacy settings). The members of a college network (which include students, staff, and faculty) can be sorted by gender, age, religious views, college year, degree concentration, and several other factors. Facebook prohibits unsolicited mass emailing, so it is not recommended that the available information be used for this purpose. Instead, this information can be used to gain a deeper understanding of the student (and faculty) population, and, in turn, can be used to develop new and creative library programs and services.

There are several Facebook groups created by and for librarians. Many of these, such as "Librarians and Web 2.0," "Library 2.0 Interest Group," and "Digital Reference in Facebook," are geared toward librarians interested in Web 2.0 technologies. Groups such as "Theological Librarians" and "SciTech Librarians" cater to academic librarians with particular areas of expertise. While some of these groups are fairly static, several of them regularly update their information, have relevant discussions, post useful URLs, and otherwise maintain an active Facebook presence. Even though some group creators appear to be doing their best to be of service to their peers, networking is probably the most popular aspect of Facebook groups for librarians.

Finally, librarians are also involved in the various Facebook groups and pages that have been created by others at their respective institutions. At Azusa Pacific University, for example, the Haggard School of Theology has recently created a Facebook group for current students and alumni. The group is used to announce various events and news items, as well as to provide information about the School of Theology. Current students and alumni are also able to network and keep in contact with one another. APU librarians were involved by providing Facebook instruction and suggestions for the new group. Librarians also joined the group and intend to post library-related information on occasion. While there is definitely an element of library marketing in this venture, joining such a group also provides librarians with more personal contact with both students and faculty than they might otherwise have.

COMMUNITY, THEOLOGICAL LIBRARIANS, AND FACEBOOK

Many theological librarians are working in small, close-knit academic settings in which "community" is highly valued. Facebook not only originated in and for an academic environment, it was specifically designed to facilitate community for pre-existing relationships.⁹ It is this social element that makes Facebook worthy of particular attention for theological librarians.

Community can be defined in a variety of ways, and when the elements of religion and the Internet are brought into play, there is much to consider. According to Heidi Campbell, "Within the sociological tradition numerous definitions of "community" exist, and . . . the only fundamental element of agreement between these definitions is that they deal with people." Campbell goes on to define online community as "a product of an information-driven culture providing a forum to sustain and connect individuals who would otherwise be distanced due to geography, lifestyle, or other limitations. It is a new social grouping, created as people invest emotionally in relationships formed online. It is also a forum to sustain and connect." ¹¹

⁹ Laura Locke, "The Future of Facebook," *Time*, July 17, 2007, http://www.time.com/time/business/article/0,8599,1644040,00.html. [Accessed December 28, 2007]

¹⁰ Heidi Campbell, Exploring Religious Community Online: We are One in the Network (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2005), 27.

¹¹ Ibid., 51.

Most faith traditions have something unique to say about the idea of community. Islam, for example, refers to the *umma*. Those who affirm the Muslim statement of faith (*shahada*) and seek to fulfill the five pillars of Islam belong to the *umma*. In Buddhism, the *sangha* refers to a community of disciples dedicated to the teachings of the Buddha. Hinduism has the *sampradaya*, a community formed around a particular guru. The concepts of covenant and land are central to the Jewish community. Christianity focuses on both *ekklesia* and *koinonia* to describe community.

Discussions about whether it is possible to create authentic community online will continue, keeping pace with the new technologies that are sure to develop. Is the anonymous nature of the internet a portal to utopian community, free of discrimination and bias, or is it nothing more than a forum in which people can appear to be flawless or otherwise misrepresent themselves? Does online communication facilitate deep relationships, or will online relationships always be shallow and impersonal on some level? These and other similar questions are not likely to be settled anytime soon.

By contrast, *religious community* is something that most believers understand instinctively. While there are no perfect religious communities, a large body of adherents often work from within common understandings of meaningful community. Although some religious communities try to remove themselves from the corruption of this world, others are often very outward and practical, seeking to model God in their actions toward others. Religious communities also tend to care for each other by participation in worship, pastoral care, education, and fellowship activities.

The diversification of social networking tools only serves to highlight the importance of relationships. Terence Huwe, in his overview of new technologies in 2007, observed, "Notably, the points of intersection between tools and community have multiplied, and user awareness of the power of community has grown." Some may argue whether Facebook is capable of fostering authentic community, but there is no doubt that, if used wisely and thoughtfully, Facebook can at least make a contribution. This, after all, is what creator Mark Zuckerberg had in mind. In an interview with *Time* magazine's Laura Locke he said this:

"Our whole theory is that people have real connections in the world. People communicate most naturally and effectively with their friends and the people around them. What we figured is that if we could model what those connections were, [we could] provide that information to a set of applications through which people want to share information, photos or videos or events. But that only works if those relationships are real. That's a really big difference between Facebook and a lot of other sites. We're not thinking about ourselves as a community—we're not trying to build a community—we're not trying to make new connections." ¹³

Possibly Facebook's biggest contribution to community is its capacity to help users discover and know people in ways that they feel are important and on their own terms. Profiles allow people to express interests, beliefs, and talents that may not be apparent in face-to-face interaction. This sort of representation of oneself need not be looked upon as any less authentic than how someone represents himself/herself in person. It is simply another form of expression and has the potential to improve understanding and to deepen existing relationships.

¹² Terence K. Huwe, "In 2007, Community-building Tools Rule," *Computers in Libraries* 27, no. 10 (Nov/Dec 2007), 31, http://web.ebscohost.com.

¹³ Laura Locke, "The Future of Facebook," 5.

Facebook also provides multiple ways to stay in touch and communicate, which contribute to maintaining and building community. Users can send emails, which remain private, or write short, public messages on someone's wall. More informal options exist, such as "poking" a friend (a gesture that can mean several things, but is usually a way to let someone know that she is in someone's thoughts). Other, more interactive, applications exist to add simply a little bit of fun to relationships, such as "Scrabulous" (online Scrabble) and "Food Fight" (users buy cartoon food to throw at their friends).

Even within smaller academic communities it is quite possible that there will be significant face-to-face contact with those students and faculty who are using Facebook. Using Facebook to maximize these relationships certainly makes sense for library work, but theological librarianship goes beyond academics and the library profession. It is often just as much about helping a student through a difficult situation by offering encouragement or prayer, or by inviting a new faculty member to a service of worship or other community gathering.

Clearly, Facebook is a tool that has already gained phenomenal acceptance among undergraduate students, and whose use is rapidly expanding within older age groups as well. ¹⁴ While it will never be a substitute for personal interaction, its clean design, smart features, endless variety of applications, and intriguing potential nevertheless make it a valuable tool for building relationships and meaningful community.

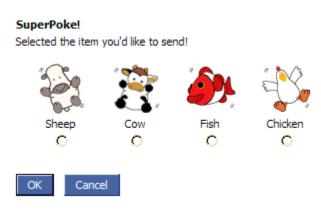


Figure 4: Part of the "SuperPoke!" application

¹⁴ John Schwartz, "73 and Loaded with Friends on Facebook," New York Times, October 14, 2007, Sunday Styles, http://web.ebscohost.com. [Accessed December 28, 2007]

APPENDIX: LIBRARY PAGES & USEFUL APPLICATIONS IN FACEBOOK

Many academic libraries are using Facebook pages to promote library services and to offer a variety of research tools. The following lists are intended to provide helpful examples of some of the most innovative library pages as well as applications that are most suited for use on library pages. These links are only accessible by registered Facebook users.

A. Library Pages in Facebook

Hundreds of libraries have created Facebook pages. The following four library pages are good examples of how academic libraries are making use of Facebook and its many applications.

Binghamton University Libraries (BUL)

http://www.facebook.com/pages/Binghamton-NY/Binghamton-University-Libraries/7266047455?ref=s

This Facebook page has made good use of the applications most relevant to libraries. The My HTML application has been used to provide searches for the library catalog, as well as various journal databases, including a separate search for JSTOR (not the same as the JSTOR Search application). The WorldCat application is located below My HTML, which conveniently situates all of the searching functions. Simply RSS has been used to provide access to the BU Library News & Exhibits blog, and other BUL links can be found in the Posted Items section. The nice thing about the Posted Items section is that it is not limited to only BUL postings – anyone can post to it. The Meebo Me application has been added, which allows anyone (including non-BU patrons) to instant-message library staff.

Duke University Law Library (DULL)

http://www.facebook.com/pages/Durham-NC/Duke-University-Law-Library/7739830819?ref=s

One of the more creative and unique things about this page is the use of the <u>Video</u> application, which is a standard one created by Facebook. The single video available is entitled "Library Suggestion Box" and seems to be intended to provide a little bit of humor. This application is quite underused on library pages, and could conceivably be used to provide a variety of relevant videos like library tours, instruction, etc. In addition to catalog searching and instant messaging applications, the Library Links and <u>Events</u> applications have been used to provide more research and instruction opportunities. The <u>LibraryThing</u> application has been used to advertise books that have been recently added to the library.

Inner Temple Library (ITL)

http://www.facebook.com/pages/London-United-Kingdom/Inner-Temple-Library/19997208040?ref=s The first thing users will notice about this page is the gorgeous photo of the Inner Temple Library. The page makes good use of the Library Links application (probably an application created by ITL, or a generic application like My HTML), and includes links to the library catalog, the library calendar, a gateway to legal websites, and the library blog (which is duplicated in the Simply RSS application). The Photos application has been used to document the history of the library and to allow users to take a virtual library tour – this is probably one of the most effective uses of the Photos application by a library. The Bookshare Books application is being used to advertise recently added books (including book cover thumbnails), but has the capability for rating, reviewing, and recommending books.

University of South Florida – Tampa Library (USFTL)

http://www.facebook.com/pages/Tampa-FL/University-of-South-Florida-Tampa-Library/14210035643?ref=s
Like Inner Temple Library, this page also has an attractive photo of the library. There are several applications on the USFTL page that have already been mentioned. Meebo Me, JSTOR Search, and WorldCat are all used. The Photos application has been used to document (not very thoroughly, however) a library event called "Poetry Jam 5." What makes this page different from the previous three pages is the inclusion of the My del.icio.us application. While there doesn't seem to be a particular theme to the links listed in this section, use of this application is a good way to add another Web 2.0 technology that many students are probably already using.

B. Applications for Library Pages

All of the following applications are currently on one or more library pages. This list is certainly not exhaustive. There is plenty of room to experiment with other Facebook applications that may not be on any library pages, such as My Stuff, which allows users to grab any code (for slideshows, media players, etc.) and put it into a page, or an application like FreeDrive, which provides a way to share files.

To find the following Facebook applications, log in and click on the "Applications" link in the upper left corner. Click "Browse more applications," and then enter the application name in the "Search Apps" box. Unfortunately, there doesn't seem to be a good way to search for only those applications that can be added to pages (as opposed to personal profiles). The only option is to browse through the 9000+ applications in the "For Facebook Pages" section, or to search all applications and look for the "Add to Page" button in the application information.

Again, only registered Facebook users will be able to view the following links. Applications marked "FB" are those that have been created by Facebook.

Sharing Books/Reviews

- Bookshare Books
 http://www.facebook.com/apps/application.php?id=2395952879&b&ref=pd
- Reviews (FB)
 http://www.facebook.com/apps/application.php?id=6261817190&b&ref=pd

Posting Links

- Posted Items (FB)
 http://www.facebook.com/apps/application.php?id=2309869772&b&ref=pd
- My del.icio.us
 http://www.facebook.com/apps/application.php?id=9615235559&b&ref=pd

Instant Messaging

- Meebo Me
 http://www.facebook.com/apps/application.php?id=4900043878&b&ref=pd
- Ask A Librarian @ Your Library http://www.facebook.com/apps/application.php?id=6261385845&b&ref=pd
- Instant Messaging http://www.facebook.com/apps/application.php?id=2603081069&b&ref=pd

RSS Feeds

- Simply RSS http://www.facebook.com/apps/application.php?id=4915599711&b&ref=pd
- Blog RSS Feed Reader http://www.facebook.com/apps/application.php?id=5315590686&b&ref=pd

Photos & Videos

- Photos (FB) http://www.facebook.com/apps/application.php?id=2305272732&b&ref=pd
- My Flickr http://www.facebook.com/apps/application.php?id=2352557895
- Video (FB)
 http://www.facebook.com/apps/application.php?id=2392950137&b&ref=pd

Database Searching

- JSTOR Search http://www.facebook.com/apps/application.php?id=2412474777&b&ref=pd
- WorldCat http://www.facebook.com/apps/application.php?id=7644880307&b&ref=pd
- My HTML
 http://www.facebook.com/apps/application.php?id=5577282239&b&ref=pd

(some libraries are using this to embed library catalog searching and other database searching – many libraries have created their own applications for library catalog searching. (See McCarthy, 2007)

Other Useful Page Applications for Libraries

- LibGuides Library http://www.facebook.com/apps/application.php?id=7504732166&b&ref=pd
- Events (FB) http://www.facebook.com/apps/application.php?id=2344061033&b&ref=pd
- Notes (FB) http://www.facebook.com/apps/application.php?id=2347471856&b&ref=pd
- LibraryThing http://www.facebook.com/apps/application.php?id=2403145016&b&ref=pd
- Page Maps
 http://www.facebook.com/apps/application.php?id=19582321008&b&ref=pd

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