

Reaching out to Users: Romanian Academic Libraries on Facebook

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Abstract: Lately, most academic libraries have been experimenting with different innovative methods for improving their information services and for reaching out to their users who display new information practices and expectations. The advance of the new technologies and the variety of applications available nowadays offer the necessary context for academic libraries to try new formats for delivering information. One of these new ways is to use social networks, such as Facebook or MySpace, in order to communicate better with the users and to provide them with specialized assistance. This paper analyzes the presence of large Romanian academic libraries on Facebook, how they use this outreach tool and what information they deliver through their Facebook page.

Keywords: academic libraries, Facebook, social networks, library users, Romania

1. Introduction

In this digital age, academic libraries must focus more on studying the changes in the information practices and expectations of the users they want to reach. The new technologies are at the basis of most changes taking place at the users' level and, in order to respond to all these changes, academic libraries must find innovative ways of accessing and delivering information in different contexts and 'in any number of formats' (Evans, 2009: 26) or in 'dynamic formats' (Li, 2009: 31).

When discussing the changes noticed at the users' level, W. Evans (2009) shows that these were influenced, for the most part, by the users' experiences with Web 2.0 and he considers that mobility and interactivity, including the sociability as well, are the main aspects that characterize the changes regarding users' expectations.

The advance of information and communication technologies and the variety of possibilities these provide to academic libraries for the development of applications, networks, and platforms, have created the conditions for libraries to reach the usual and the new users whenever and wherever they are.

One of the new ways which academic libraries have experimented lately in order to deliver information and communicate with users, is represented by the social networking sites such as Facebook or MySpace.

2. Academic Libraries and Facebook

Launched in 2004 as an application aimed to connect students at Harvard University with each other, it had 1 million users by the end of that year and, in 2006, when registration was opened to the general public, it had 12 million users. Presently, it is the most used social networking site for people and organizations.

For academic libraries Facebook has proved to be 'a flexible space to interface with a large number of students' (Hendrix, et al., 2009: 44) and they have used it as a tool for different purposes from pushing out announcements, to sharing photos, providing instructions or reference assistance, etc.

In the library literature, studies can be found on the implications of Facebook on libraries, how it is used by different types of libraries in different countries, or how to attract users via Facebook.

There is no doubt that social networking sites such as Facebook are good marketing tools and they can increase library visibility (Mathews, 2006 apud Hendrix, et al., 2009; Farkas, 2007 apud Riza Ayu & Abrizah, 2011), but the opinions are divided and the studies even contradict one another. While some claim that most reference questions were asked using this social network (Mack et al., 2007 apud Hendrix, et al., 2009), others found that e-mail was preferred over Facebook for research assistance. (Ismail, 2010)

Analyzing the way in which libraries use social networks as a method of outreach to students, some studies (Connell, 2009) investigated if they really wanted to interact with the library via Facebook or other similar applications, and many concluded that libraries needed to find out more about the best methods for approaching students through these tools. In their study on the use of Facebook in academic health sciences libraries, D. Hendrix et al. (2009) were not sure if Facebook was a useful and effective application for these structures. On the contrary, other specialists (Miller & Jensen, 2007; Riza Ayu & Abrizah, 2011) considered it as one of the best ways for libraries to find out more about their users, but in order to make it work, libraries 'have to make connections with others and develop them' (Miller & Jensen, 2007: 18-22) with different strategies. Despite the diversity of opinions they have generated, nobody can deny that social networking sites, and especially Facebook, have had an impact

on the activity of academic libraries and if we discuss the need for libraries to create a page on this social networking site, this can be perfectly justified considering the advantages it can bring. To this respect, A. R. Riza Ayu and A. Abrizah show that 'A Facebook page provides opportunities for libraries to communicate better with their users. It is a platform for interaction and a source of receiving feedback from users on library services. Libraries can gain insights into what their users want and need. Ultimately they can understand their users better'. (Riza Ayu & Abrizah, 2011: 248) Others specialists (Landis, 2007 apud Riza Ayu & Abrizah, 2011) emphasize the time and budget related advantages a Facebook page can bring to libraries in their approach of reaching out to users.

3. Romanian Academic Libraries on Facebook

For analyzing the presence of Romanian academic libraries on Facebook, how they use this outreach tool and what information they deliver through their Facebook page, data were gathered from the library Facebook page and their website.

We have chosen six large academic libraries in Romania from different cities and we have focused on the main libraries, not on their branches. These libraries were: the Central University Library 'Carol I' Bucharest, the Central University Library 'Lucian Blaga' Cluj-Napoca, the Central University Library 'Mihai Eminescu' Iași, the Central University Library 'Eugen Todoran' Timișoara, the Central Library of the University of Medicine and Pharmacy 'Carol Davila' – Bucharest, and the Central Library of the 'Politehnica' University of Bucharest. We have browsed the websites of these six libraries and their Facebook pages and have investigated if they had on their homepage the Facebook icon and if clicking on it directed you to the library's Facebook page. Then we have checked the year they had started the Facebook page. The activities on the 'Wall' (announcements to users, library's events, sharing photos etc.) have also been examined.

Two libraries, the Central University Library 'Carol I' Bucharest and the Central University Library 'Lucian Blaga' Cluj-Napoca have the Facebook icon on their homepage, the Central Library of the University of Medicine and Pharmacy 'Carol Davila' – Bucharest does not have the icon but its Facebook page can be accessed from its homepage, and the Central University Library 'Mihai Eminescu' Iași has the icon but on the contact page of its website. The other two libraries do not have the Facebook icon on their websites, but their pages can be found by checking on Facebook.

All the six libraries have contact information on their Facebook pages (address, phone, email, website etc.). The first one present on Facebook was the Central University Library 'Lucian Blaga' Cluj-Napoca, which created its page in 2010, then came the Central Library of the University of Medicine and Pharmacy 'Carol Davila' – Bucharest in June 2011, followed by the other four in 2012.

They use the 'Wall' for promotional purposes, such as publicizing events and sharing photos.

Unlike the others, the Facebook page of the Central University Library 'Carol I' Bucharest, is the most 'official', according to a student, and only posts information and links to different cultural and scientific events and shares photos from these events. Comments from other Facebook users cannot be found, as it happens in the case of the Central University Library 'Lucian Blaga' Cluj-Napoca and of the Central University Library 'Eugen Todoran' Timișoara, which have a more intense interaction with their users and a direct communication with them. The Central University Library 'Carol I' Bucharest has the most intense traffic on the page, most likes, etc. and is followed by the Central Library of the University of Medicine and Pharmacy 'Carol Davila' – Bucharest, whose page is less 'official' but has a lot of posts; then comes the Central University Library 'Eugen Todoran' Timișoara, which has many comments and photos. All the six libraries share a lot of photos from different events or with the library itself or with books from their collections or with personalities.

We can say that only three of the six libraries are currently actively communicating with their users, but the use of the Facebook page is new for most of the libraries analyzed. Four of them started to develop their Facebook page only last year.

All the six libraries use the Facebook page as a marketing tool and inform their users mainly about different cultural events, but also about their services, and they share a lot of photos. We consider that their Facebook pages should be updated more often and should be designed to attract more users. The feature 'Ask a librarian' is not available, so they do not offer reference services via Facebook to their users.

According to the data gathered, we can consider that the Romanian large academic libraries analyzed are just beginning to take advantage of the opportunities offered by Facebook in order to communicate with their users, but at the moment they are not using all the facilities provided by this social networking site for a better interaction with the users.

This paper is just a very short analysis of the Facebook pages created recently by the six Romanian academic libraries. It is an analysis based just on the access and observation of their Facebook pages, analysis aimed at determining the level of Facebook page usage among large academic libraries in Romania.

4. Conclusions

Many academic libraries have recently created Facebook pages in order to be 'where users are' and, even if some recent studies found that users were not interested so much in communicating with the library via this kind of applications, there are advantages for the libraries from implementing and

developing an information service based on Facebook. Academic libraries can use Facebook in order to reach out to their students, but it is important that they know and understand the practices and expectations in their users' way of communicating through Facebook.

Large Romanian academic libraries have started to use Facebook and in all six cases analyzed they do it for posting announcements about different events and, in some cases, also for interacting with the users. However, at the moment, they do not use in full the possibilities which a Facebook page can offer them for communicating with users and for providing specialized assistance.

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