Social networking and libraries

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ABSTRACT

Observing the changes in the information landscape and new emerging online services, one type of service has really taken the online users by storm – social networking. Adopting the simple Web 2.0 principles such as harnessing the powers of the users and free signup, social networks have built a very large user base and became very interesting to different companies as a marketing tool. Today, the most popular social network globally is Facebook. With more than 500 million users worldwide, and more than half of them using Facebook on a daily basis, the marketing potential of the Facebook platform becomes obvious. As Facebook became more and more popular, different non-profit information institutions, such as libraries, began exploring ways in which they can reach potential users. The authors present the results of the research on Croatian libraries presence on Facebook, the most popular social network worldwide and in Croatia. The research was based on the analysis of the number and type of Croatian libraries present on Facebook, types of their representation (group/profile/page), number of subscribers and maintenance frequency.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since its beginnings in 2004, Facebook (http://www.facebook.com) managed to become not only the most popular social networking service worldwide, but also a starting point of many online trends. According to different sources, Facebook user base in July 2011 was between 500 and 750 million users worldwide (Hepburn, 2011; Facebook, 2011). Increased use of this platform can also be seen in Croatia. Data from July 2011 (Internet World Stats, 2011; Socialbakers, 2011) show that from 2.5 million Internet users in Croatia, over 60% of them (1.4 million) own a Facebook account. Local research confirmed that social networks dominate the field of online services in Croatia, with Facebook being the dominant one (Banek Zorica and Ivanjko, 2011). The Facebook phenomenon and its influence can be seen not only in private sphere of an individual, but also in different sectors, such as businesses, institutions or other organizations whose presence is emerging almost on a daily basis. Many of them are starting to use Facebook for reaching a large number of potential customers in a partially free and easy to use environment or reaching out in the customer space.

In the area of non-profit institutions, libraries were among the first ones that started to explore the possibilities of social networks. First researches on social networks and libraries have shown that, although a significant number of libraries have started to create its presence in social networks, virtual presence in such environment was still considered experimental. The majority was still considering the notion of social networking as too unstable and „unprofessional" for traditional library services (Charnigo and Barnett-Ellis, 2007). Furthermore, Facebook was mainly perceived as fun (not suitable for business purposes), private (users do not want professional services inside their private social network), too commercial or even dangerous (known problems with data privacy) (Bejune and Ronan, 2008). On the other hand, Secker (2008) offers a different attitude towards Facebook, stating many benefits that libraries can get from creating their presence on Facebook.

In the area of user oriented research, latest research conducted by OCLC (2011) shows a steep decline in the use of library web sites, stating that almost all researches today start with Internet search engines (84%) and none of the participants started their research on the library web site. Social networking plays a vital role in the online lives of people, with 66% of Americans using social networking services. Local research on Croatian student population has confirmed those results and found that Croatian students see a role for the library inside their social network, and would like to use some of the library services in that environment, such as searching the catalogue or receiving useful and relevant notifications from the library (Banek Zorica and Ivanjko, 2010). It can be stated, with fair certainty that, libraries can receive benefit from shifting their focus from library web sites to social networks in reaching their users. Social networks could help libraries in creating their presence in the online information landscape and transferring their "offline" brand into online environment, which they have not been able to achieve through their web sites.

One of the first researches, focused on the content or the analysis of the data libraries post in social networks, gathered various data on libraries and their Facebook space (such as fan numbers, wall postings, number of photographs, etc.) concluding that libraries have used Facebook mostly as a marketing tool, while communication aspects were not utilized as much as it would be expected (Jacobson, 2011). Another research was based on the analysis of the data which selected sample of libraries posted during a period of eight days. Results have shown that library posts were posted only by librarians who were the profile administrators and the majority of posts were a push notes i.e. library activities, photographs and user notifications. The user activity was almost non-existent (Calvi, et al., 2010).

2. RESEARCH

In order to investigate the use of Facebook as a business platform for Croatian libraries local research was undertaken. Since there were no similar researches in Croatia dealing with the presence of libraries on Facebook, the main contribution of the research is to gather data on Croatian libraries present on the Facebook platform and the number of users they have managed to attract. By gathering data on current trends, useful data can be provided to libraries considering Facebook as an option, as well as those already present on Facebook, in identifying possible pitfalls or useful practices.

2. 1 Methodology and sample

The data was collected during July 2011 using several methods: a) examination of the Facebook page "Croatian Libraries on Facebook", b) entering the keyword "library" in Facebook search, and c) browsing all the gained results as well as browsing the libraries' "friend lists" and activities in order to discover new libraries. The collected data consisted of 94 libraries which have created 106 various Facebook representations (profile/group/page). After browsing their wall activity, 7 Facebook representations were excluded from the sample due to their complete inactivity. The overall sample included 94 libraries with a total of 99 representations. Further analysis on the sample of 94 libraries was conducted on July 21, 2011. This analysis included: library type, type of Facebook presence (profile/group/ page), number of subscribers

(number of friends (profile)/members (group)/likes (page)), is the profile/group private or public and number of days from the library's last wall post.

2.2 Results and discussion

First, the sample was analyzed based on library types. Table 1 show that, out of a total number of 94 libraries that have a Facebook representation, over half of them are public libraries (55%), and there are a significant number of elementary school libraries (23%).

Table 1. Total number of Croatian libraries with Facebook presence.

Library Type	# of libraries	%
Elementary school	22	23%
High school	5	5%
Faculty libraries	8	9%
University libraries	5	5%
Scientific libraries	1	1%
Special libraries	2	2%
Public libraries	51	55%
TOTAL	**94**	**100%**

To gain a better insight into the size of the sample in relation to the total number of libraries, the data about the presence of Croatian libraries on Facebook were compared with recent Croatian Bureau of Statistics data concerning the number of total libraries in Croatia. It was found that only university libraries are in majority present on Facebook, where only one university library does not have some kind of Facebook representation. Results also show a significant presence of public libraries (20% out of total number of public libraries in Croatia), while the percentage of other libraries on Facebook was practically negligible. A smaller number of faculty, scientific and special libraries were found, which can implicate that they have not yet found sufficient reasons to use Facebook platform in providing their services. In this segment, the importance of the social component is obvious, since libraries who see themselves as more "social" (public libraries) have recognized the importance of social networks, unlike the ones considered more "professional" (faculty, scientific and special libraries).

The next analysis examined the type of Facebook representation, i.e. did the library create a profile, page or a group. Results showed that the majority of libraries decided to create a profile (52%), followed by creating a page (36%), and the smallest number opened a group (12%). This clearly shows the lack of basic understanding of Facebook and its Terms of Service, as well as the obvious absence of rethinking the Facebook strategy. In fact, Facebook TOS clearly state that Facebook profiles are intended exclusively for private users, and their violation entails legal liability, as well as suspending the user account and losing the entire data made available by the user. Results show that more than half of the libraries are risking their user account to be suspended and all the data permanently lost. Apart from creating a certain type of Facebook representation, libraries can also limit the access to its contents by making it public or private. The majority of libraries made their contents public (84%), but there were 16 libraries (16%) which decided to keep their content private and inaccessible to users. Out of these 16 libraries, 8 of them accepted our friend request or request to join the group so they were included in the overall sample.

The number of Facebook subscribers is another major exemplar of the impact of library Facebook presence. Depending on the type of Facebook presence, research collected the data on number of "friends" (profile), number of "likes" (page) or number of members (group). Figure 1 shows the distribution of libraries depending on the number of Facebook subscribers to their content.
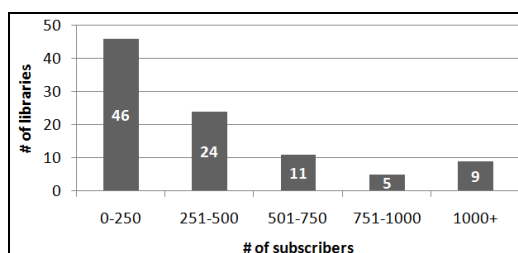
Figure 1. Number of Facebook subscribers by classes

The data presented in Figure 1 show that most libraries (73%) have up to 500 subscribers. In order to see whether libraries from larger cities have more subscribers, the number of subscribers from 25 libraries with the largest number of subscribers was compared to the population number of cities they are from. Results showed that 18 out of 25 libraries with the largest number of subscribers are from cities with population under 50 000, so the original assumption was not confirmed.

In addition to the number of subscribers, research collected data about the maintenance frequency. As stated before, the data was collected on July 21, 2011 so the number of days since last library wall activity, was recorded. Results have shown that more than 50% of Facebook presences had at least one post in 15 days, and about one third of them have a low maintenance frequency or are totally inactive.

3. CONCLUSION

This research explored current situation with the use of Facebook as a potential business platform for Croatian libraries. Research gathered data on 94 libraries with a total of 99 Facebook representations (profile/group/page). The results have shown that over 50% of libraries that have a Facebook representation are public libraries, i.e. every fifth public library in Croatia has a Facebook presence. Also, 5 out of 6 university libraries in Croatia have a Facebook representation. Overall number of faculty libraries, scientific or school libraries that have created a Facebook presence is very small (2-6%). As for the types of Facebook representations (group/profile/page) libraries have decided to create it was discovered that more than 50% of libraries have created a profile, a Facebook representation exclusively suited for private users. This shows that more than half of the libraries is directly breaking Facebook TOS and risk their user account to be suspended and all the data lost. This data can implicate a lack of strategy in determining a presence plan inside Facebook. Possible lack of strategy (and probably staff) has another implication - low wall activity: around one third of library presences haven't been updated in 30 days. As for the subscriber number that libraries managed to attract, that number is below 500 for almost two thirds of the libraries (73%). Surprising result was noticed when libraries with a largest number of subscribers were compared to the population of the place they are originally situated. The results have shown that 18 out of 25 libraries with the largest number of subscribers are from cities with population under 50 000, thus proving that libraries from smaller places have generally been more successful in attracting larger number of online subscribers. This can implicate the importance of local "offline" community in building a bigger online user base.

Research shows that although the overall number of Croatian libraries that have a Facebook presence is fairly large (especially public libraries), only small portion of them have a regularly updated presences combined with a larger user base and most of them are just trying to be „where the users are" without a clear strategy. Future research should investigate the structure and content of information that libraries post in their chosen social network, as well as investigate possible strategies and business models in creating a successful social network presence.

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