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Social networking at the University - student research patterns and online activities

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ABSTRACT

Academic environments, such as universities, are often sources of new ideas and approaches that explore the potential of new generations. At the same time they are primarily organized on traditional principles of knowledge sharing, such as print resources and usage of library collections, usually slow in accepting and implementing new approaches. Exploring how students use online services and cope with the development of technology, and how they perceive the role of academic educational environments together with their supporting services, such as library, in their online social spaces may give us some answers on how these changes can influence work at the university. In order to better understand students' information needs and behavior and to draw some conclusions on the role of library in the educational environment and how should learning environments be designed to satisfy those needs, a broader pattern of online usage as well as more specific aspects of usage of existing services is needed.

Paper discusses the results of survey conducted in January of 2010 with graduate students of Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (FHSS), University of Zagreb. This research aims to shed some light on students' information universes, their perception of the library, use of online services, and new approaches to the educational information space, mainly based on social networking and its tools, influencing the change in traditional models of communication and knowledge transfer.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sociologist C. Shirky was one of the first to define the notion of social software in simple words: "It's software that supports group interaction" (Shirky, 2003). Since his speech at the O'Reilly Emerging Technology conference in Santa Clara in 2003, the idea and the development of software built around that simple idea of enabling group interaction through online services really took off. Social software soon became the fuel of new emerging trends on the internet, for which Tim O'Reilly soon after coined the term Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005). Social networking, instant messaging, picture and video sharing or the increasingly present idea of cloud computing has influenced every aspect of information and knowledge exchange process. Such an environment changed the traditional form of communication and learning models. Facing the new generations of "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001a; Prensky, 2001b; Long, 2005.) i.e. people that think and process information in a completely different way, there is a growing importance in gaining better understanding of their information behavior and learning. Academic environments, such as universities, are often sources of new ideas and approaches that explore the potential of new generations. At the same time they are primarily organized on traditional principles of sharing knowledge, such as print resources and users' capacities of using library collections, usually slow in accepting and implementing new approaches. As academic libraries have always been center of educational process with main goal to respond to its users' information needs the transition currently affecting information environment has posed new challenges on them. Today, the main task of libraries is to deliver good quality information to their user and new information environment (Web 2.0) with its tools enables libraries to simplify this task and create closer interaction with the users. (Banek, Eremic, 2009) In order to create better educational environment for our students we need to research their information behavior and create

spaces that can help them in information overload, respond to their needs and create information literate citizens of the knowledge society.

2. STUDENT ONLINE BEHAVIOR AND LIBRARY POSITION IN WEB 2.0 ENVIRONMENT

The most comprehensive recent report that gave the insight into social networking, use of online services and the digital lives of the students is probably the OCLC report «Sharing, Privacy and Trust in Our Networked World» (OCLC, 2007). Compared to their previous report «Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources» carried out about 18 months earlier, some of interesting findings are:

- The use of search engines and e-mail has grown by more than 20%; user participation in basic Internet services such as searching and e-mailing is approaching total participation; internet has infiltrated our lives
- Social web sites have gone from obscurity to mass use in the last two years; 56% of college students now use social networking
- Less than 15% of the users, or library directors, think libraries should construct or sponsor social networking sites
- 60% of survey participants rate their libraries as trustworthy; but, libraries have been unsuccessful transferring this brand promise online; online libraries are seen as no more private than commercial sites and social sites

The report concludes: *“Open the library doors, invite mass participation by users and relax the rules of privacy. It will be messy. The rules of the new social Web are messy. The rules of the new social library will be equally messy. But mass participation and a little chaos often create the most exciting venues for collaboration, creativity, community building—and transformation...The new Web is a very different thing. Libraries need to be very different, too.”* (OCLC, 2008)

Stating that social web sites are now a part of everyday life of library users, and on the other side looking at the small number of users (or library directors) that perceive libraries as an integral part of the social network activities, and the significant drop in use of library web sites, can raise concerns on the future of libraries in an online environment. This result shows that libraries have a long way in front of them in becoming as important online as they are in their offline activities. On the other hand, as the report puts it, “the rules are messy”, so although the climate for now isn’t too favorable, leaping into that unknown territory of social networking and Web 2.0 services can be very awarding for libraries in the long run.

Another study on students and the use of social networking, Web 2.0 services, and libraries was conducted on the University of Michigan (Chapman, Varnum, Creech, 2007) where a total of 330 students responded how they participate in online activities, use the library, and view the different Web 2.0 services that the library offers. The main findings of the survey are:

- The top five student online activities are (in descending order): e-mail, social networking, IM, using wikis, reading blogs; the more “2.0” the activity, the less frequently respondents undertake it.
- Students mainly go to the library to borrow books, use the computers, use online databases and to do homework or study.
- The students find new research resources mostly through the library catalog; browsing the library or book store shelves is still a very popular method
- Only 17% of respondents would like to contact a librarian via Facebook or Myspace; 36% thinks that the social network environment isn’t appropriate for libraries

The findings of this study confirm the results of the OCLC report in terms of perceiving the library services “outside” the social networking circle. The library is still perceived as a place that deals primary with “offline” activities, such as borrowing books or studying. ,

The relationship between major social networking sites and libraries has been a subject of research for some time now. A recent publication "Checking out Facebook.com: The Impact of a Digital Trend on Academic Libraries" (Charnigo, Barnet-Ellis, 2007) reported on a survey of 126 academic libraries concerning their perspectives and opinions toward the popular social networking site Facebook.com. The survey examined the librarians' awareness of Facebook, how they might use it, what services could the library offer through Facebook and their general attitude towards the use of Facebook in an academic environment. The results showed that librarians were overwhelmingly aware about Facebook, but *"...while some librarians were excited about the possibilities of Facebook, the majority surveyed appeared to consider Facebook outside the purview of professional librarianship."* (Charnigo, Barnet-Ellis, 2007). On the other hand, the authors also found that a small group of the respondents were extremely positive and excited about the possibility of online social networking. They have also started a Facebook group "Librarians and Facebook" that had 11,545 members as of January 2010. So, this could be a hint that the librarians are embracing social networks and are more willing to participate in them. Another case study "Libraries and Facebook" (Secker, 2008), explored Facebook as a tool for libraries and librarians. The research has focused on documenting the experiences of libraries and librarians who have used Facebook and draw their own personal experiences of using the site. The study showed that although some students are concerned about their "social spaces" being infiltrated by academic and support staff, providing a service through a social networking site could have enormous benefits in terms of raising the profile of a library.

3. SITUATION AT THE FHSS, UNIVERSITY OF ZAGREB

In order to better understand students' information needs and behavior and to draw some conclusions on the role of learning environments that should be designed to satisfy those needs, a broader pattern of online usage as well as more specific aspects of usage of existing services is needed. Two approaches taken from the described studies were combined. The broader context of students' online activities gave us the generic preferences, while the specific patterns of library usage through Facebook answered the questions of the perceived role of academic institutions (in this case the faculty library) in the context of social networking. The aim was to broaden the previously conducted studies and to confirm and compare their results with our findings.

The research was conducted in January of 2010 where a total of 107 graduate students from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (FHSS) responded to an online survey. The sample consisted of graduate students selected from the fourth and fifth year of study since it is considered that their experiences from previous undergraduate study greatly increase the quality of the sample. There were 95 respondents (89%) that finished their undergraduate study at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences and 12 respondents (11%) that finished their undergraduate study at some other faculty of the University of Zagreb. The sample showed that two faculty departments were represented with the highest number of respondents - the Department of Information Sciences with 47 students (43%) and the Department of Croatian Language with 32 students (30%).

3.1. RESULTS

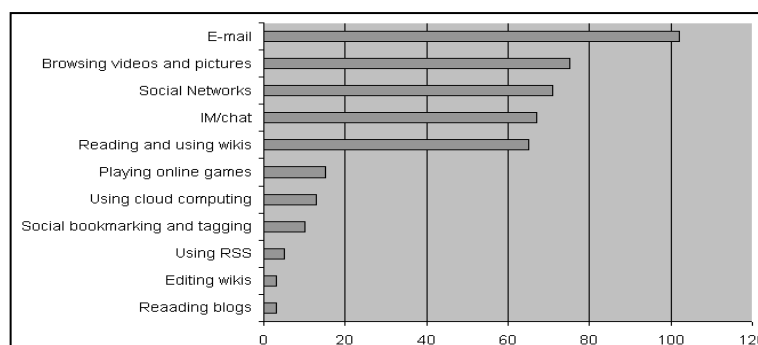
The questionnaire was designed as an online survey consisting from 14 questions. The results are presented in two main parts corresponding to the areas surveyed: student online behavior and library usage and Facebook. Graphical representations will be given where appropriate.

Results show that there are no students kept out of the networked environment. This result is influenced by the fact that FHSS has an e-learning system Omega, based on Moodle, which enables students to use electronic environment for their educational advancement. Survey shows that majority of students (n=77) spends on average more than 15 hours per week on internet.

Regarding the services that students use on a daily basis in their leisure time most commonly used are (Figure 2.): e-mail (96%), browsing video and pictures (70%) social networks (67%), IM/chat (62%), and the use of wikis (60%). It should be noticed that although a very high percentage of students use social networks often there is a significant number of respondents that never used social networks (19%). When asked how they have learned to use these online services the majority

of respondents (92%) answered that they were self-taught. This might be the reason why some of the Web 2.0 tools like social bookmarking, RSS, blogs and wiki creation and editing are less used.

Figure 2. Commonly used online services - answers *daily* and *often* combined



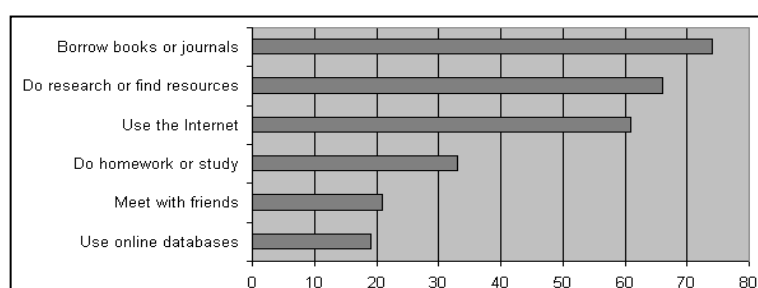
One of the questions that interested us is student behavior during their information or research activities (Table 1.). When asked about searching for new resources 82% of the respondents indicated the library catalog as their starting point in most of their searches, followed by the often use of citations, footnotes and bibliographies (55%), suggestion from friends, colleagues or professors (47%), browsing through library shelves (45%) and searching websites of online bookstores. Surprisingly, only 15% of respondents ask the librarian for help in finding new resources.

Table 1. Most common places to find new resources

Service	Always	Often	TOTAL
Library catalog	47%	35%	82%
Following citations, footnotes	20%	35%	55%
Suggestions from friends/colleagues	7%	40%	47%
Browsing library shelves	15%	30%	45%
Searching online bookstores	11%	21%	32%

Secondly, interest was on students' usage of the faculty library. The results show (Figure 3.) that the student most commonly use the library for borrowing books or journals (71%), 64% of students use library for research, 58% go there to use the internet while 40% of students go to library to do their homework or study. Interestingly, results showed that minority of the students perceive library as the social place used for meeting with friends. Still 60% of respondents stated that they have never or rarely used library for social gathering.

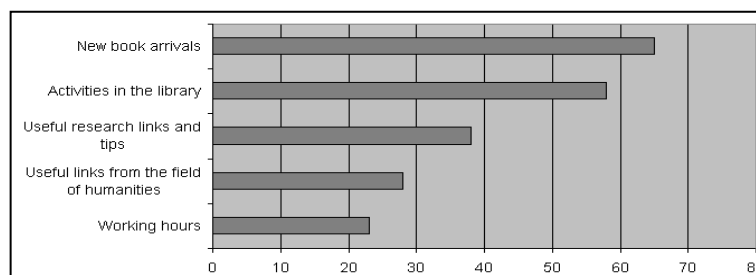
Figure 3. Most common use of the library - answers *most often* and *often* combined



As stated before, apart from researching students' online behavior our interest was on library integration in Web 2.0 environment, specifically FHSS library integration with the social networks like Facebook. This service was chosen due to its popularity among students as it was confirmed in the survey where 78% of the respondents have a Facebook account. As FHSS library is part of the Facebook community with teachers, students and other librarians being part of the group, question was are all student on Facebook members of the library group. The results showed that 69% of them were not a member. When asked for a reason most of them indicated that they were not aware of such a group (81%), with a small number of respondents stating that they were not interested in joining due to their usage of Facebook primarily for fun. It should be mentioned that the respondents not owning a Facebook account did not participate in answering the questions so the sample that covered questions regarding the presence of the faculty library on the Facebook consisted of 83 respondents (out of original 107 respondents).

Most of the students that have a Facebook account would like to receive notifications from the group created by the faculty library, mostly on new book arrivals (81%) and new activities taking place in the library (72%) (Figure 4.)

Figure 4. What notifications would you like to get as a member of the Facebook group “Library of the Faculty of the Humanities and Social Sciences?” (n=83)



When asked about the types of library services they would like to use through Facebook application (Figure 5.), most of the respondents would like to search the library catalogue (64%), contact library staff through chat/IM (60%) or have the ability to suggest new library services (56%).

Figure 5. What library services would you like to use through the Facebook application (n=83)

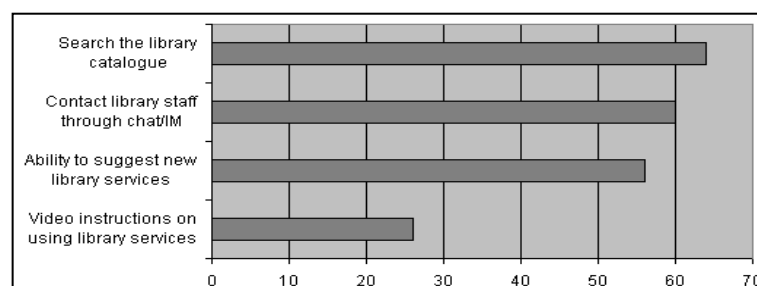
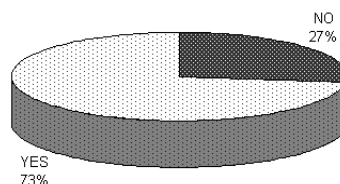


Figure 6. Do you think it should be the library's role to build a social networking site for the student community? (n=106)



A very high percentage of students (73%) see a role for social for social networking sites in the library. Compared to the results of the OCLC report, where under 20% of respondents worldwide believe that the library is for learning/information and do not see the connection with social networking and libraries, these results are surprising.

4. DISCUSSION

The results of this small scale research that surveyed the students of Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb showed that the internet and participation in various online activities has infiltrated the way they learn, communicate and search for new information. Vast majority of respondents are familiar and often use e-mail, IM services and social networks to communicate in real time with their friends, colleagues or peers. Students often browse video or picture sharing sites and use wikis, showing their preference towards new ways of discovering information, either by visual stimulation (watching videos or pictures), or using sources created by group efforts and without strict control (wikis). Although respondents are ready to use those new ways of discovering sources, their willingness to take part in creating them is not that strong with around 95% students rarely or never edit wikis or write blogs, around 66% never or rarely share pictures or videos via user account, and more than 75% never or rarely use online services for tagging and bookmarking or those relying on cloud computing. By analyzing those answers we can see which form of communications students are more willing to participate in. They show that the students are familiar with consuming information through visual stimulation and that they are willing to use wikis, social networks, e-mail or IM so those activities should be the basis in creating a learning environment for them. Students are still not that familiar with the notion of cloud computing or RSS, activities that, if used in a learning environment, should be implemented in such a way that that the students will have time to familiarize with them. An overwhelmingly large number of students (92%) are self-taught when it comes to learning how those services work which indicates that their knowledge of those services probably vary from one student to another so their skills regarding those services should be further examined.

The results regarding discovery of new resources show that the students are still using the traditional methods and patterns, with searching of the library catalog, following of citations and footnotes and recommendations from professors or colleagues being the most common ways. New online services such as Google Books or Google Scholar are not that popular with little over 60% of students using them rarely or never. Although the traditional methods score high, students are not that keen in asking the librarian for help in their discovering of new resources, with 57% of doing that rarely or never. The reasons for that may be that the students surveyed were from the graduate study where they have already developed a certain experience and expertise in their field of research so they don't perceive the librarian as an expert that could discover valuable sources to them.

A high percentage of students is enrolled at the faculty library (94%), showing that the library is a vital part of their information environment and an important place to cover their information needs. Library is commonly used for borrowing books, doing research or using the library computers to

access internet, which are all results in accordance with the previously described researches. The use of online databases is low with more than 62% of students using them rarely or never. Also, the library is not perceived as a place of meeting with friends, with only a little under 20% of students going to the library for that purpose.

The last part of the questionnaire surveyed the relation student-Facebook-library in order to examine the perceived role of the library in the online social spaces of the students. With 78% of respondents owning a Facebook account, the popularity of that social networking service between the students is obvious. Trying to see how the students would respond to the presence of the faculty library on Facebook, the library created a group called "Library of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences" which had 1,091 members since January 2010. Our survey showed that only 31% of the respondents are a member of that group, and that the main reason why other students are not a member is that of not knowing it exists (81%). Those students that own a Facebook account would mostly like to receive notifications about new books, library activities and useful links for their field of research. The respondents presented an overall positive attitude towards the library "invading" their personal social space they have created through Facebook, so no negative statements were made. When asked what library services they would like to use through their Facebook account, most of the respondents expressed their desire to search the library catalogue (64%), contact library staff through chat/IM (60%) or have the ability to suggest new library services (56%). These findings are consistent with the previous research and the various services some libraries worldwide already offer through different social networks. The final question asked should be the library's role to build a social networking site for the student community. A very high percentage of students (73%) see a role for social for social networking sites in the library. Compared to the results of the OCLC report, where under 20% of respondents worldwide believe that the library is for learning/information and do not see the connection with social networking and libraries, these results are somewhat surprising. The future researches should try to deeply investigate the needs and possibilities of creating such a social network using, for example, the Ning service.

5. CONCLUSION

There is little doubt that information landscapes and learning environments change continuously (Alexander, 2006; Downes, 2005). The emerging idea of social software, one of the latest additions to the field of teaching and learning, allows the student to be in the centre of the dynamic learning process. The academic institutions, such as universities, are dynamic environments where new approaches to standard teaching and learning patterns are a must. In order to track the changes in information and learning preferences of the students, their attitude and user preferences towards new emerging tools and services, a continuous research is needed. In this paper we have tried to answer some of these preferences and attitudes of the students of the FHSS in Zagreb.

When the broader picture of the results is taken into consideration, two visible patterns emerge. On one hand, students are familiar with some of the new emerging services, such as social networking, instant messaging and that they often use picture and video sharing sites as well as wikis. They also use the internet on a daily basis, and want the library to be a part of their online social spaces, either by using the existing social networks as an outreach tool, or by creating a social network of their own. But, on the other hand, some of the worldwide popular services such as cloud computing or RSS or even the use of online databases are not that widely used. Also, the classic forms of research, including the use of library catalog or the following of citations, bibliographies or citations is heavily used. The library is still mostly used in its classic role, for borrowing books, doing research or studying and to access the internet.

These findings tell us that in order to design a learning environment in which the maximum of student capacity and attention is utilized, both traditional and new approaches and services should be implemented. Teaching the students to do proper research, to know how to use printed materials, how to engage in all those offline activities that often form a basis of any research is equally important as showing them the advantages of new emerging services and trends.

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