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Privacy and Generation Y: Applying Library Values to Social Networking Sites

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Privacy and Generation Y: Applying Library Values to Social

Networking Sites

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Abstract:

Librarians face many challenges when dealing with issues of privacy within the

mediated space of social networking sites. Conceptually, social networking sites differ

from libraries on privacy as a value. Research about Generation Y students, the primary

clientele of undergraduate libraries, can inform librarians' relationship to this important

emerging technology. Five recommendations assist librarians in expanding their

traditional commitment to privacy into the realm of social networking sites.

Introduction

A commitment to privacy is one of the central tenets of librarianship, but its meaning in relation to emerging technologies such as social networking sites (SNSs) remains ill-defined. SNSs represent a relatively new conceptual space for librarians. Only by examining the nature of these sites and by being responsive to our users can librarians become sophisticated participants in this space. To act effectively within SNSS, librarians must examine core values, as well as the values of patrons. This examination is particularly important to librarians whose primarily clientele are members of Generation Y, as this generation has been the primary motivating force in the formation of SNSs. Largely because of this group, librarians have become interested in the potential of SNSs for outreach.

In his book *Our Enduring Values*, Gorman (2000, 156) states, "Library privacy plans need to be built on a combination of principle – the natural law right to privacy – and experience – the case studies that illuminate and exemplify a principle in changing and different circumstances."(Gorman 2000, 156). This statement highlights the tension between the ideals and the real-world information that librarians must strive to balance when making decisions. Gorman's statement also exemplifies one of the underlying themes of his book, a theme that also forms the partial basis for this article: for libraries to act or plan effectively, their actions must have some "intellectual and philosophical underpinning" (Gorman 2000, 3). Our philosophies and values form the foundation for

action and allow librarians to experiment and take risks with reduced fear of causing inadvertent harm.

This article draws upon both the practical and the philosophical. It contextualizes the research about the Generation Y students who are the primary clientele of undergraduate libraries. On the more philosophic side, it draws on insights about the value of privacy and how that value affects libraries attempting to operate in a for-profit mediated space. These practical and philosophical considerations serve as a conceptual foundation for five recommendations that can illuminate the way forward for librarians operating in SNSs.

Generation Y: A Library Perspective

The opinions of Generation Y need to play a crucial role in libraries decision making as we look to the future. Yet, generalizing research conducted about an entire generation is inherently problematic. Generation Y is usually, but not always, defined as persons born between 1977 and 1994 (Paul 2001). This generation will constitute the majority of "traditional students" for the foreseeable future. Researchers vary not only on the exact definition of Generation Y but even on what to call this group. People fitting this age profile are variously known as Generation Y, the Millennials, or the Net Generation (Tapscott 2009). Other related distinctions have also been offered as being more salient; for instance, the frequently cited paradigm of digital natives and digital

immigrants (Bennett, Maton, and Kervin 2008). Whatever the exact definition, the concept of defining large groups of people by their age remains a tenuous, if convenient, way to understand potential patrons (Alanen 2001).

Each generation is shaped by and forced to react to a common set of historical events and popular culture that affect "the values, beliefs, attitudes, and worldviews" of that generation (Coomes 2004, 18). These events and the available technology shape everyone in that generation, but they do not define all individuals equally. People can be shaped by the commonalities of a generation, without accepting its prevailing ethos (Alanen 2001). Certainly other factors, such as race, gender, class, regional location, and even parenting techniques, have a profound impact on Generation Y personalities.

Despite its limitations, this body of literature represents the best information available about incoming students and must be consulted if librarians wish to consider the expectations of Generation Y. If the primary fault of the research is its broadness, then once recognized and accounted for, that characteristic is also its greatest asset. Indeed, since any long-term plans will require libraries to look into the future and anticipate the needs of a wide variety of patrons, this type of research proves vital. The sheer output by scholars in different fields and the variety of perspectives make it impossible to do justice to the breadth and depth of the available literature.

Nonetheless, even highlights of the research can provide valuable insights. The subtitle to one of the sections of Tapscott's book *Growing up Digital* is "Technology is

Like Air" (pg 18). Both the title and the subtitle represent attempts to encapsulate the

reality of a generation that has grown up surrounded by technology. "While Net Gen

children assimilated technology because they grew up with it, as adults we have had to

accommodate it – a different and much more difficult type of learning process."

(Tapscott 2009, 18). Certainly, this is a difference that affects what members of

Generation Y expect from their technology. SNS is a key technology that has integrated

itself into Generation Y's daily habits. Because they have grown up with technology,

they perceive SNSs as simply another type of space. SNSs represent, in some ways,

space that is more private and easier to control than many physical spaces (Livingstone

2008).

A 2009 EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research (ECAR) study of

undergraduate students at two- and four-year educational institutions backs up this

finding. ECAR reported that students spent a median of sixteen hours a week online,

with many spending even more time. Additionally, 90.3% of students use SNSs,

typically on a daily basis (Smith, Salaway, and Caruso 2009). The 2008 study provides

even more details about undergraduate use of SNSs, showing that the majority (55.8%)

of students reported less than six hours a week on the sites. Over a two-year span, daily

usage had jumped from 32.8% to 58.8% (Salaway, Caruso, and Nelson 2008). Even more

important for those trying to predict future trends, both of the ECAR studies confirmed

that the younger the students, the more likely they are to use a SNS (Salaway, Caruso,

and Nelson 2008; Smith, Salaway, and Caruso 2009).

Although rarely stated in scholarly treatments of the subject, a general sense exists in the popular press that members of Generation Y simply do not care about privacy (Kornblum 2007; Kratz 2009). The underlying narrative is that privacy has no relevance to younger generations. Younger people may regard privacy differently than do members of older generations, but available evidence indicates that the dynamics of that relationship are complex and not yet fully understood. The dearth of conclusive evidence is particularly noticeable from the standpoint of librarians. While some studies do suggest that privacy's importance may be waning in the minds of Generation Y, this contention remains inconclusive, at least for the purposes of librarians. These inferences tend to be drawn by examining at trends and are made based on an assumption about how much participants *should* be concerned about privacy (Tapscott 2009). The threshold used by most researchers is very different than the one librarians need to use when making judgments about the importance of privacy in the minds of their patrons. Such assumptions are can alter how the data is understood.

For instance, the 2008 ECAR study concludes, "Overall, SNS users do not appear to be overly concerned about privacy and security issues." (Salaway, Caruso, and Nelson 2008, 16). On the other hand, data from this same study shows that over half of their participants are at least moderately concerned that their information will be misused. Moreover, 87.4% of the participants put at least some restrictions on who can

access their data (Salaway, Caruso, and Nelson 2008). The discrepancy here is not so much that the authors failed to read their data, but that the meaning of the data changes depending on what the researcher is interested in knowing. Tellingly, a study conducted in 2009 revealed that the majority of 18 to 24-year-olds surveyed did not want tailored advertisements. When the participants were informed that their online activities would need to be tracked in order to include tailored advertising, the number who opposed tailored advertisements increased (Turow et al. 2009, 16). Researchers will inevitably interpret data points differently depending on the context. For librarians examining the issue, no compelling proof is available to support abandoning our privacy concerns on the basis that our patrons no longer expect privacy.

Certainly, many members of Generation Y enjoy the prospect of being able to share information about themselves with a wide audience. Innumerable news stories detail the consequences of lack of concern (Ilgenfritz 2009). Along with others who interact regularly with the digital world, most of Generation Y recognize on some level, that SNSs create a space that requires a certain amount of sharing to function as intended. It is a trade-off for which the full consequences remain largely unknown.

Generation Y's willingness to accept this trade off should not lead librarians to ignore the rest of the data about how they regard privacy. This point is highlighted by another frequently mentioned characteristic of Generation Y: their propensity to scrutinize everything and to demand integrity from the institutions with whom they

interact (Tapscott 2009). Seen together, these viewpoints should dissuade librarians from feeling comfortable with taking for granted that Generation Y does not care about privacy. Why their propensity to question everything has not yet led them to exert more caution regarding SNSs remains an open question, and serves as a reminder that research on Generation Y gives us guideposts, not absolutes.

Library Values: Privacy

The role of library values in the context of SNSs is currently situated in a gray area (Gibbons, 2009; Fernandez 2009). Unlike confidentiality, which is a clear library value, the concept of privacy is harder to pinpoint. The American Library Association (ALA) has produced numerous documents that deal with the value of privacy (Kranich 2004). But even in ALA's (2002) strongest statement on the subject, *Privacy: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights,* the association inevitably makes reference to the role of confidentiality. In a digital age, potential threats to privacy have expanded, and questions of privacy must be considered in situations where confidentiality is no longer such a clear concern. Traditional statements about privacy make it clear that it would be a problem if, for instance, a patron's confidential conversations with a librarian were being monitored without the patron's consent within a SNS.

Any investigation of SNSs must necessarily draw upon some conception of library values or ethics. The phrase "library ethics" is fraught with room for

misunderstanding. Fallis offers an excellent introduction to thinking about library ethics that takes into account both high-minded idealistic views of ethics along with more consequence-based understandings (Fallis 2007). Much of the problematic history of the phrase can be mitigated somewhat by following in Gorman's path and emphasizing the less history-laden term "library values" (2009). Both terminologies ultimately lead to an understanding that allows for practical factors, such as the percentage of Generation Y students who utilize their privacy settings, as well as more philosophical discussions.

Some report indicate that hackers are increasingly targeting SNSs (Irvine 2009). While the monitoring of private conversations may therefore be a threat, this is not the only challenge that librarians face. Key to most definitions of privacy is an element of control (Gorman 2000). Having privacy means being able to control who has access to your personal information. On a basic level, users of SNSs have control because they can always opt not to participate. When they do participate, they must accept a terms of service (TOS) agreement. Generally, this provides legal protection to the SNSs, even if evidence suggests that many Internet sites purposefully use confusing legal language to prevent users from making informed decisions (McDonald et al. 2009; Pollach 2007). The legal question is separate from the question of values with which librarians grapple.

To do justice to the value of privacy in the real world, librarians must recognize that only a small percentage of users of any online service will read TOS agreements,

even the clearly written ones. McDonald and Cranor (2009) estimate that reading the

privacy policies of websites would take an average of 33 minutes a day, which works

our to 201 hours a year. This statistic does not include the additional time it would take

to decipher the technical language and jargon included in most privacy policies. Nor

can we assume that people fully understand the implications of signing these contracts.

Recently, it has been shown that even extremely private information such as social

security numbers can be extrapolated by taking data from multiple sites (Acquisti and

Gross 2009). More commonly, scholars and the popular press cite the examples of

professional difficulties than can arise when private information, made public by users

on a SNS is discovered (Tapscott 2009). Incidents like these highlight the unforeseen

consequences that result from the type of privacy encouraged within SNSs.

Facebook, the most prominent SNSs among college-age students, has provided a

number of almost textbook examples of its willingness to push the boundaries of what

its users are willing to accept. Both during the highly publicized Beacon controversy,

and the more recent re-writing of their TOS, the users of Facebook eventually pushed

back, causing Facebook to backtrack (Stone and Stelter 2009; Story 2007). Of the two

incidents, perhaps the more revealing is the TOS change that occurred in 2009. In this

case, Facebook made some changes to its TOS agreement that every user consents to in

order to use its services. An article produced by the website *The Consumerist* claimed

that the changes meant Facebook would own any content users put on the site, its their

users protested until Facebook backed down and reverted to its previous TOS

agreement (Walters 2009).

Facebook's privacy controversies continue. Six months after the TOS

controversy, some users became concerned when they realized that Facebook could use

their information, including photographs, in advertisements (Biersdorfer 2009).

Around the same time, Facebook was found to be in violation of Canadian law after an

investigation by its privacy commission (BBC News 2009). Most recently, in November

2009, Facebook came increasingly coming under criticism for not protecting its users'

privacy appropriately in the context of social gaming. There are claims that the site has

not enforced its own rules, which has allowed scammers and businesses to trick

consumers into allowing access to their private information. As a result, some have

been misled into signing up for unwanted products and services (Lyons 2009).

SNSs as a class of technologies have an incentive and historical record indicating

they view privacy differently than do libraries, often to the detriment of the privacy of

their users (Fernandez 2009). This does not mean that SNSs do not recognize the

importance of privacy as a tool for gaining user trust or that all SNSs will disregard user

concerns about the issue. The bottom line is that the profitability of SNSs – even their

very existence –depends upon their users transmitting information about themselves

freely. Because of the benefits, users are willing to sign up. The providers set rules for

the space, and they make the transmission of personal information easier – even

necessary.

SNSs are spaces within which libraries may like to act, but in which the rules of engagement are dictated by outside forces. The way information is transmitted within SNSs is governed almost entirely by the creators of that space in a way that is impossible to do in a physical space. Because SNSs exist to make a profit, they have reason to create spaces that encourage the sharing of information that users might otherwise prefer to keep private. Ample historical evidence suggests that these entities will continue to push at the boundaries of what their users find acceptable. Precisely for this reason, librarians have an obligation to consider their values and the practical implications of acting within these spaces (Fernandez 2009).

While librarians have traditionally sided with privacy advocates, the term "privacy" has taken on a new dimension in the digital age, given the possibilities created by SNSs. Still, initiatives such as the *Privacy Revolution* website and other programs sponsored by ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom help show a way forward. The fact that many users are legally complicit in the invasion of their own privacy as SNSs conflate public and private realms does not relieve librarians from considering how the value of privacy should influence their actions.

Under these circumstances, librarians may be tempted to ignore SNSs entirely. While deciding not to participate in a particular SNSs may be a reasonable response, ignoring the subject entirely would be a foolhardy stance. SNSs as a whole, whether

Facebook, Twitter, or some as yet unknown SNSs, are poised to continue to grow in importance over time. Already SNSs are an important outreach tool, and they will likely become a key component of search technology as well (Scale 2008). If librarians do not find ways to articulate their roles in relation to SNSs they risk being left behind.

The following proposed recommendations synthesize relevant research on Generation Y and on the value of privacy in librarianship and are designed to enable librarians to make more sophisticated decisions regarding SNSs. While not comprehensive of all the potential challenges, the recommendations take into account current research about how Generation Y perceives privacy and suggest ways librarians concerned about privacy can respond. Each recommendation merits its own investigation. Grouped together, they provide a new perspective on the importance of SNSs and suggest some options for how front line-librarians might respond.

Recommendation I: Become Translators of SNSs Knowledge

In her book *The Academic Library and the Net Gen Student*, Gibbons (2009) highlights the important distinctions between knowledge and information. Academic libraries have never served as the sole providers of information, but librarians' expertise situates them perfectly to deal with knowledge. In particular, Gibbons (2009) envisions librarians as taking on a crucial role as translators of knowledge. The information contained within a SNS is caught between worlds. It consists of public and private

information, as well as academic and personal conversation. Thinking of librarians as translators of knowledge provides a conceptual understanding of our role that will let us adapt to whatever form SNSs take.

The nature of information is changing, and for libraries to survive, they must continue to adapt. Nine out of ten college students have an account on a SNS. People, from advertisers to recruiters, have recognized the importance of SNSs in the world of college students. Increasingly, students use these sites to discover information about a wide variety of topics (Scale 2008). SNSs are so integral to their lives and to the nature of information that both Google and Microsoft have launched initiatives to help users search the information contained in SNSs (Kharif and Ricadela 2009). Outreach is the obvious, most prominent example of libraries' role in this space, and archivists will certainly find new challenges in documenting the information contained within SNSs.

Librarians have the potential to take on a powerful new role in relation to SNSs. To do this effectively, active engagement with the medium itself is essential. As a study by Chu and Meulemans (2008) has shown, some students already use this medium to discuss academic topics. Additionally, preliminary research by Epperson and Leffler (2009) has shown that 44% of students at the University of North Carolina would be willing to seek librarians' help through a SNS. Twitter accounts have made news headlines with facts about current events (Cohen 2009). Clearly some elements of the information contained on these sites fall within a librarian's realm of expertise already.

As librarians come to recognize a role as translators of the information contained within these sites, they must recognize explicitly that the conversations taking place in this space are both private and public. The very essence of information science is to study the flow of information. Information – much of it personal – is the lifeblood that makes SNSs tick. In some capacity, libraries need to be involved in this conversation on a deeper level.

Recommendation II. Take a Leadership Role in the Public Debate on Privacy

A reasonable response to the privacy concerns raised by Facebook would be to withdraw from having a presence within suspect SNSs out of fear of lending them legitimacy. This response sidesteps the immediate problem but does not address the larger privacy issues SNSs represent. Librarians can provide leadership and a forum within their communities to encourage dialogue on this issue.

Those libraries already participating within a SNS can do something as simple as mixing in announcements about privacy news alongside their other posts to SNSs. A study by Corrado (2007) found that a majority of librarians already believe that issues of online privacy should be taught during information literacy instruction. On the other hand, the same study also found that only 8.2% of libraries alert patrons when linking them to remote sources (Corrado 2007). The findings highlight some of the special circumstances created by SNSs. Unlike linking to a database run by a company that

takes privacy less seriously than librarians may prefer, SNSs are rarely neutral or uncaring on the issue of privacy. In fact, SNSs have a profit motive and, in some cases, a clear history of encouraging the sharing of personal information to the widest audience possible. As a result, the transmission of information within SNSs has an entirely different context, wider in range than most databases, and more interactive. Libraries may not only refer their patrons to Facebook portals but also can interact with them from within Facebook.

After determining that libraries should have a presence within a SNS, they can take a leadership role in promoting awareness and engagement on the issues surrounding information literacy and privacy. For many libraries, this role will be a natural fit. At the very least, when librarians use SNSs to communicate with students, they must make every effort to make the implications of their exchanges transparent.

Recommendation III. Respect Patrons' Boundaries

As libraries attempt to inform, they must also accept the realities of the increased interactivity that Web 2.0 has brought about. While sites such as MySpace have opened themselves up to companies, the bread and butter of these sites remains the general public. Just as users' expectations of privacy may not always match the realities of the activities in which they engage, the same applies to librarians' expectations when interacting within SNSs.

According to media expert danah boyd "You should enter the students' social networking space only as a mentor and only as invited" (Ishizuka 2009, 14). This is a lesson backed up by corporate marketers who have found that their potential audience reacts poorly if they feel as though their space is being invaded (Foster 2009; Mancini et al. 2009). It also serves as a reminder that while information professionals have a valuable voice to add to the conversation about privacy, we must not attempt to dictate the conversation.

Both as a practical matter, and as a matter of values, librarians must respect the ever-changing and highly variable expectations regarding the kinds of interactions students want to experience within SNSs. Even within Generation Y, a wide range of opinion exists regarding privacy and the appropriateness of outside agencies marketing in this context. It would be a mistake to override students' boundaries and break the trust libraries have developed.

Recommendation IV. Update Polices

New understanding of the nature of SNSs has meaning only when these insights give way to action. Correspondingly, a careful examination of library policies can often inspire new insights into their underlying philosophies. One of the clearest areas in which individual libraries can act is in generating policies that correspond to their stance towards SNSs, as well as encouraging their professional organizations to do the

same. Policies, especially those dealing with technology, need to be revisited frequently

as changes take place. This is particularly true given the new dynamics created by SNSs.

Often, the underlying structure and values of the library will remain unchanged. The

process of revision will involve both updating existing policies, and creating new ones

that take into account the intricacies of SNSs. By proactively dealing with as many

potential complications as possible, libraries will prepare to deal with unanticipated

problems.

For instance, most libraries already have policies about contacting students.

These polices must now be updated to include the world of SNSs. For example, what

should a library do when official contact information becomes out of date and the only

available contact information is on MySpace? Should the library use this technology to

send overdue notices under any circumstances? If so, do the students need to register

that contact information ahead of time? Should the library moderate hateful speech that

takes place on the space created by their Facebook page? What should libraries do with

records of a reference question asked on Twitter? Many of the questions inspired by

SNSs, but not all, can be answered with a careful examination of the policies that apply

to analog counterparts.

In practical terms, an important distinction remains between what is technically

acceptable and what builds patron confidence. Libraries must ensure that the patrons

do not *feel* violated. Simply being legally covered does not ensure that the user will not

feel offended at an unwanted intrusion into a space that operates between public and

private realms. Libraries do not want to become the source of the kinds of protests

Facebook has already experienced.

Libraries, unlike many SNSs, tend to be conservative with their patrons'

information, whatever the context. The challenge, then, is to make sure that we continue

to make explicit how our old policies apply to this new world. Simultaneously, old

policies, such as not notifying patrons when they are leaving library-controlled web

space, may need to be revised entirely. In some cases, new policies about the library's

role in situations such as moderating discussions on interactive SNSs may need to be

generated from scratch. No matter what, libraries need to ensure that their polices

continue to reflect their values.

Recommendation V. Model Privacy-Conscious Behavior

In some sense, the recommendation to model privacy-conscious behavior serves

as a conclusion to the previous recommendations. Whatever position the individual

librarian or library ultimately takes on these complex issues, a clear policy translating

this stance into the actions of the library needs to be in place to give concrete meaning to

philosophical values. Modeling privacy-conscious behavior ourselves, creates a

comfortable atmosphere that encourages others to do the same. The effects may not be

as immediate or visible as a marketing campaign, but the outcomes can be just as

important.

Despite the profession's concern about privacy, only a minority of libraries in 2007 had posted their privacy policies online (Corrado 2007). This type of discrepancy between values and actions does not inspire confidence from patrons. Before librarians address the relationship between SNSs and privacy in library orientations, or elsewhere, we must first concern ourselves with ensuring that the behavior we model is exemplary. The exact nature of that behavior and how to best serve their patrons will be determined by the values of each particular library.

Tapscott (2009, 35) has summarized Generation Y as "looking for corporate integrity and openness when deciding what to buy and where to work". These are areas where libraries should have a significant advantage over most organizations when marketing to Generation Y. These advantages will remain true, however, only if we prioritize developing a deep understanding of the technologies we use and find ways to ensure respect for patrons' boundaries through polices and actions. To effectively lead a public debate on privacy, we must first ensure that we are not complicit in the violation of that privacy ourselves. As this recommendation highlights, libraries must work to ensure that this deep understanding is modeled in all of our actions.

Conclusion

The recommendations outlined here are meant to serve as guides that take into

consideration the prominent realities of Generation Y's expectations and the difficulties

of working within a moderated space while also valuing privacy. All five

recommendations are, in a sense, intertwined. They have been discussed separately for

the sake of clarity and to draw attention to the unique features of each. The

recommendations are not a complete list of the consequences of a close reading of

Generation Y's expectations or of the problematic nature of privacy in SNSs. Taken as a

whole however the recommendations expand libraries' traditional commitment to

privacy into the realm of emerging technologies. SNSs will continue to evolve. For

librarians to innovate alongside it, we must be guided by our values as well as by an

engaged understanding of our patrons.

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