Review Article: Sharing, Privacy and Trust in Our Networked World: A Report to the OCLC Membership

(OCLC 2007)

This exhaustive report (available at http://www.oclc.org/reports/sharing/default.htm), commissioned from Harris Interactive by OCLC as part of a series of "landscape reports", studies social use of the Web, and links (if there are any) with the world of libraries. The report focuses on the social networking habits of library users and of librarians – that is, their use of social websites, such as YouTube, Facebook, and MySpace. The report was done on an impressive scale, having studied around 6,500 users in six countries, including (of course) the US but also the UK, Canada, France, Germany, and Japan. There is a long list of important people consulted, and a bibliography of over a hundred titles, plus an unusually comprehensive glossary – you even see definitions of privacy, the Internet, and iTunes. All in all, I cannot deny that my expectations were raised. Surveys of Web use are not among my favourite reads, but this one looked good, and thorough. In fact it's one of those surveys that are so big, the editors chose not to paginate it continuously. Instead, it is paginated in several sections, which makes it difficult to ascertain just how long it is. But thorough the survey undoubtedly is: each interview was conducted in the local language of the country. And then alongside this vast trawl of Internet users, the report studied 382 "library directors", although these were restricted to the US, because of "the lack of an online available research pool of library directors outside the United States" – are library managers really that difficult to locate?

I eventually found a demographic breakdown of the people consulted. You have to hunt through the report to discover, for example that of those 6,000 users, only 511(8%) of them were students. This starts to limit the value of the report: if you interview the entire public in six countries, then each user group tends to be pretty small (for example, students in France using Facebook can only be a handful in this survey). Otherwise, the conclusions tend to be rather bland, for example that between 54% and 70% of the general public uses the Internet, although the figure varies a little between countries.

The report is determinedly upbeat, using tag clouds to display results, and lots of variety in the typography. It's unfair to criticise the foreword to the report but this has a wonderful otherworldliness, for example (page viii) "And from what we have observed on the surface, it appeared that much of what is happening on social sites is unrelated to education or to library services". This sounds like a Victorian headmaster commenting that newspapers may contain other things than current affairs.

The questions OCLC chose to ask concerned:
  1. User practices
  2. User attitudes about sharing information
  3. Information privacy
  4. Librarian social networking practices.

I'm not sure if these are the questions I would have asked (does it really matter what librarians practice of social networking is?) The survey reveals that as you would expect most people get on with using the Web and take privacy for granted much of the time. But let's press on and describe the results.

The big picture is clear: the Internet is no longer news: 90% of the general public has used a search engine. 97% of people have used e-mail. And social networking is here to stay: 28% of the people surveyed used social networking sites. The report immediately jumps to the conclusion that our usage of the Internet has reached a "tipping point", where we switch from exploration toward "creation and mass contribution… respondents are moving from Internet visitors to developers, creating their own digital experiences and communities." Heady stuff.

Why do students use social networking? Because their friends do, which is I suppose self-evident. More useful was the distinction the survey makes between three types of site that can have social interaction features:

- Commercial sites, such as Amazon;
- Social Networking Sites, designed to facilitate interaction between users who share interests, attitudes and activities, such as Facebook, and MySpace, but also including such disparate sites as Classmates.com, del.icio.us, and LinkedIn.
- Social Media Sites, which enable individuals to share content they have created, such as YouTube (video sharing) and Flickr (photo sharing).

If, as the survey claims, people are moving towards a collaborative use of the Web, is this demonstrated by the responses? The survey distinguishes three types of Web activity:

1. Browsing/purchasing.
2. Interacting
3. Creating (e.g. Blogging, writing an online journal).

Browsing may seem to be ubiquitous (but around a third of Japanese interviewed had never used a search engine), but is it really true we are moving towards a more creative use of the Internet? The US had the highest proportion of social networkers, but the lowest proportion of people who had created a Web page. Even so, I am amazed that 20% of the general public have created a web page. I knew there were a lot of pages out there on the Web, but that is astonishing. Not surprisingly, communicating with friends and family is the main reason stated for creating a web page.

Downloading music is hardly a creative activity, but it's that people do on the Web – around 50% of people interviewed. And another rather questionable creative use of technology is the use of mobile phones. It may still be something of a rarity in the UK, but in the US, 15% of the general public use their mobile phone to access the Internet. Before you start to think these guys are technical wizards, remember that the single biggest activity using your phone on the web is to download ringtones. Ha! I hear the doom-mongers say, that proves the Internet is built on trivia!

How trustworthy is this report? Well, I was shocked to see the report quote figures that suggest that Google is only the third most frequently used website, after Yahoo and MSN. But these figures came from a third party, not from the survey itself. More accurate, to my mind, at least, was that the top commercial site is Amazon, followed by eBay – and this is true for all age groups.

MySpace is the favourite social networking site, and YouTube the most used social media site – no surprises there. Of the most commonly viewed YouTube videos, 63% of them were professional, and 37% amateur, which suggests a rather different scenario to the earlier idea of a world of Internet creators. At least, we may all be creators, but most of the time we stick to consuming professional content. And around half of all YouTube videos are of music. And why to these people use YouTube? Because their friends do.

Of course, usage varies somewhat in different age groups. Users aged below 21 use social media sites, because the website is fun (they said it, not me). But for over 50s, the main reason for using social media sites was because the site is useful. Do we lose our natural enjoyment of the fun of using websites as we become old and crabbed, perhaps? Or do we lose our innocence and take less pleasure in getting lost on huge websites? Of course, another divergence between young and old takes place when you measure how frequently people use social media sites. If you use a social networking site, you tend to use it frequently: 39% of users of social networking sites access it every day. Unsurprisingly, young people log in several times a day compared with old fogeys who have better (or worse) things to do. And once started with social sites, people rarely stop using them (so, yes, it is an addiction!). The report puts it rather differently: "Social site users … are building the social Web". So that's all right, then!

The questionnaire then examines how familiar users are with the social networking sites they use. This is a bit like asking people who spend several hours in their car each week if they know its look and feel. These people have probably memorised every inch of their website, if they are accessing it multiple times a day.

Sharing and privacy

Whatever people's views on privacy (and the users were split over whether their information was more or less private than two years ago), everyone is adding more information to the Web. Older people, of course, are more suspicious. And in the UK, losing personal data happens on such a large scale that one or two websites with a privacy problem is probably irrelevant. 42% of users always use the same password, which suggests that human memory is a poor thing, not that people are trusting.

How do you check sharing and privacy? People are very happy to share photos, and to a lesser extent, videos – but does this reveal anything? People are happier sharing their "true personality" face-to-face than on the Web. What is your true personality? I think they mean that people don't lie about their age and sex on the Web, but my experience of questionnaires is that people often lie in answers to questions.

People are concerned that they can control who has access to their personal information. And 60% of library users trust the library that holds their information, which might make you feel good, but another table seems to contradict this when it shows that younger users at least are more inclined to trust a social networking site than a library website. As I said, you can prove many things if your survey is big enough.

Library directors

A section devoted to library directors reveals some stunningly predictable results. Question 515 shows that library directors spend more hours reading per week than the general public. No doubt, because they are reading all those books, they have less time for social networking sites, because only 22% of them use social networking, compared with 37% of the general public. Does this mean they are out of touch? Or that they have better things to do? And, surprise, library directors are far more likely to search for books on the library website than the general public. But, reassuringly, in many respects, library directors are like the rest of us. They use YouTube, and Flickr, and iTunes, like we do. Their use of social media is of course because it is "useful" rather than because it is fun, but they are just like you and me: the survey concludes that "the online activities and preferences of U.S. library directors parallel those of the users they serve".

Libraries and social networking

It doesn't take a survey to learn that social networking happens in places other than online library sites. The general public and library directors agree that social networking is not the role of the library. Having said this, the report suggests there is a space for online book clubs, and, for me, the report comes to life when it describes a few fascinating small-scale initiatives set up by libraries, e.g. Ann Arbor District Library's "Social Catalog", where users can add ratings and reviews to the online library catalogue. Sounds great! I am one of those sad people who always reads those little white cards where the booksellers have described their personal favourites, so I suppose it's not surprising I would be drawn to an online comments section in the library catalogue.

The final section of the report is the least valuable. It comprises an extended discussion by various representative figures, although the discussion resembles those "roundtable" (they are never round) sessions set up by desperate conference producers who have run out of ideas: they put all the presenters together and hope something useful emerges. Unfortunately, the discussion rapidly moves to phrases such as "I don't have any first-hand knowledge of this, but…" and I tend to fall asleep at that point.

What are we to make of the Web? Pretty much what we want to make. Surveys such as this report are so vast that you can probably use it to prove whatever depressing or optimistic conclusion you wish. Do young people spend all their time looking at a computer screen? Yes. Do the Japanese share less personal information on websites than Americans? Yes. And what does that mean? When the upbeat conclusion refers to a Wired article entitled "We are the Web", my first response is to say, I am not the Web. I might earn my living from the Web, but so does a taxi driver from his vehicle. And he or she is not a taxi.

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