Slow burner: harnessing Facebook in a theological library

In February I attended the ABTAPL workshop in Oxford on social media in libraries, and my report on the event appeared in the March *Bulletin*. Since then we have set up a library Facebook page, and the purpose of this article is to reflect on that experience.

The workshop was timely in the sense that we conduct our annual library survey of new students in March, so this year we were able to include a question about the use of social media. From the survey we discovered that 65% of new students are on Facebook, 21% are on Twitter, and 48% would be interested in linking up to a library social media presence. It was on the basis of these results that we decided to set up a library Facebook page.

Privacy and control

Setting up the page was relatively straightforward. I had to set up a "personal" page in order to create an "institutional" page, but by maximising the privacy settings on my personal account, I can choose to let it lie effectively dormant.

One of my concerns at the outset was about the control of information about the library, and I have been disappointed to discover that it is not after all possible to mediate comments, only to be notified when they appear. My colleagues were equally surprised by this, and it was a useful reminder that Facebook makes regular changes to both its appearance and functionality without necessarily informing its users. But the larger point is that Facebook is committed to openness, so perhaps we should not be surprised that they have chosen this option.

The posts

Since Easter, when the library Facebook page was launched, we have posted roughly once a week, and my concerns that it would be time consuming have so far proved groundless. But it is interesting to reflect on the nature of the posts. If information is important, then clearly we need to use email in order to ensure that we reach everyone. If information is sensitive or confidential, then that is also a reason for not putting it on Facebook, and I have found myself reluctant to go public on even quite routine matters, such as the acquisition of a particularly expensive book – do we really want the world to know? So we have published a sequence of posts which are arguably rather mundane: some results from the library survey, details of a couple of new acquisitions of particular interest to the institution (with jacket images attached), some advice for students on placement, and news about the library stock check.

The reach

So who are we reaching? When the library Facebook page was first launched, I was surprised to see that six of the first twelve names to connect to us were people I had never heard of! Two more were of students who had left. Facebook works by linking people through multiple networks of relationships,

so I asked my colleagues who host the Queen's Foundation page to "like" the library page in order to spread the word. Our posts now reach a steady twenty or thirty people, most of whom are current students, but nevertheless this is still significantly fewer even than the 48% (representing 53 students) who expressed an interest in the library survey. I have so far resisted the temptation to email students to encourage them to join up. My sense is that that the library Facebook page should stand or fall on its own terms.

Reflections

The library Facebook page was set up to provide an informal forum for communication about library services and resources. It is too early to draw conclusions about whether or not it has been successful. By its nature, Facebook is likely to be a "slow burner" as word spreads, but so far I have to say that I have been underwhelmed. We have made no attempt so far to gauge opinion amongst students, but with only two comments posted, the implication is that it has not yet set the collective pulse racing.

Two thoughts occur to me. The first is that Facebook is not designed for libraries. It is a social media tool, and the clue is in the word – social. It is designed to facilitate our social lives, not our working lives. I find myself asking, why would our students even want to follow us on Facebook? As libraries we are using it because it is there and it may or may not help us to achieve our objectives, but if we were starting from scratch, we would probably do it another way.

On the other hand, it may be that our presence on Facebook is worth more than the sum of our individual posts. Although we are using it primarily to communicate with what is essentially a captive audience – our students may or may not choose to tune in, but they have little choice about using the library – in a broader sense it gives us a presence in a place where many people now spend a great deal of time, including prospective students. The look and feel of the library Facebook page, or simply its existence, may have a valuable role to play in promoting the institution.

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