New technologies and approaches in libraries

The Facebook challenge for public libraries in Romania

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Abstract

Social networks have rapidly won their place in our life and in the activity of many private and public organizations and institutions. At library level, social networks have demonstrated their role as good marketing tools and their utility for a better communication with users. Public libraries in Romania have lately experienced great transformations in terms of the approach of their relationship with the users and the improvement of their activity. They have also launched a series of new services in order to meet the needs of the community they serve and to attract new users. Implementing

and using new applications such as online social networks, more exactly Facebook was one of these recent developments. This paper analyzes the way in which social networks are used at the level of public libraries in Romania by the example of three large public libraries and the way in which these libraries advertise their services through Facebook.

Keywords: public libraries, library services, communication, users, Facebook, social networks, Romania

Introduction

The changes taking place in user behavior regarding access to information in the context of the new technology based developments drive libraries of all types to adapt to the interactivity expectations of the public.

Daily and often times permanent access to social networking sites and communication through them has become a habit for many of us and if we take the example of Facebook, we can speak of millions of people who use this application.

A good marketing tool and a good way to find out more about users (1), Facebook has also proved lately to be one of the means for information delivery and communication with users preferred by many libraries, especially public libraries.

Facebook in the library world

Facebook was launched in 2004 as an application aimed to connect students at Harvard University, it had 1 million users by the end of that year and, in 2006, when registration was opened to the general public, it recorded 12 million users. Presently, it is the most used social networking site for people and organizations.

Libraries have understood the potential of social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace and others for communicating with their user community and for a better interaction with them. Ahorny (2) considers the presence of social networks in the library world as challenging and intriguing and in an analysis of Facebook usage by the American public and academic libraries found that both types of libraries use it in order to deliver information to users, in the case of public libraries mainly information regarding different activities and regarding collections in the case of academic libraries.

Aside from being 'a global resource for locating and linking with people', Facebook features, according to Neo & Calvert (3) who investigated aspects of its adoption among public libraries in New Zealand, many other benefits for teaching, collaborating, communicating with users and community building. The same authors point to the advantages of adopting Facebook which surpass its disadvantages.

Phillip's perspective (4) refers to Facebook as being 'fundamentally about relationships' and some of its characteristics such as immediacy, informality and interactivity are seen as opportunities to develop and improve relationships with users.

Going beyond simply creating the context for a better communication and interaction with the users, Facebook is also a good way of finding out about users' needs, preferences and expectations. (5)

Public Libraries in Romania

Public libraries in Romania seem to have understood lately that innovation in all its forms is the key for success and that in order to meet the current needs and preferences of users, the development of their relationship with the community needs most attention. For this purpose new applications which facilitate communication and interaction with the users represent the answers sought after.

The last decade proved to be a period full of changes for public libraries in Romania, while the transformation and modernization of services provided to users best embody their recent evolution. Access to computers and Internet is available now in all public libraries through Biblionet. This program developed in partnership by IREX, the National Association of Public Libraries and Librarians in Romania (ANBPR), local and national authorities and libraries throughout the country has aimed to provide free access to information for users of public libraries in Romania. The program has had four components: 'facilitating access to information, preparing public librarians, promoting the value of libraries and fostering government support'. (6)

Along with providing new services to the public, a broadening and improvement of librarians' knowledge and skills and also an increase in collaborations were observed for Romanian public libraries during recent years, aspects which help meet new user expectations and needs.

Implementing and using new applications such as online social networks, more precisely Facebook, is one of the recent developments experienced by public libraries in Romania.

Romanian Public Libraries on Facebook

The best method to illustrate the way in which social networks, more precisely Facebook, are used at the level of public libraries in Romania is by concrete examples, and for this purpose we have chosen three large public libraries from different areas of Romania in order to analyze their Facebook page. These libraries were the 'Gheorghe Asachi' County Library in Iaşi, the 'Ion Heliade Rădulescu' County Library in Dâmboviţa and the 'Octavian Goga' County Library in Cluj.

We browsed the websites of these three libraries and their Facebook pages and checked to see if they had the Facebook icon on their homepage and if clicking on it directed you to the library's Facebook page. Then we checked the year they had started the Facebook page. 'Wall' activity (announcements to users, library events, sharing photos etc.) has also been examined.

All the three libraries feature the Facebook icon on their homepage and provide contact information on their Facebook pages (address, phone, email, website etc.). The

first one present on Facebook was the 'Octavian Goga' County Library in Cluj, which created its page on April 7, 2010, then came the 'Gheorghe Asachi' County Library in Iaşi on October 11, 2011, followed by the 'Ion Heliade Rădulescu' County Library in Dâmboviţa on December 8, 2011.

They use the 'Wall' for promotional purposes, such as advertising events, activities and sharing photos.

The activity of the 'Gheorghe Asachi' County Library in Iaşi (7) is diverse, the library regularly posts on its page information about projects and cultural programs, visits to other libraries in the county, county and national activities and debates, foreign language courses, professional development workshops, film screenings, etc. Being a public library, it addresses all social and professional categories. Its page has 1,273 likes.

The 'Octavian Goga' County Library in Cluj (8) posts information about European programs, contests, county events to which people of all ages can participate. This way it offers citizens the opportunity to receive various information. The library develops a career guidance program for high school students organized together with Biblionet and TechSoup Romania. The program envisages sessions of public online workshops in order to provide students with updated information about the job market. This library also organizes a workshop specifically addressed to librarians and people in the academic area: students, master students, PhD candidates, teaching staff. The library urges users on the Facebook page to apply for this workshop if they fall into the above mentioned categories. The page has 1,730 likes.

The posts of the 'Ion Heliade Rădulescu' County Library in Dâmboviţa (9) refer to book launchings, literary creation competitions, meetings with writers, festivals, cultural and educational competitions, press awards gala. This library focuses on literary competitions, literary debates, symposia and book launchings, a way to attract users as the competitions are held in the general interest and involve interesting prizes. A good example is the National Literature Competition 'Văcăreşti Heritage' organized by the Dâmboviţa County Centre for Culture together with the Târgovişte Writers Society and the National Museum Complex with the support of the Writers' Union of Romania. This creative competition has four sections (poetry, short stories, essays and drama), now reaching the fourteenth edition. The library's Facebook users seem very interested in this contest, sharing the page on their own profiles. The library Facebook page has 430 likes.

Unlike the other libraries, the 'Gheorghe Asachi' County Library in Iaşi emerges through greater collaboration with users. At a simple analysis of its Facebook page, it appears that users are interested in the library given their comments after each post made by the library.

The three libraries promote their activity by posting often, thus trying to attract users to their services, activities and events. One may note the desire to innovate, to approach the community and to attract more users for all three libraries. Contests seem to captivate their attention the most. The data indicates that the homepages of these three libraries are less accessed than their Facebook pages. The explanation may be that on Facebook users can express opinions and comment with other users with regards to information posted by the library.

We can conclude based on this short analysis and judging by the access and observation of their Facebook pages that the Romanian public libraries assessed know

how to take advantage of the opportunities provided by Facebook for a better communication with their user community and for a more intense advertisement of their services and cultural and educational activities. The interaction facilities are not used by the three libraries as frequently even though users in Romania seem more eager for library interaction and communication through Facebook.

Conclusions

Public libraries in Romania assessed in this paper have created Facebook pages and this proved to be a change appreciated by users, while the benefits for libraries consist mostly in reaching out to their community through this alternative means and in improving the visibility of their services and cultural activities.

This short study can represent a starting point for a deeper analysis of the presence of Romanian public libraries on social networking sites.

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