Drinking From The Firehose — Fun With Facebook

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Social networking sites such as **Facebook**, **MySpace**, **Orkut** and **LinkedIn** are all the rage these days. I enjoy this type of interaction although it's important to find a niche and stick with it. We cannot all be active on all these sites, nor would we want to be.

Those of us who work in academia can find plenty of kindred spirits on both **Facebook** and **LinkedIn**. I have professional colleagues, however, who are not ready to take the plunge. There are a variety of reasons for this sentiment. Some people are worried about the invasion of their privacy. Others are not interested in this sort of interaction online, just on principle. One big difference between a social networking "interaction" and the kind you experience with email or texting, is that most of the time the social network post goes to all your "friends" at the same time. Or that is what people assume. It doesn't have to be that way. There are a number of ways to close yourself off if you wish. Many people use their **Facebook** accounts as though it were email. It's up to you how you want to use it.

All these different types of ways of communicating are getting a little hard to manage for some people. It is completely understandable that there might be some doubts or paranoia about how this works.

There are a couple of key issues to think about. One is this: Is your life an open book? Do you have reasons to care what people know about you? If you have issues with this concept, social networking may not be for you. For numerous reasons, you might want to lay low. Or, if you do decide to sign up, be choosy about those you allow into your circle of "friends."

I have "friended" a number of people with whom I work. Some of these folks, frankly, are not, in "real life" people I hang out with in any way. Some of them I hardly know.   But I have allowed them into my **Facebook** page anyway. This includes an administrator above me and several of my direct and indirect reports. My Library Dean and one of my favorite AD colleagues have both decided to keep their **Facebook** pages closed to just family and personal friends. That's OK, I can respect that choice. The couple who rents our house back in Boone for example, are not "friends" since they use **Facebook** for professional connections to their students in a very directed fashion. It makes sense that they don't want to be "friends" with their landlords.

I have discovered old friends from high school and even elementary school on **Facebook**. That's been interesting, and fun. I did use **Classmates.com** and other reunion sites for awhile but they have an annoying tendency to want to charge you a fee when you're not looking so I have pulled out of those sites.

I am not much into "**MySpace**" because I don't think it caters to my age group or tastes, although I do use it to follow a favorite music group.

I've never used **Google's Orkut** and **LinkedIn** seems to lack any real fun to it — it's kind of dry. Of course, some of the features in **Facebook** are just silly and I ignore them. But what's the harm in sending people "Good karma?"

There are lots of librarians on **Facebook**, and perhaps that is because so many of us work in academia and so we want to be where the students are. **Facebook** started at **Harvard**, so it reflects the university culture. Students typically are not thinking very seriously about what they put out there. This has been a controversy for some time, but as students mature and start realizing that their **Facebook** pages might not reflect positively on them, they make changes to their profiles. This is especially true close to graduation — it has become a rite of passage for seniors to take down the fluff stuff in preparation for the job hunt — you don't want perspective employers to be viewing your spring break antics!

There are people on **Facebook** whose goal, it seems, is to have as many friends as possible. If that's their desire, so be it, but I will not accept you as a friend just because you are collecting them. I received a couple of friend requests from people who seemed to be in collector mode, and I eventually cut them loose. No offense meant — if I actually do meet you some day, perhaps I'll pick you back up. Also, I do not want vendors cozying up to me on **Facebook** if I have not already met their acquaintance.

One big concern has had to do with the kinds of behavior young people display by posting party pictures to **Facebook**. I would like to suggest that this is *nothing new* and we need to GET OVER IT. I could (but I won't) post a picture of my college friends and I in the 1970's — yes, we were drunk! And we were having a great time. I could also post pictures from **ALA** and other professional conferences that show people relaxing and schmoozing that are not so different. Okay, we're not in bikinis or pulling up our T-shirts, that's true (nor would anyone expect or want this). College advisors have focused on reminding their students that what is put out on **Facebook** can have an effect on how people perceive their university — especially the student leaders and athletes, for example.

The latest trend is for (helicopter) parents to sign up for **Facebook** so they can interact with their kids. Of course for some adolescents this is the kiss of death — ick — not our parents! Go away! But since so many of them are already texting and cell calling their parents every day anyway, why not? And for parents (or grandparents) who hardly know how to use a computer, **Facebook** is actually easier to navigate. For one, if you have access to an Internet connection, it's free; and you don't have to understand email set-ups or protocols.

In my collection of "friends," I have work colleagues, both from my current place of employment and my former jobs, people I know from the profession, family, friends, children of family and friends, my dog sitter, and a handful of people who don't fit any of the above categories. I expect to find other connections soon since so many people are joining **Facebook** these days!

For more information and opinions about Facebook:

According to an article in the March 10, 2009 *PC Magazine*, "Blogs and social networking are consuming more online time than checking and writing personal email." See: *http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,2817,2342757,00.asp.*

Another nice discussion about privacy issues on **Facebook** can be found on the blog, *Library Garden*: *http://librarygarden.blogspot.com/2009/02/what-libraries-can-learn-from-facebook.html.*

And this: *http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/08/business/08digi.html.*

And here is a more scary, paranoid, disturbing vision of what **Facebook** is really about: *http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2008/jan/14/facebook.* 🐾