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Working the Social: Twitter and Friendfeed

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WORKING THE SOCIAL:

TWITTER

AND Let these social networking services do the filtering for you
By Laura Carscaddon & Colleen S. Harris

FRIENDFEED

Information overload is so five years ago, but the problem it describes is all too real. Fortunately, there's hope yet for the savvy librarian: Twitter and FriendFeed turn information dissemination on its head, using friends and subscribers as a filter for the best, most credible, and most engaging information out there. As Clay Shirky said at the Web 2.0 Expo keynote in January, the problem isn't "information overload. It's filter failure."

Like other social media sites, Twitter and FriendFeed are excellent personal and professional social outlets, connecting users to friends and colleagues regardless of boring problems like geography. But they also connect users to the content those friends and colleagues share, clueing them into their network's likes and dislikes and jacking them in to the editorial decisions those in their network make about the stories and content that matter to them most.

The best part? Everything about these services is eminently customizable, depending on which and how many followers

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you choose to include in your stream. You can use Twitter and FriendFeed to get the play-by-play of conference updates remotely, or keep tabs on any of a number of ongoing topics of interest. If you're publishing inclined, you can use these social content filters to track your favorite authors and publishers, or simply to get the latest updates from your favorite blogs and publications.

Twitter: tweeters do it in smaller spaces

By now, most of us are familiar with blog posts, which can ramble between a paragraph and a missive. Similar to traditional blogs in that their purpose is still to convey information, microbloggers simply do it in a smaller format. Launched in July 2006, the frontrunner of microblogging applications (which also include Plurk and Jaiku) is Twitter, an application that allows users to send brief text updates of up to 140 characters. These updates are viewable by "followers," or people who have signed up to receive your messages. Users can send and receive these short messages (referred to as "tweets") through Twitter's web interface, SMS, or any number of external applications. Librarians, information professionals, educators, and others have found Twitter a concise way to start conversations, to keep folks updated about their whereabouts when at industry conferences, and to post links to recent happenings in the field.

Hey there, tweetheart: getting started

Anyone can go to twitter.com and set up a free Twitter account. You may choose to make your Twitter account public (anyone may add you and read your posted messages), or if you choose “protect my updates,” your account is private, in which case people must request authorization to follow your Twitter updates. After you choose your username and password, you can start following folks. If you’re an old hand at 2.0 technologies, you might start by searching Twitter for the usernames of folks you know reside on the web whom you’re interested in following. (This is one more particularly good reason to maintain the same username across different services!) You can use Twitter’s search field to search by username or keyword.

Using the @ sign, you can directly address your message to another user by starting the message with @username. Note that using the @ sign, your message to that person is still viewable by your followers and is simply distinguished as a reply directly to that person. The “direct message” function allows you to send private messages to other users. You can also tag your tweets using hashtags, a word or phrase prefixed with a #. This allows users to search for tweets on a specific subject or related to a specific event (such as #internetlibrarian09, #ALA, #mothersday). Note that during conference time, Twitter use (particularly for librarians) goes through the roof. In fact, in the last two years, library conference hashtags have made it into the top ten “trending topics” across all of Twitter a number of times. You can restrict Tweets sent to your mobile device (or turn that function off completely) if you get overwhelmed during peak use of Twitter by your friends.

Twits on the go

If you prefer not to be tied to your computer screen to use Twitter, you can register your phone under Settings and Devices in the Twitter interface. From your mobile device, send an SMS message to 40404, and Twitter will post your tweet. It’s worth getting used to the nonbrowser interface, since many useful messages are posted while on the move and away from your computer. This is perfect for meetings, because you’ll want to stay abreast of which sessions are full, make last-minute lunch, dinner, or karaoke plans, and generally keep informed about plan changes during fast-paced gatherings.

Remember to check your SMS/text messaging plan with your provider before you choose to receive Twitter updates to your mobile device, as usage increases dramatically during conferences, new device and application releases, and any other event that gets your friends and followers chatting. You also can follow other people based on their phone number: SMS “add [phone-number] to 40404” to follow the user with that phone number. If that person isn’t yet a Twitter user, he/she will receive an invitation to join. A number of other services, including Facebook, FriendFeed, and several blogging services now offer to incorporate your Twitter updates, as long as those updates are public.

FriendFeed: all your social “are belong to us”

So, Twitter is nice when you’re looking at short updates, Flickr is great for your photos. There’s LibraryThing for the books you’re reading, Delicious for your bookmarks, and so many other online social networks that surround specific aspects of our lives. It can all get a bit daunting at times, especially when many of your friends also cross from site to site. So where do you go to consolidate all these services? One answer to that is FriendFeed.

20 Ways for Librarians To Use Twitter

By Sonja Cole

ASK FOR HELP

1. Ask for recommended books, products, or services.
2. Ask for help or advice about a topic of professional interest.

BE HELPFUL

3. Recommend a book, product, or service other librarians would be interested in.
4. Write a book list one tweet at a time, or link to a book list on the web.
5. Tweet about a useful resource on the web, a particular blog post, video, or web site.
6. Provide a daily tip like a word of the day, book of the day, random trivia, useful fact, or helpful resource.
7. Share new studies of interest to other professionals.
8. Celebrate timely events. Recognize author birthdays, Banned Books Week, and other events that affect your patrons.

PROMOTE YOURSELF

9. Tweet about your library’s web site, blog, and/or podcast. Add a new tweet to let your followers know when you make updates.
10. Link to a book trailer or video booktalk you create.
11. Start a Twitter book club, and tweet your reactions to the book as you read.
12. Invite followers to an event (online or offline). Events can include library programs, book signings, talks, meetings, your online book club, webchat, etc.
13. Link to photos of your library and events.

MAKE CONNECTIONS

14. Retweet someone else’s post that you found interesting.
15. Say thanks when someone retweets you or mentions you in their tweets.
16. Participate in #FollowFriday by recommending others people might want to follow.
17. Answer someone else’s general question, and reply to those who ask you a direct question @your_Library.
18. Schedule to meet fellow librarians at a conference, or organize a professional tweet-up in your area.
19. Make a personal connection with other librarians by sharing your favorite new book, video of the day, quote of the day, blog post, etc.
20. Ask others for their favorite posts, and reply with comments on their picks.

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FriendFeed is a livestreaming service or a “social aggregator” that allows you to pull content from multiple social networking sites to one place. Want to follow a specific person on Twitter, but you don’t have (and maybe you don’t want) a Twitter account? If those tweets are fed into FriendFeed, you can follow along there. Right now, there are 57 services that FriendFeed can pull in directly, along with the ability to pull in an RSS feed from any site that has one. You can also post original messages to FriendFeed, push a post automatically from FriendFeed to Twitter, or have other services use

FriendFeed as a pass-through, so FriendFeed pulls your updates from other services and then pushes them out as tweets.

Let's talk and connect

A major benefit of FriendFeed is the ability to converse easily on a specific topic with threaded discussions. While with Twitter you can reply to a specific user, in FriendFeed you reply to the post, and your answer is threaded below it, letting you see the entire conversation, not just 140-character bits and pieces. You'll see responses made by people other than the original poster and yourself, again letting you see the full exchange and helping you find new people with interesting things to say.

FriendFeed also has a Groups (formerly known as Rooms) option, which are areas of the site set up for discussions around a specific topic, theme, or group. Anyone can set up a group and decide whether it will be Public, Standard Feed, or Private. Public groups allow posting and commenting by anyone, Standard Feeds allow only the owner to post but anyone can comment, and Private groups require an invitation to members before they can join and post.

Using groups can help you segregate your discussions and decide what will appear in your Home Feed (the page you see when you first log in). There are groups that discuss technology, like the iPhone group, or groups that want to discuss specific topics, like the Librariology group. Groups can also be set up surrounding specific events, like the ones for the American Library Association (ALA) Midwinter Meeting and annual conferences. For those groups, the official tags/hashtags can feed into the group so that tweets, Flickr photos, blog posts, or other content tagged with the event's official tag can be automatically aggregated into the group, establishing one place to go to see all kinds of things about the conference. Tracking conference activity this way can help keep you from being inundated on other social networks, such as Twitter, during conferences. Instead of feeling like you need to read everything now, join the group and come back to it at any time. Groups can also be set up to avoid specific topics; around the time of the 2008 Presidential election, there was a "No Politics" room set up, for people who didn't want to see any conversation about politics.

Search and subscribe

As with Twitter and other online social networking sites, a good way to start is to search for a topic or a group you're interested in and see who's talking about it. Perhaps a big portion of your job involves training. Searching for training might lead you to the T Is for Training Group, where there is a community of people who use it as a space to discuss trends and issues in training from a library perspective. Once you find some people who say things that interest you, see who comments on their posts and who else they follow for additional folks to talk to in FriendFeed. Also, look for specific usernames from other sites, as often people try to use the same name across multiple sites, making it simpler to find them. Don't worry about getting stuck following a prolific poster: you can always unsubscribe to someone you've subscribed to or use your settings to hide some or all of their entries if you don't want to see them. The person won't be notified that you've hidden their posts or that you're no longer a subscriber.

Unlike Twitter, FriendFeed doesn't have a large number of iPhone apps available. A recent site upgrade allows mobile users to see a fully featured version of the site, rather than the previous scaled-down iPhone version, though the reduced version is still

Can't make it to a conference? Let friends and colleagues be your agents, pushing info to you online

available at friendfeed.com/iphone. The newest site update includes IM and email posts to your discussions, if you prefer keeping up that way. Access through fftogo.com is another excellent option for BlackBerry and iPhone users. The friendfeed.com interface is very simple but allows quick access to all your groups, friends, and the search function of FriendFeed.

Ready? Let's go!

To get started on FriendFeed, go to friendfeed.com and set up an account; decide whether you want a public feed or a private one. A private feed will give you some control over who is able to see your posts, and you will have to approve any followers. A public feed means that anyone can follow you, and you can provide a direct link to your posts on FriendFeed at friendfeed.com/username for those who don't have FriendFeed accounts. One thing to remember is that anything you feed into FriendFeed from a private account becomes public if your FriendFeed stream is public. What this means in reality is that if your Twitter account is private and you feed it into a public FriendFeed account, you've just made that private Twitter stream publicly available.

Next, choose what services you'll have feed in and what you'll push out, if any. FriendFeed will ask you for the specific information it needs to get the feed, whether that's the email address associated with the account, a username and password, or the RSS feed address. FriendFeed does take some effort; you can just set up an account and run with it, but it's worth it to feed more services in as a way to generate more conversation among the people in your network. Another way to share as you run across interesting web pages is to use the FriendFeed bookmarklet. Using the bookmarklet lets you post a link along with an optional image from the page and a comment to your FriendFeed account and any of the groups you belong to or, with the newest redesign, as a direct message to one or more of your FriendFeed friends.

Finally, take the time and explore! FriendFeed is an excellent service for conversation and networking. As we gear up for ALA annual in Chicago, find out who will be there. Especially for first-time attendees, FriendFeed can be an excellent way to locate other attendees and connect with them in person. Post to the ALA Group and see if you can get a group together for lunch or dinner and turn your online social network into an in-person one as well.

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