

Libraries Get Personal: Facebook Applications, Google Gadgets, and MySpace Profiles

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The impersonal space of the World Wide Web is rapidly being replaced by Web 2.0 technologies that put the individual user in the spotlight. With the rise of blogs, wikis, and social networking sites, organizations are beginning to re-evaluate how they deliver content to their users. Libraries are certainly no exception to this rule. A growing number of libraries and library-related organizations are facilitating access to their resources by developing tools for patrons to use in their personal slice of the web. These applications complement previous methods employed by libraries, guiding the patrons through the library experience without forcing them to leave the familiarity of their favorite sites.

Library-related applications in facebook

Facebook applications are developed using the Facebook Platform (<http://apps.facebook.com/login.php>), which was launched on 25 May 2007. Utilizing the Facebook Developer Application, third-party programmers can create applications to suit their purposes. Applications can be created to provide a variety of services, such as displaying an RSS feed, searching an outside resource, or cataloging a person's recently seen movies, to name a few.

In order to use a Facebook application, an individual must first add that application to his or her profile. Facebook maintains a searchable catalog of all Facebook applications, which is accessed through the Applications link on the left side of the interface. When a user chooses an application from the catalog, Facebook displays the application's "About" page, which describes the basic utility of the application. Clicking the "Add Application" button adds it to the user's profile.

A Facebook application is composed of several parts. First, an application may place a box in the user's profile page. This box often offers the basic services that the application is built to provide. An application may also place a link on the left side of the user's Facebook interface which provides the user quick access to the application's "canvas page". The canvas page displays another web page inside the Facebook interface and is often used to display more content than a box on the user's profile page could show. Facebook applications can also add profile actions to a user's profile, allowing the user to do more than just "poke" other users. Applications may place stories in the user's News Feed as well, allowing friends of that user to see what the user is doing with that particular application.

Libraries have taken a couple of approaches as they develop applications for Facebook. The primary function of most if not all library applications is to provide a means of searching the library's catalog from a Facebook profile. However, some libraries have gone beyond providing this basic service and have added additional features to their applications.

Most library applications are simple catalog search applications. These applications create a box in the user's profile with a search form. When a user enters a search term, the search is executed in a new browser window that loads the library's usual online catalog. Typically, this type of application makes minimal use of the canvas page, usually displaying a search box similar to the one in the user's profile. Some applications provide a few links to library resources like Ask a Librarian (online chat and e-mail reference services), but the functionality of these applications is relatively limited. The

University of Michigan Libraries, Broward County Libraries, and Alvernia Library are among the libraries that have implemented this approach. Additionally, some library-related organizations including JSTOR are creating Facebook applications that perform similarly to these catalog search applications.

There are, of course, variations to this approach. Hennepin County Library provides a slightly more integrated experience by displaying the search results inside the canvas page if the search is executed from that page. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign's search box uses the library's Search Assistant, which provides a federated search. The University of Alberta offers a few links to its services such as Ask a Librarian and a citation linker on its canvas page, utilizing a tabbed interface to delineate between categories of links.

A few libraries have decided to include more content on their canvas page, creating a library home page inside of Facebook. Ryerson University Library's application displays a simple webpage on its canvas page, which includes a catalog search box, links to several library resources including course readings, ILL request forms, and online book renewals, as well as incorporating a small library news feed. While all of these links take the user to pages not created specifically for Facebook, Ryerson has provided a more thorough representation of the library in its Facebook application than any other library has.

An application entitled Librarian (<http://apps.facebook.com/login.php>) combines elements of social bookmarking with features of Ask a Librarian online references to create a new web resource. Built by Brad Czerniak, a Library and Information

Science student at Wayne State University, Librarian is similar to the popular Digg (www.digg.com/) website, displaying a community-generated list of search engines. Registered users can vote both for and against the search engines, ideally raising the best resources to rise to the top. Librarian also offers its own version of Ask a Librarian online chat that utilizes Facebook's messaging utility and relies upon volunteer librarians to answer questions.

Library vendors are also utilizing Facebook to provide services to librarians and users. Springshare, creator of the LibGuides platform, has created a Facebook application that lists and links to the LibGuides pages of subscribed libraries. However, as of this article's writing, it seems that the application offers limited functionality. Once a user selects one institution's page, it is difficult to return to the list of libraries. Springshare also offers a specialized application that allows librarians to display the LibGuides they have written in a panel on their profile.

Library-related applications in Google

Google Gadgets are mini-applications written in Extensible Markup Language (XML) that have been built to utilize the Google Gadgets API. These applications work primarily with a user's iGoogle page. Gadgets can be created to provide a variety of services, including RSS feed readers, search boxes for resources other than Google resources, weather forecasts, calendars, and games.

A user with an account for any of Google's services automatically has a personalized iGoogle home page, which can be accessed at URL www.google.com/ig. Clicking on the "Add Stuff" link in the upper right corner of the interface leads to a comprehensive listing of the gadgets, which is also located at URL www.google.com/ig/directory. Adding gadgets to an iGoogle page simply involves locating the gadget through the directory and clicking "Add it now".

Once installed, a gadget appears in a standalone panel on the user's iGoogle page. The user can reorder these panels by dragging them to a preferred location on the page.

The programmer of a Google Gadget can choose to syndicate it, or allow the gadget to be used on third-party web pages. Users can add a syndicated gadget by using Google's "Add this gadget to your webpage" editor. A list of these Syndicated Google Gadgets can be found at URL <http://gmodules.com/ig/directory?synd=open>.

iGoogle library-related gadgets tend to fall into two distinct categories.

RSS feeds

Some university and public libraries have gadgets that display recent news postings to an RSS feed:

- UC Riverside Libraries – www.google.com/ig/directory?root=%2Ffig&dpos=top&num=24&url=http://library.ucr.edu/xml/news.xml
- UC Berkeley Government Library – www.google.com/ig/directory?root=%2Ffig&dpos=top&num=24&url=http://sunsite3.berkeley.edu/govblog/%3Ffeed%3Datom
- Yale University Library – www.google.com/ig/directory?root=%2Ffig&dpos=top&num=24&url=http://www.library.yale.edu/socsci/subguides/psychology/psych_news.xml
- UIUC Online Resources – www.google.com/ig/directory?root=%2Ffig&dpos=top&num=24&url=http://www.library.uiuc.edu/orr/rssfeed/subject.php%3Fsubjectid%3D29
- Hennepin County Library – www.google.com/ig/directory?root=%2Ffig&dpos=top&num=24&url=http://www.hclib.org/rss.xml

Prominent library organizations have also created gadgets to publish updated content:

- Library of Congress – www.google.com/ig/directory?root=%2Ffig&dpos=top&num=24&url=http://www.loc.gov/rss/pao/web.xml
- Project Gutenberg – www.google.com/ig/directory?root=%2Ffig&dpos=top&num=24&url=http://www.gutenberg.org/feeds/today.rss

Librarian bloggers make entries accessible through personalized gadgets:

- The Shifted Librarian – www.google.com/ig/directory?root=%2Ffig&dpos=top&num=24&url=http://www.theshiftedlibrarian.com/atom.xml
- The Krafty Librarian – www.google.com/ig/directory?root=%2Ffig&dpos=top&num=24&url=http://www.kraftylibrarian.com/atom.xml
- Librarian in Black – www.google.com/ig/directory?root=%2Ffig&dpos=top&num=24&url=http://librarianinblack.typepad.com/librarianinblack/atom.xml

Catalog search

The second category of gadgets functions in a similar fashion to the simple catalog search applications of Facebook. When the user enters a search term in the box, the search is performed in the library's regular catalog page.

- WorldCat – www.google.com/ig/directory?root=%2Ffig&dpos=top&num=24&url=http://worldcat.org/googlegadgets/worldcatsearch.xml
- Washington State Libraries – www.google.com/ig/directory?root=%2Ffig&dpos=top&num=24&url=http://www.secstate.wa.gov/library/docs/iii/gadget.xml
- Hennepin County Libraries – www.google.com/ig/directory?root=%2Ffig&dpos=top&num=24&url=http://www.hclib.org/pub/GoogleCatalogSearchGadget.xml
- Multnomah County Library Catalog – www.google.com/ig/directory?root=%2Ffig&dpos=top&num=24&url=http://www.multcolib.org/services/gadget-mclcatalog.xml
- University of Mississippi Libraries – www.google.com/ig/directory?root=%2Ffig&dpos=top&num=24&url=http://www.olemiss.edu/depts/general_library/files/techserv/umissopac.xml
- PCC Library – www.google.com/ig/directory?root=%2Ffig&dpos=top&num=24&url=http://www.pcc.edu/library/xml/pccclibgadget.xml
- University of Nevada, Reno Libraries – www.google.com/ig/directory?root=%2Ffig&dpos=top&num=24&url=http://www.library.unr.edu/gadgets/quicksearch.xml

Library profiles in MySpace

MySpace allows organizations to have their own profile page, which can be used by a library as a different sort of home page. MySpace has a blog as a standard feature on profile pages, which many libraries use to keep their patrons up-to-date on library events. Most libraries also provide links to key resources such as article databases and reference guides on the profile page.

MySpace has not encouraged third-party development in the way that Facebook and Google have, and for that reason there is significantly less innovation on MySpace. Nevertheless, a large number of libraries have built profile pages in MySpace to integrate themselves into their patrons' social networking. A group that strives to list all the libraries on MySpace can be found at URL <http://groups.myspace.com/myspacelibraries>.

Some examples of typical library profile pages are:

- University of Central Florida – www.myspace.com/ucfaskalibrarian
- University of Kentucky – www.myspace.com/uklibraries
- University of Baltimore – www.myspace.com/ublowlibrary

- University of Central Oklahoma – www.myspace.com/ucolibrary

Public libraries are also moving into MySpace. Many of these institutions choose to tailor their profile pages to a teenage audience to capture the interest of the young subset of MySpace's user base.

- Trails Teen Library – www.myspace.com/trailswest
- Glendale Public Library – www.myspace.com/teenlibrariansgpl
- Brownsburg Public Library – www.myspace.com/brownsburgpubliclibrary

Conclusion

The future of Web technologies is with greater personalization and portability. Not merely a fad, these applications are rapidly gaining adherents as a growing number of libraries and librarians are experimenting with packaging and delivering information in this simple, practical way. In the advent of this brave new paradigm, librarians need to stay current and engaged or risk marginalization. More importantly, they may miss a huge opportunity to communicate and

collaborate with colleagues and clientele in meaningful and powerful ways.

How can librarians stay current with this burgeoning trend? Librarians can read library blogs, join a social community such as Facebook and start trying some of the available library-related applications, personalize a Google page and add web feeds and Google Gadgets, join relevant Facebook groups such as Facebook groups such as FacebookAppsForLibraries, and browse the Google Gadget and Facebook Application directories.

While many current applications are simple and pragmatic, there is undoubtedly a vast amount of potential that has yet to be fully realized. Libraries that take the initiative to explore this potential will thrive and discover revolutionary ways to connect their patrons to the world of scholarship.

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