

Comparative Analysis of the Social Networking Websites LibraryThing and GoodReads

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ILS 537-S70: Information Seeking Behavior

Spring 2010

Southern Connecticut State University

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April 18, 2010

Introduction

The Internet is a vast repository for information. However, not all electronic information services are well-designed or functional enough to support effective information seeking. Gary Marchionini (1995) said, “It is unlikely that any information environment will be complete without supporting both analytical and browsing strategies” (p. 160). In addition to supporting both search strategies, an information service should be user-friendly and intuitive. No information service exists in a vacuum; it must have a substantial level of usability.

Social networking sites have exploded upon the scene, allowing users to connect with people from anywhere. While most sites exist for entertainment, literary social networking sites are also turning into an important information service for those interested in books. In addition to connecting with friends, they serve as electronic information systems because users can search for books based on recommendations, similar themes, and a myriad of other criteria. These literary social networks resemble online public access catalogs (OPACs) in that they list titles and authors as well as publication data. However, they have more levels of interactivity and allow users to use a variety of browsing and analytical strategies.

Analytical and browsing strategies

Marchionini identifies the main differences between analytical and browsing strategies in *Information Seeking in Electronic Environments*. Analytical strategies are goal-oriented and systematic, designed to find the most relevant information in a short period of time (Marchionini, 1995, p. 76). This model is linked to the earlier days of the Internet when users were charged for online access based on how long they were online for. In contrast, Marchionini (1995) defines

browsing strategies as informal, natural, and primarily used to get an overview of a topic (p. 100). Both of these strategies are tied to Marchionini's theory of information seeking that is made up of a number of subprocesses that are affected by a variety of factors. The act of information seeking is generally the same whether the information seeker is using analytical or browsing strategies to find information.

Because literary social networking sites (in this case, LibraryThing and GoodReads) are, like any other social networking site, "...an online place where a user can create a profile and build a personal network that connects him or her to other users" (Lenhart & Madden, 2007), they tend to be more casual. Instead of being focused on an information goal, users visit social networking sites to browse their friends' activities, look at their pictures, and play games. The literary slant to LibraryThing and GoodReads includes a bit more of the analytical strategy to the social networking world, however, because users can systematically search for information on books in addition to the socialization aspect.

LibraryThing

LibraryThing was launched in 2005 and since then over one million users have cataloged more than forty-nine million books ("LibraryThing Press Information," 2010). The records for these books are compiled and modified by a variety of sources: "Relying on data from the Library of Congress (LC), Amazon, and over 30 other library catalogs worldwide for catalog records and book jacket graphics, LibraryThing also depends on user-generated such as book reviews, tags, ratings, and changes to catalog records to create a dynamic, social space for book lovers" (Rethlefsen, 2007, p. 40). In this way, users are able to use analytical strategies like pearl growing by looking up books with similar LC call numbers and are also able to browse similar

books by clicking on user-generated tags and scanning users' libraries that are similar to their own.

LibraryThing boasts a variety of features, such as an Early Reviewer program where users can sign up and get advanced reader copies of select titles as long as they agree to review them. In addition, there are a seemingly infinite number of ways to compare your library to others, add tags, and view your own library. The possibilities are endless, as is the available information.

GoodReads

Although GoodReads was launched later than LibraryThing, in December of 2006, it claims it is the largest literary social networking site: "We have more than 3,200,000 members who have added more than 84,000,000 books to their shelves" ("About GoodReads," 2010). GoodReads does not indicate where it draws its records from, and no LC call numbers are included. Overall, it is better suited to browsing than analytical strategies with user-generated content similar to LibraryThing, like "[...] the user's ability to match his or her books with anyone else's on the site to discern what they've read in common. The software then gives a score based on the percentage of shared titles, thus creating a sense of literary community as its basis" (Werris, 2009, p. 21). However, with entry points such as awards won, users still have the opportunity to use analytical strategies like the building blocks strategy.

Unlike LibraryThing, GoodReads includes advertising on its site. However, the ads are tailored to users since a user's GoodReads account includes information about their preferred literary genres (Werris, 2009, p. 21). Also, GoodReads has quizzes, trivia, videos, and other

interactive features that are lacking on LibraryThing. LibraryThing resembles an OPAC while GoodReads is like a book-centered Facebook.

Benefits and areas for improvement

Clearly, the social aspect of LibraryThing and GoodReads is what makes them so popular and different from OPACs. Without the ability for users to interact with each other and see what their friends are reading, these information services would be less dynamic and entertaining. Otis Chandler, founder of GoodReads, said, “There’s no social interactivity around Amazon’s ‘wish lists’ for books, and I wanted to see what my friends were reading” (Werris, 2009, p. 21). These sites allow for blogging, tagging, and cataloging all in one package, but in a public sphere where connections are made and conversations are sparked.

LibraryThing and GoodReads revive conversations about books, but can also be used by professional librarians as a supplement to traditional readers’ advisory services: “Other library staff use these sites while on the public service desk. It’s a quick and easy step to click a ‘historical fiction’ or ‘cozy mystery’ tag or shelf and get many suggestions immediately for the patron waiting at the desk” (Stover, 2009). No librarian can comprehensively read every genre, so these information services can be used to help the librarian maintain a high level of service to patrons.

As previously mentioned, LibraryThing is closer to an OPAC than GoodReads. It contains much more information, however, and this sometimes strays toward information overload. Marchionini (1995) said, “In relation to distraction, which wastes time and may mislead information seekers, browsing in rich environments may also lead to information overload. This is especially true in highly interconnected electronic environments in which the

richness of relationships leads to confusion and overload rather than a deeper understanding of the concepts represented by the system” (p. 118). The top navigation bar on the main page has nineteen links alone, and each of those links has sub-links. There are so many possibilities that one can easily get lost.

In contrast, GoodReads can stray toward informality. Without any readily found information as to where a book’s cataloging data is coming from, records may not be as reliable. Furthermore, GoodReads allows anyone who has fifty books in their profile to apply for “librarian status,” bestowing upon them the ability to edit catalog records (“Librarian Manual,” 2010). While this is an improvement from when anyone was allowed to edit records, there is still potential for one so inclined to render the catalog unreliable.

Conclusion

Literary social networking sites allow users to implement both browsing and analytical strategies as defined by Marchionini. While neither LibraryThing or GoodReads have the same level of reliability as, say, the LC’s catalog, they allow anyone to track what they’ve read, find other books they may like based on entry points such as genre and author, and connect with other readers. The rise in use of these information services is a boon to libraries because, as Stover (2009) said, “Library staff are beginning to use descriptors that our patrons understand better. The more we share the vocabulary of reading appeal, whether it is in person or online, the more connected our readers are to libraries, books, authors, publishers, and each other.” While both services could be improved, such as LibraryThing streamlining its links and GoodReads including more entry points for analytical searching strategies, both these information services have created a dynamic social network for readers.

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