Connecting libraries to teens in the Digital Age

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Abstract: Digital technologies such as social networking sites, chat and online discussion forums are changing the way that people, and especially youth communicate with one another. Libraries have increasingly been responding by developing a presence on these sites and using these tools. Research by Vivian Howard explains different types and characteristics of teen readers and shows that for many of these readers, social networking sites provide a valuable tool for doing online reader's advisory. Canada's Teen Reading Club, a library based online teen reading club across the country brings many of these social networking functions into one specific site for teens.

Introduction

Thank you to the coordinating divisions of IFLA for inviting us to speak today on the topic of connecting libraries to teens in the digital age. My name is Karen Sharkey from the Vancouver Public Library. I am pleased to be presenting along with Kirsten Andersen of the Greater Victoria Public Library and on behalf of Vivian Howard of Dalhousie University who is unable to be here today.

Social networking sites, youth and libraries

Social networking sites, such as Facebook, Bebo and Myspace, create connections between people who agree to be friends with one another. They are online representations of one's social network. A person creates a profile and adds other people with profiles as their friends, or invites people who do not yet have a profile to join the site and become their friend. Friends post information about themselves, such as their interests and hobbies, events they are planning to go to and communicate with each other through messaging, commenting on photos and through various other applications. According to boyd and Ellison, "what makes social network sites unique is not that they allow individuals to meet strangers, but rather that they enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks (boyd and Ellison, 2007)." Generally speaking, although not always, users go on to the sites primarily to engage with friends and acquaintances they already know, not to meet new people. There is a strong correlation between one's friends online with one's friends offline. This differentiates social networking sites from other online communities that were often based on shared interests, not on one's personal connections with other individuals (boyd and Ellison, 2007; Lenhart et al, 2007; Ofcom, 2008).

Around the world, these sites are becoming increasing popular. Even if youth are not on one of the big three social networking sites of the English speaking world (Facebook, Myspace and Bebo), they will likely be on others that are popular according to their age, country or language. Different social networking sites have similar features and the discussion about their use in libraries applies to all. The popularity of specific sites

changes over time, and sites that are most used today, such as Facebook or Myspace, may lose their appeal in a short period of time. In fact, recent data from Neilson in 2008 show that Facebook has had slight decrease in the number of unique users for the first time and both Bebo and Myspace have had slight declines since 2007 (Ofcom, 2008). This does not mean that social networking sites in general are on the decline, just that some of the most popular sites have possibly peaked. If libraries do decide to start profiles on a site, they must be aware that they will not be just creating one profile and maintaining it, but that they will need to keep up with what sites are popular in order to be relevant. The emphasis should be on how to make the most of these sites to connect with youth, instead of focusing on the details of one site in particular.

Why should libraries use them?

Social networking sites are used by a large number of people and are especially popular with youth. These sites provide an easy way to get information out about events, to get feedback, and to promote the services of the library. Canada, in particular has a large number of people using social networking sites, with 53% of adults with profiles. Other countries have a smaller percentage of adults with profiles but the numbers are still significant and will likely continue to rise (other countries surveyed include the UK with 39%; France with 17%; Germany with 12%; Italy with 22%; the USA with 34%; and Japan with 32%. Source: Ofcom, 2007). In the US, 93% of youth ages 12 to 17 use the internet, 55% of these online youth have profiles on social networking sites and close to half of these teens check these profiles everyday (Lenhart et al, 2007).

Social networking is becoming an increasing common way for organizations and institutions to get information out to people and to engage with them. Charities such as the Royal British Legion have successfully increased youth volunteer participation in their Poppy Campaigns by creating a Facebook page (Ofcom, 2008) and the use of Facebook to engage people with political candidates in the current US elections are examples of how social networking sites have quickly become powerful tools for communication and to spread information. Their use by mainstream media and large organizations show that this type of communication is not a passing fad, it is one of the new ways of sharing information and if libraries wish to connect with people online, we need to look at what types of technologies and sites people are using.

These sites can allow libraries to connect with youth by being where they are and where they are communicating and sharing information with their friends, family and acquaintances. Libraries can post information on their programs and services to youth who become their friends, who in turn can post it to their friends and so on. Programs for youth tend to have a slow build up and become successful once teens themselves spread the word to their friends and other youth. Social networking sites can be a cheap and effective way to get the word out through youth who are already connected to the library to their friends and acquaintances about our programs and services.

At the Vancouver Public Library, we have created a Facebook Teen Advisory Group profile as well as continuing to post information on our library webpage and events

listings. Having the Facebook profile allows us to get information about library services and programs out into the online environment where youth are. It is also a way to connect and discuss library services with youth who may not be able to or wish to come to the library's monthly Teen Advisory Group meetings. Many of the youth who are interested are very busy and it can be hard to find a time that works for everyone. Using social networking technology will also give the Teen Services Librarian a chance to ask questions and get input from youth if a decision needs to be made quickly, before the next meeting. This helps build on the already existing relationship between the youth and the librarians. Discussion on sites such as Facebook is very easy amongst many people and it is much easier and less cumbersome than email correspondence. It is a very simple and effective way to have several people discuss a topic on the same thread. It also gives youth who may not be confident speakers a chance to have their say, as they don't have to worry about public speaking.

What are the concerns and how do libraries address these concerns?

Security and privacy issues are major concerns when setting up these profiles. At the Vancouver Public Library, we do not ask that every teen that is part of the Teen Advisory Group or other teen programs sign up to be our friend, it is optional to join. People must be invited to join and by keeping the group closed in this way as opposed to letting anyone join in an open group, we can control who is added as a friend. The level of privacy settings on the profile can be changed to allow more or less public access and this will be monitored as the profile is used. As the Teen Services Librarian, I am working with a Teen Advisory Group member to administer the page. Only youth that have been involved with teen library events and groups will be added as friends. We can still reach a large network of people because all of these youth can send out invitations to events to their friends who are not part of the group. It is important to know who is joining to make sure that all of them are in fact teens and that they are joining in order to participate positively within the group. We will also look at adding authors who have come to do visits or who are popular with teens as friends. The addition of these types of friends will be discussed further with the Teen Advisory Group. Setting parameters along with the youth involved before the profile is active and continuing to evaluate how the parameters are working is important to ensure a safe space for teens and to give them a voice in how this space is administered.

Every library will have different policies regarding using these third party, commercial websites and there are issues to consider beyond safety. Sites have paid advertisements and control over content posted. On some sites, photos, writing or other material posted becomes property of that site. Most sites have the right to remove content and if a library is posting photos of an event only on a third party site, these may not be archived and content may be lost if it is pulled by that site. Libraries risk losing control or ownership of the content and if there are technical problems with the site, the library's staff cannot do anything to fix the problems as they could with their own website.

A possible obstacle that you may find is that the youth involved with library programs do not want to be part of the social networking group as a friend. Some may not wish to

publicly identify with the library since social networking is a visible and public representation of one's identity and social group and the library may not fit in with that public image. Some youth may feel uncomfortable being friends with librarians since they are adults and possible authority figures. The space may be one that they want to keep only for their peers and they may feel compromised having an adult as a friend. There are other youth who are simply not interested in social networking sites for a variety of reasons, from protecting their privacy to not wanting to go along with the crowd.

As a librarian working with youth, you will need to consider whether you want to have your own personal profile attached to the group or if you want to create a separate one for work purposes. In a study in the UK, teachers were one group that expressed concern over what people might see on their profiles and how that may contrast with their public image and what is expected of them in that role (Ofcom, 2008).

Social Networking as an opportunity for reader's advisory

During the spring of 2007, Vivian Howard conducted focus group discussions with junior high school students in the Halifax Regional School Board in an attempt to determine the role of reading for pleasure in the lives of young teens and the role of the public library in supporting their recreational reading. As a result of these discussions, she established a taxonomy of teen readers based on the role of their peer group in influencing their reading habits. Three distinct groups of avid readers were evident: Social Communal readers (teens who are strongly influenced by their immediate friendship circle in their reading choices and frequently read series fiction and magazines), Solitary readers (teens who see reading as a solitary activity and who do not share their reading with their friends), and Detached Communal readers (teens who are uncomfortable sharing their reading with their immediate friendship circle but who develop detached reading communities, either actual or virtual, to support their recreational reading). Detached Communal readers tend to consider themselves more "serious" readers than Social Communal Readers: they dislike the predictability of series fiction and read a wide variety of themes and genres, often deliberately selecting challenging or "edgy" titles. Most of the teens in this group self-identify as very strong readers, often reading well above their grade level, and read a mixture of adult and YA titles, both fiction and nonfiction.

Detached Communal Readers are adamant in their dislike of receiving reading recommendations or advice from their friends. They resent the fact that a friend, particularly someone will less sophisticated reading skills, might want to influence them in their reading choices. Detached Communal Readers tend to view reading recommendations from friends as unwanted pressure and, potentially, even a threat to their friendship as the following quotes illustrate:
> *Isobel: Yeah, I had a friend recommend a book to me and I just didn't want to read it because she had said it was so good.…Yeah, if someone says this is the best book ever, I just won't get around to it…ever.*
> *Nicola: If someone tells me it's a great book, it's like it's THEIR book,*

and that makes me not want to read it. I want to find books for myself.
I have to find my own books. I've got to be a rebel.

In contrast, many Detached readers see themselves as trendsetters or opinion leaders and enjoy dispensing reading recommendations to others; these teens view themselves as gatekeepers to reading, and enjoy discovering new titles or new authors and passing on this information to their friends.

> *Catherine: When I read a good book I recommend it to my friends so now a bunch of people are asking to read this one book. I actually give them the book when I'm finished with it.*
> *Miriam: I'm the one that everyone comes to for recommendations because I have the most books. There's like a layer of books in my room.*

Detached Communal Readers thus avoid developing a reading community with their immediate friends. Instead, they actively seek other, more distant, opportunities for peer support for their reading. Several Detached Communal Readers established a virtual reading community through social networking tools such as the "iRead" function on Facebook.

These "detached" reading communities function as safe spaces for these avid readers to discuss and share their reading interests with peers without threatening their primary friendship relationships. The relative anonymity of these reading communities gives Detached Readers the peer encouragement and support they desire as well as the opportunity to give and receive reading recommendations in a risk-free environment. There are obvious implications here for library service to teens. Public libraries can and should make use of the social web in developing and supporting interactive online reading communities for teens.

Social Networking, Readers' Advisory, and connecting with youth: Canada's Online Teen Reading Club

Canada's Online Teen Reading Club
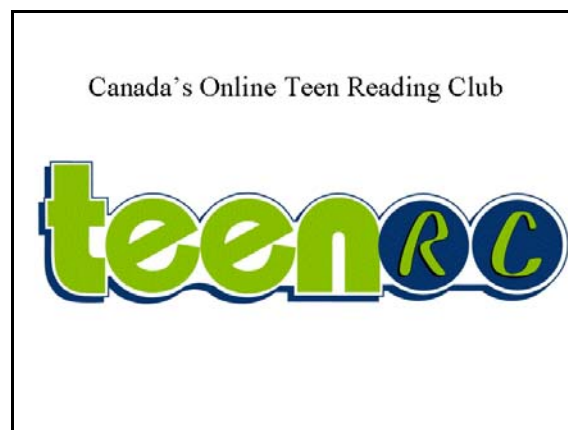
As described by Karen Sharkey, youth seek information through their social networks, and libraries can and should connect to youth by being where they are and where their

communications take place: online. As Vivian Howard's research shows, certain kinds of teen readers seek distant or anonymous opportunities for peer support for their reading.

In light of these facts, the province of British Columbia, Canada, developed an online reading promotion program for teenagers, simply called Teen Reading Club, or TRC. I'd like to take a few minutes to introduce this program to you, and will be speaking more at length about it next week in Québec City.

Background

Teen Reading Club is offered by three major partners: The Ministry of Education, Province of British Columbia; the British Columbia Library Association, a provincial-level professional association, and my home library in Victoria.

The provincial Ministry of Education has a division called the Public Library Services Branch, which is the body that coordinates and oversees all provincial library initiatives including TRC. The Public Library Services Branch provides staff support and funding for the program.

Teen Reading Club was developed in 2005 as an extension of the province's long-running and highly successful children's summer reading club, a reading promotion program.

We wanted to provide service to teens where they are: online. Knowing that peer relationships are very important to this age group, it made sense to create a teen space where teens could support each other's recreational reading. Moreover, we wanted to avoid reduplication of services between libraries, so moving to an online format made logical sense. We would create one large club that individual libraries could promote.

Background
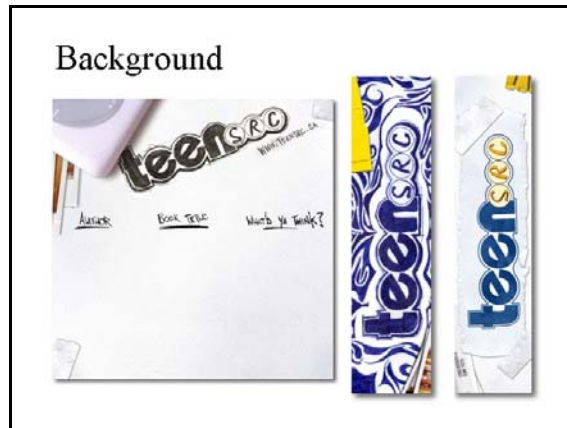
In the summer of 2005, a website was launched as Teen Summer Reading Club. The goal was to have 1,000 teenagers sign up in the province. In fact, 2,150 signed up! They posted 5,200 book reviews and 14,900 threads about teen literature were posted to the discussion forums.

Teen Summer Reading Club was offered again in 2006 and 2007, and proved to be very popular. Libraries and library systems in other provinces of Canada wanted to join, so the program started to become a national one.

Current Club

Current Club

Today, Teen Reading Club runs all year, and involves over 590 libraries in six provinces and one territory of Canada. We now have over 3,000 teens who have signed up and once as many as 170 have been online at once.

Book Recommendations
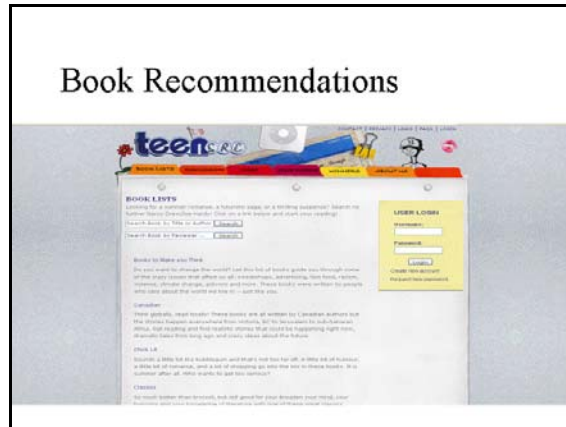
Research and experience has shown that adults are not teens' preferred source of reading recommendations. Knowing this, TRC is designed for teenagers to be able to recommend books to each other. We do provide a starter list of book suggestions in various categories such as "Classics", "Humour", "Goth" "Diaries and Letter" and "Weepers" and then open it up for the teens.
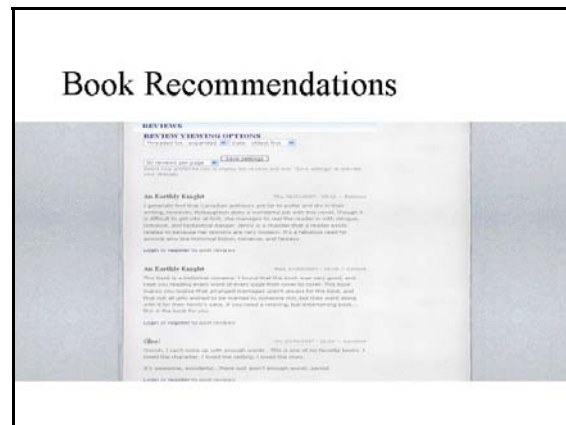

Teens can review these books, or add any book they have read to the many booklists on the site. Each year, teens review many hundreds of different books to each other through the book reviews. Last summer, over 700 different teenagers posted book reviews to the site.

Discussion Forums

Since teens are so accustomed to online social networking, they asked for discussion opportunities after the first summer. A discussion forum section was added where teens could post and respond to each other on a variety of mostly book-related topics. Librarian moderators are also present on these forums, keeping everyone safe and enriching discussions with further book suggestions. Since the discussion boards were added in 2006, well over 30,000 posts have been made to the forums. Some teens use the forums daily, finding peer encouragement in this relatively anonymous reading community.

Chat
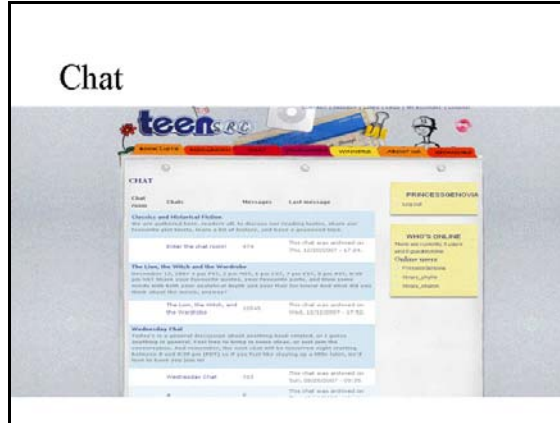
Chat technology offers yet another opportunity for social networking that is familiar to this age group that tends to use instant messaging and text messaging more than email. TRC offers chats focused on specific topics such as a book or genre, and the chats take place at a designated time. Librarians are also present in the chats and enjoy interacting with the teens. The teens seem to welcome us in their space when we use tools like chat that are familiar to them.

Privacy & Safety

Privacy and safety are considerable concerns for this program. Throughout the school year, a team of over 30 librarians across Canada moderate the book reviews and forums, and many more are involved in the high-traffic summer months.

The TRC privacy policy was developed at the provincial level and conforms to British Columbia's Freedom of Information and Privacy Act. Teens do not give out personal information online, and moderators alert teens if they are giving too much information, such as where they live or their real names. Moderators also make sure that the site is not used for commercial activities. The teens are very good at reporting spamming or posts selling goods, and the moderators make sure this misuse is not tolerated and such postings are deleted promptly. A terms of use statement is in development so that any teen creating a user account will agree to some basic terms of use for the site.

Conclusion
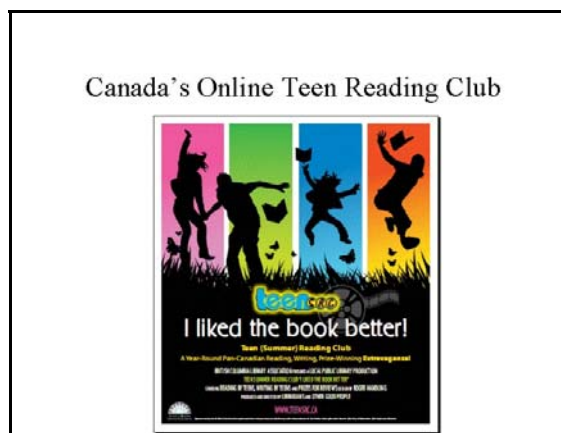
Canada's online Teen Reading Club is an example of how, in Vivian Howard's words, "public libraries can make use of the social web in developing and supporting interactive online communities for teens." TRC supports adolescent literacy and healthy peer relationships, and meets teens' needs where they are.

Thank you!

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