

Student Behaviors and Opinions Regarding the Use of Social Media, Mobile Technologies, and Library Research

by Stacy B. Baggett and Megan Williams

Daily we see students walking across campus tapping on the screens of their mobile devices or sitting in the library with their laptops in front of them, several windows open on their computer screens, earphones attached while texting on their smartphones or cell phones. Statistics for the use of mobile devices and social media abound. As of October 2011, Facebook statistics indicate that there are over 800 million users; and, of those, more than a third use their mobile devices to access Facebook. According to Pew Demographics (May 2011), 95 percent of users in the United States between the ages of eighteen to twenty-nine use the Internet, and 89–94 percent of all Internet users have some college or have attained a college education.

Study Focus and Setting

In order to discover what mobile technologies and what social media Shenandoah University students are using, the authors conducted a two-part research study in the fall of 2011. The first phase took place in September, when we conducted an online survey among our student community. In October, we conducted the second phase, a follow-up focus group comprised of volunteer students. This two-part study was designed to capture the opinions and behaviors of Shenandoah University

students regarding the use of social media, mobile technologies, and library resources. The following research questions provided focus for the project:

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- How do our current students use Web 2.0 tools and new technology?
- What do our current users know about library resources?
- How do our current students obtain information about available library resources?
- In what ways can the library offer information or resources using social media and mobile technology?
- How can the library design and implement marketing strategies to increase library resource usage?

Shenandoah University is a private, midsized institution located in northern Virginia. It has approximately 3,600 graduate and undergraduate students and offers over eighty programs of study. In 2009, Shenandoah University launched an iMLearning Program. All incoming freshmen are given a MacBook Pro laptop and the choice

of an iPod Touch, iPhone, or iPad. This mobile technology provides students with the tools necessary for communication, learning, and discovery.

The Shenandoah University Library, with the mission to support the university's academic programs and curriculum, consists of the main library facility and a branch health sciences library. The mission is fulfilled by developing and organizing quality collections and providing information services through technology access and support. The library currently provides information and access to all resources through the library website and Blackboard®, as well as providing face-to-face interactions with library faculty and staff. The library's Facebook page also makes information available to library "friends."

In September, the authors offered an online survey to all Shenandoah University students,

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with fifty-eight responding. To enhance the baseline information gathered from the survey and to gain a deeper understanding of student behaviors and opinions, we also chose to conduct a focus group. Through discussion with the students, we hoped to better understand how technologies fit into their social and academic lives and what they envision for the library of the future. Following the survey analysis, we developed six questions to ask students during the group session.

The first two multipart questions dealt with how current students use technology on campus and Web 2.0 tools:

1. What do you think mobile technologies are? What kinds of mobile technologies do you use? What do you use mobile technologies to do?
2. What do think social media are? What kinds of social media do you use? What do you use social media to do?

The next two-part question dealt with what students know about existing library resources.

3. What kinds of online library services do you think are essential for students? What kinds of online library resources do you think are essential for students?

The fourth and fifth questions dealt with how users obtain information about available library resources and attempted to discover new ways the library could offer resources using social media and mobile technology.

4. How would you like to access or use library resources and services?
5. What do you think are the most effective ways for the library to communicate with students?

In asking the final question, we sought information that would be helpful for designing and implementing strategies to increase usage and planning resource purchases.

6. What do you think the ideal library looks like now? What do you think the ideal library looks like twenty-five years from now? What is your vision of the library of the future?

We invited library work-study students to participate in our research focus group; six undergraduates attended. In order to accommodate the students' schedules, we chose a time between 6–7 p.m. and provided pizza, drinks, and dessert. One of the authors acted as group moderator. The other author acted as a scribe, taking notes on

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group dynamics and making observations on student interactions. The moderator explained the purpose of the study and the question-and-answer format of the hour-long session. Participants were informed that their responses would be kept confidential, and they were free to withdraw their consent at any time. Responses were recorded and transcribed afterwards. Field notes including observations were also used as data sources.

Findings

Use of Web 2.0 Technology and Other Technologies

The general response was that mobile technologies were considered tools that one could “carry around with you.” Cell phones were the primary tools mentioned, followed by laptop computers, either the iPad or iPod Touch, e-book readers, digital recorders, and cameras. The use of laptop computers as television screens for viewing movies

or favorite television shows was also important for students whose schedules did not allow them to watch during prime time.

All agreed that social media is a “connection between people” and is used as a way to “share things.” These are useful tools for communication and education, and are a means to keep in touch with people professionally. They provide an opportunity for networking in any profession (e.g., becoming “friends” with people in a field of study; social media also offer the ability to provide an easily updated mini-resume). With time constraints and demanding class schedules, social media provide an opportunity to multitask because students don’t want to “waste time” by creating multiple individual messages. They commonly use Facebook, watch television or a video, talk, email friends and family, and write papers or conduct research all at the same time.

All participants use Facebook daily, and some use Google+ and Tumblr. All responded that Facebook was a good way to stay connected with family and friends and to share photos as well as get to know people. All reported that they have used Skype, though some were more familiar with it than others. Only two have used LinkedIn, which they called the “business world’s Facebook.” This group of undergraduates reported using Twitter rarely. All had several apps on their cell phones, which participants indicated that they use regularly. Interestingly, there was little discussion or interest in wikis, blogs, or podcasts.

Knowledge of Library Resources

The collective response was the importance of interlibrary loans, allowing students access to resources the library did not own and saving them money. Other resources mentioned included the library’s online journal locator, the

online library catalog for in-house library items, and the availability of circulating laptops and chargers. Reference librarians were also considered an essential service to students. The students mentioned *Grove's Online* and *Naxos Music Library* as important and frequently used tools.

Obtaining Information about Available Library Resources

For some, having a resource available electronically was not important, merely convenient. Some liked using electronic resources, but felt that their reading comprehension was not as good when using them; several complained of eyestrain when having to read a computer screen for long periods of time. For example, electronic access was acceptable when reading a simple three- to ten-page document, but they preferred to read longer documents in print. Several agreed that taking notes with a computer was tiresome, requiring going back and forth between windows. Most still preferred print, and said they liked the feel and touch of a print source. They also pointed out the advantage of being able to highlight important parts of the text. Several preferred the use of tablets to laptops. Students indicated the tablet was easier to read, and they liked the ability to hold it, which made it feel more like a book. A few stated that an e-book reader might be an option, though they did not express having much experience with them.

Publicizing Library Resources Using Social and Mobile Technology

There were varying responses to this research question. Most participants agreed that they did not have the time or inclination to read emails or the campus e-newsletter (*SUN-e*). They favored daily email announcements with an informative subject line, such as "New library resource," that would

let them know the message was from the library and give them the option to open and read it if they wanted. They also suggested placing a sign at the library entrance or distributing library posters with important information in other buildings where students gather every day on campus. Several suggested the use of Facebook as a newsfeed, but they cautioned that if a page does not get updated on a regular basis (daily), then students would not visit it. None of the students was aware that the library had a Facebook page.

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What the Ideal Library Looks like Now

Interestingly, most said that both a computer lab and study rooms were important. Ideally, both individual/one-person study areas and larger group areas where students could study with friends would be available. With the iMLearning Program on campus, students said that they have the resources available to them with laptops and iPods, iPhones, or iPads, but would like more in-depth training and documentation on how to use them. This information could be available in the form of documentation, classes, or short video clips. They felt that having a reference librarian is very important for bibliographic instruction in the classroom and for assistance at the reference desk. The possibility of a drop-in or training session was discussed, and all felt that it would be helpful, but scheduling would be necessary to accommodate all students' schedules. More activ-

ity on Facebook was suggested, including recorded mini-sessions, question-and-answer discussions from the drop-in sessions on a specific theme, or perhaps a question of the day offering information on a particular library-related topic.

Envisioning the Ideal Library of the Future

Students stated that the physical library of the future would be a balance between the old and the new. They all still want a physical structure, but envisioned fewer books. The library would be a place to provide resources using new technology and formats, but would still provide access to older resources. There would be more electronic resources, online applications, and digital resources; social networking and mobile devices would provide a common method of access. Many stressed the importance of the preservation of older resources and the need to provide availability through new formats. Others indicated that it was important to "go green" and emphasized the need for less paper waste.

Communication was still important to all participants. They wanted to be able to talk to a person and liked the personal touch of working with a librarian. However, if they could not get to the library, then the use of email, online chat, or video chat was acceptable. Email offers the advantage of maintaining a copy of the correspondence for review.

Discussion

All student participants were undergraduates; no first-year freshman participated. After a brief awkwardness, the students relaxed, which allowed them to open up and discuss the issues and answer the questions freely. The session continuity was interrupted briefly when one student left early and another arrived late. As can occur

in focus groups, we observed that there was one very verbal and one very quiet participant. For future sessions, we might alter the format by asking the questions and having the students take turns or go around the table to respond. We also observed the potential for bias, as the moderator was a librarian, participants were library work-study students, and the setting was a library conference room.

Although the focus group provided some interesting information, it was an unrepresentative sample of our student body, with only six students participating. In conducting future focus group discussions, we would invite both undergraduate and graduate students, holding discussions in the student center and other student gathering places away from the main campus. Potential sites are the Bowman Building or the Health Sciences Building on the Northern Virginia campus, which has an entirely different composition of students. Our initial online survey showed that graduate students use different social media, and a focus group geared specifically toward this population might provide different information and ways of providing resources.

Our results indicate that our students are using social media and mobile technologies for communication with friends, networking professionally, and education. Thus, the library needs to stay abreast of the constantly changing social media. What is “in” for a freshman this year may well be out of use by graduation. Examples of this include MySpace, Diigo, and Delicious (formerly del.icio.us), which were popular two to three years ago, but have been replaced with Facebook, Twitter, Google+, and Tumblr, the latter two not even on the radar a year ago.

Traditionally, the library website has been the primary point of access for electronic resources. Stu-

dent responses indicate that we should expand our use of Facebook, posting daily or at least two or three times a week as a way to let students know what is new in library resources, events, or hours. According to the students, the more often a page posts, the more they will check in. In addition to regular posts, we should link to informative library podcasts or movies through Facebook. While using Facebook as a primary method of

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marketing library resources and services, we should develop additional marketing strategies for Blackboard®, the *SUN-e* campus electronic newsletter, the student newspaper, and signs in the library and other campus buildings. We should increase our marketing of mobile applications for library resources like the library catalog through SirsiDynix, WorldCat, or EBSCOhost. The goal is to maximize the use of the journals and databases that now comprise the main portion of the library’s materials budget.

While we hope to increase resource usage by changing our marketing strategies, we recommend developing drop-in training sessions offered throughout the semester for the use of specialized library resources or specific technology. This will address some of the students’ requests for training to use current technologies to complete course assignments. In addition to providing training for students, library faculty and staff will also need training to remain up-to-date with current changes in tech-

nology so they can provide the best possible services to our students.

Plans should be made to evaluate new initiatives as they are developed and implemented. It is essential to establish a good baseline of usage statistics to improve assessment. Statistics should be reviewed at the end of each semester as well as annually. It will be important to offer the survey again next year and hold additional focus groups with other student populations on campus. Technology and social media are changing rapidly, and we need to stay abreast of the changes so we can better provide resources and services for our students.

For a complete description of our research protocol, contact the authors.

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