

The final breakdown of search engines in alphabetic order was a good approach to analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of each however there appeared to be a bit of what could be characterized as almost a reverse bias against Google. Despite declaring it as the “predominant” search engine of the moment, the author was quick to point out that these trends of use have been highly volatile throughout their brief history, almost going out of his way to not let it appear that Google was the preferred search engine of the day. While this historical perspective is valid and worthwhile in terms of further identifying the changeable nature of the Web and Web technologies, a few more concrete reasons such as Google’s lack of truncation would be a more effective means of documenting its deficiencies. The statement that “it lacks many advanced search features” is extremely vague and it would be far better to cite the specific features he feels are missing rather than referring to a list of deficiencies listed on searchengineshowdown.com.

Overall however, the book presented in a very effective manner the essential knowledge necessary to develop a teaching plan capable of delivering quality instruction on Web search skills to a variety of audiences. In addition to the topical references covered in each of the chapters, the book also delivers extensive biographical information and publications of the experts cited throughout the text and a huge volume of sample handouts and training materials that could be modified for use in future teaching plans. The author’s use of screenshots and links throughout the book is highly effective at aiding the reader in understanding and providing additional information resources in this exceptionally well written and comprehensive work.

Michael K. Hills
The Pennsylvania State University,
College of Information Sciences and Technology,
329H Information Science and Technology Building,
University Park,
PA 16802, United States
Tel.: +1 334 538 1311
E-mail address: mkh179@psu.edu

Available online 23 February 2009

doi: 10.1016/j.ipm.2009.01.005

Social Software in Libraries: Building Collaboration, Communication and Community Online, Meredith G. Farkas. Information Today, Inc., Medford New Jersey (2007), \$39.50, ISBN: 978-1-57387-275-1

The book, “Social Software in Libraries”, introduces various applications of social software in contemporary libraries. It explores the growing phenomenon of social software and how these technologies can be applied in libraries. Farkas, as a distance learning Librarian, tries to present relevant constructs as simple as possible, so that a typical librarian could understand some of the cutting-edge technologies. She draws on the concepts of generation X throughout her book, illuminating the particularities of this generation. This sounds crucial since librarians are increasingly facing a generation that views the Internet as an inseparable and critical element of their lives.

In the information era, social software allows people to communicate and to build online communities. It also lets them capitalize on the behavior and knowledge of each other. To this end, Farkas believes that libraries should be aware of the consequences and applications of social software. They need to do so, because their patrons will be likely use some sorts of social software, whether IM, blog, or listen to podcasts. By building on these technologies, they can also disseminate information and their resources, or improve the internal communication of their libraries.

The first 13 chapters of the book introduce social software, and then elaborate on a wide range of tools and their possible applications in libraries. They encompass technologies ranging from blogs to gaming. The first chapter discusses what the social software is, and then enumerates its main characteristics. The next two chapters center on blog phenomenon and its applications. They posit that static Websites fail to put a human face on the library. On the contrary, a blog can provide this and enable libraries to educate their patrons. In this way, blogs make it easy to communicate with patrons and to build online communities.

In the Chapter 4, RSS (Rich Site Summary) is introduced as an excellent way to keep track of important trends and updates on the Web. RSS therefore makes content more accessible on the patrons’ side while content of multiple websites is featured on a single page. In the next chapter (Chapter 5), Farkas turns to wikis and contends that with simplified, easy-to-learn rules, wikis put experienced Web designers and Web novices on an equal footing. In libraries, wiki could let everyone generate content on the Web; libraries by employing wikis can create a platform where everyone even with little technical knowhow can share personal knowledge and experiences.

The Chapter 6 is dedicated to online communities. The basic idea is that libraries can build online communities where different parties are coming together and share their ideas. In the next chapter, the author discusses the emergence of online identities and the concept of social networking. She believes that modern libraries should realize the implications of these and the ways of providing related services. For instance, they can learn where their patrons are hanging out online through websites like Facebook. This can help them engage in viral marketing to promote library services.

In Chapters 8 and 9 the implications of social bookmarking and collaborative filtering as well as tools for synchronous online references are discussed. Chapter 10 focuses on the Mobile Revolution and explicates how technologies like handheld devices could be used in libraries. The next two chapters center on podcasting, screencasting, and vodcasting. They offer libraries different ways to speak directly to their patrons through visual and audio channels.

Probably the most interesting chapter of the book would be Chapter 13 where the applications of gaming technologies in libraries are mentioned. The author holds that most teens see libraries as having little to offer, and in many cases they are right. She contends that things like videogames can be utilized to garner the attention of this group of patrons. For instance, the Alliance Library System (ALS) has drawn upon a gaming environment and created the Second Life Library. This virtual library offers book discussion, classes on achieving success in second life, and library research classes.

Chapter 14 raises the point that libraries must explore their patrons and their idiosyncratic needs. There is no “typical library” since libraries exist in many different contexts and hence serve many different populations. The chapter provides libraries with multiple ways (i.e. formal surveys, and focus groups) to become more acquainted with their population. As a result, libraries would be able to pinpoint and implement more suitable technologies based on the needs of both their patrons and their staff. Chapter 15 looks at ways to keep up with new development in library technologies- without spending a lot of money and time. Finally Chapter 16 considers what the future of social software may hold.

The book has some clear strengths, particularly for a novice who is not well-accustomed to applications of new information technologies. Novices will find descriptions and advice on using software tools, while more skilled readers could benefit from new approaches and applications. Throughout the book, the author has put effort into introducing nuts and bolts of each technology. For example, when it comes to wikis, the history and background of the technology as well as the fundamentals are discussed. In addition, the book approaches the technologies in a way that the emphasis is placed on the applications of these technologies. So, when terms such as PHP, JavaScript, and XML are mentioned, the reader does not usually need to understand how these things work.

The book also embraces the latest development in related technologies. Not only does it hash out issues of older technologies, but also investigates the implications of the newer ones like Podcasting. It also goes beyond the description of the social software technologies, and tries to forge relationships between them and the enterprise of librarians. The introduction of each technology is followed by a great deal of examples and case studies. For instance, when RSS is introduced in Chapter 4, the discussion is complemented by a detailed and practical example of its application at Norwich University. The author explains how RSS helps the university communicate directly with distance learner online and how it keeps them aware of the updates.

However, the book suffers from some weaknesses. First of all, it seems too positive about the implications of social software. As Farkas herself mentions, the book only highlights success stories where libraries have improved services to patrons and attracted new populations by using social software. Nonetheless, each technology could clearly have downsides as well as upsides. For example, although the constructive impacts of online community are elaborated, the book does not ascertain how the emergence of them could threaten the offline communities. In addition, the chapter on social networking encourages librarians to embark on websites like Facebook for marketing purposes. But it does not address the risks of these marketing strategies where the privacy of the users could be infringed.

The introduction and implementation of every new technology requires the acceptance of the end users, here library staff and patrons. To assure buy-in of the real users of technologies, libraries need to acquire a great deal of understanding over the specific context within which the technology is going to be implemented as well as the specific needs of the users. In fact, the book discusses very little over the particularities of context of libraries (which are valid across libraries), and the techniques whereby we can raise our understanding of the real users. In addition, it seems that in the case studies the book by and large delves into the details of specific technologies. This could be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it explicates pros and cons of some of these technologies. On the other hand, the overemphasis is placed on specific technologies rather than concepts and applications. This is particularly important since many of these technologies would undoubtedly become obsolete in near future.

In conclusion, the book underscores and suggests some social software technologies and helps librarians make informed choices about what is best for their libraries. It provides the librarians with necessary skills and information to embrace the most popular technological tools: blogs, RSS, wikis, social networking software, screen casting, photo-sharing, podcasting, instant messaging, gaming and so on. In addition, the author helps readers keep up through her companion websites which includes links to resources mentioned in the book, new development in social software tools, and news and other resources.

Mohammad Hossein Jarrahi
337 Hinds Hall,
College of IST,
Syracuse University,
Syracuse, NY 13244, USA
Tel.: +1 814 321 2585
E-mail address: mhjarrah@syr.edu

Available online 25 February 2009