

# Keeping up: strategic use of online social networks for librarian current awareness

Sue Cook,  
Information Specialist,  
CSIRO Information Management and Technology  
[sue.cook@csiro.au](mailto:sue.cook@csiro.au)

Constance Wiebrands,  
Manager, Flexible Delivery and Lending Services,  
Curtin University Library  
[c.wiebrands@curtin.edu.au](mailto:c.wiebrands@curtin.edu.au)

## **Abstract:**

*Librarians were surveyed in August 2009 about their use of online social networks for professional information. This paper describes the features of online social networking tools that facilitate the flow of relevant current awareness information. Practical methods that can be used strategically within tools to ensure that information is professionally relevant are described, including methods of discovery and evaluation.*

## Introduction

As librarians distributing current awareness information, we know that there are various parameters that are included in the evaluation of a desirable current awareness tool. The tool should be able to deliver current, relevant information without a huge burden in time and effort for the client or adding to their information overload. We need to apply these same criteria in assessing our own current awareness needs.

Librarian information sources – journals, conference papers, blogs - are either too slow to publication to be truly current or too numerous to effectively monitor.

A scan of the Twibes Twitter directory in May 2009 found that 781 users who identified as librarians had registered on the directory. There were 249 members of the Library Society of the World Friendfeed group, 528 members of the ALIA Facebook group and over 500 other librarian groups. The members of these communities are not only sharing information about themselves but information about their work and professional lives. They share links to, and discussion about the latest tools, resources, technical help, library concepts, conferences and the latest publishing scandals.

There are many librarians who have a look or sign up briefly to an online social networking site but do not see any value. We wanted to see if those that are using the sites for professional information have some sort of strategy that creates value.

There have been papers which examine the use of online social networks by libraries and librarians to communicate with their clients to provide services (Milstein 2009; University of British Columbia Health Library wiki 2009) and there are many sites which offer to advise organisations or individuals on the “rules” for using social networking sites (hereafter SNS) (McBride 2009).

However, the rules may be better thought of as strategies, and must be considered in the context of the particular use to which the individual is putting the tool.

Features that enhance the information seeking/information consumer experience are different from those that would enhance a tool for marketing or broadcast. For example, the value of a SNS for the purpose of information consumption is not determined by how many “friends” or “followers” that you have following you, but in the numbers and quality of the people that *you* follow.

This is a rapidly growing and evolving field; for example, the day after the survey was launched Friendfeed was bought by Facebook (Vascellaro 2009). Another paper "Online Social Networks, Virtual Communities, Enterprises, and Information Professionals" written in July 2007 (Reid & Gray 2007) does not mention Twitter or Friendfeed. Wikipedia (2009c) currently lists 155 “major active” SNS.

## Social networking sites - the theory

What are the features of SNS that make them a valuable source of current awareness?

Boyd and Ellison (2007) define social networking sites as:

“...web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.”

They are, at their simplest, communication tools in which the communication is one-to-many and asynchronous. The other key information flow characteristic is that the flow is “push”. Similar to reading RSS feeds, the information is automatically delivered to the seeker. Unlike RSS feeds, on SNS the information is pre-filtered according to your interests. Unlike search, or even RSS feeds, the opportunities for serendipitous discovery of information that you did not even know you wanted are magnified.

SNS provide a range of different tools within the site to communicate with others, such as commenting, chat, messaging systems, discussion forums, and uploading and sharing of media. They facilitate information sharing by enabling the easy posting of links and users' comments and discussion on these. Users can use SNS to pose questions and obtain answers. SNS are used to supplement professional communication at events such as conferences.

The SNS in this study differ from crowd-sourced news sites such as Digg and Reddit, in that users of these SNS must specifically select each individual who contributes to their information or news stream. Each news stream is therefore personalised. It is this choice that also distinguishes the social networking sites such as Twitter from forums, IRC, and, to some extent, blogs, although there are blogging sites in which only your friends can see your posts.

Within the group of SNS that we are considering there are differences in how this relationship works. For example Facebook, LinkedIn and Ning work on the principle of only allowing reciprocal relationships. You can friend someone only if that person wants to friend you also. Whether or not non-reciprocal connections are possible affects the way the information flows and its value for current awareness. Non-reciprocal connections mean that the information is more likely to come from a source not usually accessed and aids serendipitous discovery. It can also reduce the echo chamber discussion that occurs in close groups.

There is another difference between these sites and social bookmarking sites such as Delicious, in that the features of the site allow and encourage discussion along with the sharing of links. Google Reader recently added social features to its "sharing" feature to encourage "friending" and conversation via comments and likes (Bilotta 2009).

## People/Filters

In an online social network, when you choose who to "friend" or "follow" you are choosing your information sources and your information filters (and your information bias).

"I myself have been known to refer to my FF peeps as a distributed wetware online information filter." (Hooker 2009)

"...social media platforms like Twitter, Friendfeed, and Facebook as "smart people networks" that allow for the sharing of relevant information from friend networks that are customized to individual preferences" (Gray 2009).

Educators have used the terms "personal learning environment" (PLE) or "professional learning network" (PLN) to describe these networks.

As they form the basis of the value of the information that will be in your news stream, selection is important. The people you select should be your influencers, gatekeepers and gurus. The strategy has long been known by special librarians. As Sturges (2001) said, in any organisation one joins as a librarian there are already "gatekeepers", people who others naturally go to as information sources. It is recommended that the gurus are to be cultivated, as sources, but also as people to whom you could direct information so it could be disseminated to the rest of the organisation. Selecting people to follow is just applying this strategy in reverse to our own information seeking. Seek out the online gatekeepers, who like to share, who are active in the particular fields in which you are interested, and you should be fed interesting, relevant information.

## Discovery

Finding who to follow can initially be difficult. Starting with people that you know from other sources, then using "friends of a friend" (FOAF) features can be useful. These features expose the people that your friends are conversing with or finding interesting. Some SNS have associated directories of people listed from their profiles or self nominated such as the "Twibes" directory for Twitter users. Most SNS have some sort of people search in which you can search peoples profile and listed interests. A variant of a FOAF feature is the community meme on Twitter tagged #followfriday. It is ideally used to list two or three people that a person is following that others would find interesting.

Discovering your ideal PLN depends on the site you are trying out. There has been research that establishes that different sites have different demographics (boyd 2009a; Silverthorne 2009). The demographics will shift over time; for example, as a site becomes mainstream.

## Evaluation

Initial evaluation of the potential value of someone's information can be via their information in their profile and updates. Do their listed interests tie in with yours? Can you establish who they are? Do they have a link to the rest of their web presence for

more information? Do they converse with others in your network? Are the links they have already supplied interesting? Laurel Papworth refers to identity, reputation and trust being built in SNS (Hoover 2007; Papworth 2008) and it is these factors that you are evaluating.

## **Numbers**

According to networking theory, there is a critical mass of people that is needed to follow in order to derive value from an SNS. This is an application of Metcalfe's law (Chen 2008). Concepts such as the hive mind, crowd sourcing (Howe 2006) and the long tail (Anderson 2004) all derive from the notion of having a large number of people contributing information to a problem.

There is also considered to be a maximum stable number (Dunbar's number: roughly 150) of social connections a person can have (Wikipedia 2009a). However, many people on SNS follow many more than 150 people. Pesce (2008b) and others (Gunderloy 2008) have termed this "hyperconnectivity". Some SNS and applications to access them have built in features to help manage a large number of friends including lists or groups and filters.

## **Sharing information**

Information flows in SNS are prompted by "Status updates". Twitter users are asked, "what are you doing?" Facebook "What's on your mind?" LinkedIn "What are you working on now?" Friendfeed users have no prompt. Update prompts are not to be taken literally. People use their updates to post links to interesting sites, news, discussion, photos and videos - anything that they want to share.

Social networks are conversation tools. Any conversation tool is used to share information. Online social networks are easily used to share online information. Some recent statistics suggest social networks have become more popular than email for sharing links (Carlson & Angelova 2009) however the source of the data has been questioned.

## **Public streams and pointless babble**

Most networks do not reveal their value via the public stream. Some recent research (Pear Analytics 2009), which was widely reported because they stated that the posts of an SNS were "pointless babble", was found to be based on the researcher's opinion of the posts in the public stream. Others (Fry 2009) responded, pointing out that analysis of the public stream of Twitter or Friendfeed does not contribute to understanding these sites. Everyone's news stream should be personalised for them and is a fragment of the public stream. Looking at the public stream in order to assess value is analogous to a "noisy" search in librarian terms. The tool has not been optimised for the current awareness use.

People do post updates to so-called trivial information. This has been called phatic communication by boyd (2009b; see also Thompson 2007). It aids assessment of social connections. Such communication is part of social grooming and is required to form opinions of the value of the other information that a friend conveys. As in any

social network online, or in real life, there are shared in-jokes, memes, and jargon that contribute to the bonds between the members of the group and are impervious to outsiders.

"Right. The point is that you can't judge something like Twitter from standing outside it, because it all looks pretty trivial if you don't know the people. Twitter users don't experience Twitter as a random stream of banalities from strangers, we experience it as a meaningful stream of banalities from friends." (Kemble 2009).

### **Currency/timeliness/speed**

As most SNS updates are short messages and easily scanned and at least a few people in your network are likely to be hyperconnected, the key feature of the information flows in these networks has turned out to be the speed of information transference between users and across networks (see the "ripple effect" discussion in Papworth 2009, for example). This is even more apparent when globally important events take place and someone witnessing the event is a node of the network.

This means that they often beat other information sources (including main stream news media) for speed and currency (for example, see the Pesce 2008a discussion of the 2008 Chinese earthquake). Many mainstream news sources have started citing SNS users (Kemble 2009).

It is also the speed and ease of use which has led to their use for conference microblogging. Many conferences will now facilitate this via published hashtags.

Many SNS provide mobile interfaces so that it is easy for people to post from their phones, facilitating once again speed of information flows. Twitter is confined to 140 characters because it started as a site to which people could post by SMS.

### **Search**

Although many SNS have a search feature it is considered that it is the flow of the current information rather than being able to search the archives which make the sites useful for the purpose that we are discussing. Indeed Twitter recently disclosed that although they will keep their archive indefinitely they currently limit the search functionality (Kirkpatrick 2009a).

However, an ability to construct and save a search that is run on the public stream to give current results is useful, and has led to the "trending topics" feature on Twitter and the notion of "real time search" (Sullivan 2009).

### **Examples**

Here are some of the specific features of the five most popular sites for professional information sharing according to the survey.

## Twitter

Launched in July 2006, this SNS' well-publicised tagline was "What are you doing?" This has since been broadened to "Share and discover what's happening right now, anywhere in the world." (*Twitter*) This site is very simple in conception; basically, it allows users to post status updates. It is credited with popularising the concept of 'microblogging' (Wikipedia 2009d).

While it has been cited as the "fastest growing Member Community destination" by Nielsen (McGiboney 2009), the exact number of users is unknown but is estimated to be shortly more than 18 million in the US alone (Ostrow 2009).

The status updates of whoever you follow appear in your stream. Replies (also called "mentions") are designated by "@". The default setting is that you cannot see replies by your friends to people that you do not follow. (Twitter removed being able to see FOAF replies on 12 May 2009 to a great out-cry (Cashmore 2009; Kirkpatrick 2009b)). Resharing is designated by "RT" or retweet. These conventions were designed by the community then became supported by the software. Another community-developed feature is the hashtag. Words preceded by "#" were designed to facilitate search and accumulation. They have proved most useful for collating conference tweeting. "Trending topics", which indicate currently popular words and tags, are a relatively recent enhancement.

Connections on Twitter are not reciprocal. If someone has a public stream, you can follow them without them having to consent to them seeing your stream too. This is particularly attractive to celebrities and other influencers, who can have hundreds of thousands of followers without being overwhelmed by those followers' streams. Direct communication from the followers can still be located via the "mentions" search for the "@". Conversely potential followers are notified to the followee and perceived spammers can be blocked.

Its simplicity, combined with promotion by celebrities, has led to rapid uptake and growth and being taken up by marketers, spammers and social media experts vying for attention. Fortunately, the crucial feature is still that you choose who to follow, and unless you choose to follow a marketer or spammer, their messages will not show in your stream.

Another feature is the many ways to access the stream and contribute your status updates deriving from the public release of the API. Besides the web site there are browser plugins, desktop applications, mobile phone applications, applications that integrate Twitter with photos, maps, video, applications that aid search and friend discovery.

Privacy controls are simple. Either your stream is public and everyone can access it, or private and only accessible to those you give permissions. A private stream can also prevent interaction and cross postings to other services such as the corporate microblogging service Yammer.

Karp (2007) on Twitter:

“What’s fascinating about following the flow of tweets (assuming, again, you’re following the right people) is that they contain an unbelievably broad range of content, including:

- Ideas
- Problems/issues/complaints
- Links
- Links + comments/observations
- Questions & answers
- Greetings
- Deep meditations
- Dopey nonsense
- Jokes”

## **Facebook**

Facebook launched in February 2004 for users with a .edu email address, but opened to all users in September 2006.

Its numbers of users is stated by Facebook to be 300 million as at 15 September 2009 (Zuckerberg 2009).

Facebook is a much more complex system than Twitter, featuring a news feed of status updates and also applications that include games. It is advertising-supported.

Connections have to be reciprocal, and there is a complex system of privacy controls that can be used to specify who sees your updates. This means that it is much more likely that connections on Facebook are with people that you actually know.

The ability to connect and reconnect with people that you know has led to its popularity and to a currently rapid growth in the older demographic (Corbett 2009).

However, we would contend that this way of operating may make Facebook less valuable for professional current awareness, as you are less likely to seek influencers and make connections outside your pre-existing networks.

News streams support “likes” and threaded comments, which can lead to longer discussions. Likes or comments on an item in someone else’s stream will be visible to everyone who is a connection of theirs (FOAF feature).

Facebook has “Groups” and “Pages”. You become a member of a group and a fan of a page.

Groups are designed to be as they describe- for groups of like-minded people around some sort of subject. However, activity and discussion in a group does not appear in the news stream of the members of the group. They are closed environments. We believe therefore that groups on Facebook are not as active as rooms can be in Friendfeed. The reasons for this from Facebook’s point of view are that Facebook is monetized by advertising so pageviews are important.

On the other hand “Pages” are akin to fan sites. They are set up for control by an administrator, but can allow fans to post discussion. Postings to a “page” wall can appear in the news stream of the fans.

## **Friendfeed**

Launched in October 2007, this is “a real-time feed aggregator that consolidates the updates from social media and social networking websites, social bookmarking websites, blogs and micro-blogging updates, as well as any other type of RSS/ Atom feed.”(Wikipedia 2009b).

Connections do not have to be reciprocal and the privacy settings are similar to Twitter.

Friendfeed bills itself as a "lifestream aggregator". This means that members can feed into it their activity on many other sites. As of 12 September 2009, there were 58 different services that a member could stream or just use a generic RSS feed. In addition, you can use the site itself to post updates. You can "like" or comment on any post and comments are threaded. Threading seems to promote discussion with threads getting very long. If a person that you follow comments or “likes” a post then you will see that post in your stream even though the original poster may be a person that you don’t follow. FOAF features aid serendipitous discovery. There are also groups or rooms that you can follow, both public and private by invitation only. You can choose that the posts from these groups will appear in your news stream. Liking or commenting on a post will "bump" the post in your stream. This keeps within view posts that are currently actively discussed.

Some people find this site much too noisy. You can get enough information by following far less people. Many people join or set up streams but never revisit to comment or contribute to the conversations. Their streams however may still be used as discussion starters by others. Fortunately, there is also a "hide" feature to filter some of the noise. If someone streams their music from last.fm for example, you can hide the entire stream. Another distinguishing feature is "real time" updating. The site auto updates without the reader having to refresh. There is also a "best of day" feature. This means that if you have not visited the site for a while you can still see the posts which created the most interest from your friends during the previous 24 hours.

Friendfeed launched after Twitter was established and integrates closely with it. Twitter streams can be included in a Friendfeed stream, but, more importantly, comments on a Twitter post can be crossposted to Twitter as replies. Twitter replies that show in a Friendfeed stream link to the Twitter stream that the reply is directed to. Friendfeed also supports Twitter hashtags.

## **Ning**

Launched in October 2005 as “an online platform for people to create their own social networks” (Wikipedia 2009e). Currently Ning has more than 1.5 million Ning Networks (called Nings) and 33 million registered users (Ning 2009).

On Ning you can choose not only who to connect with but on which networks. A search on 29 September 2009 for Nings related to "librarians" found 260 networks. Connections are reciprocal.

Nings have been established as conference sites and to support library communities.

## **LinkedIn**

LinkedIn is targeted at professional connections for business purposes. Because of this, connections are reciprocal and there are features which discourage connections with people who you do not already know professionally. Currently they have 47 million members (LinkedIn 2008). There are groups and group updates appear in your news stream. As users are encouraged to use their own names and provide a complete CV, it is easy to make assessments of reputation and trust. In addition, the groups and the discussions on them are professional in nature.

## **Survey**

### **Methodology**

A survey was conducted of librarians who use social networking sites. The survey was publicised on Twitter, Friendfeed and Facebook, as well as via email, and ran from 10 August 2009 until 23 August 2009.

We developed the survey on SurveyMonkey. There were 17 questions, including 3 demographic questions and one "add any comment" question. The questions went from the general questions regarding their use of online social networks to the specific questions regarding the way they use their favourite site for current awareness. Most questions had a free text field for extra comments.

We launched the survey on Twitter, Friendfeed, and Facebook almost simultaneously on 10 August 2009, a Monday morning, at 7.00 am Western Australian time, then again that evening.

One of the authors observed at the time:

"Using Twitter to publicise a survey is an interesting exercise:

1. quick responses from respondents (cf my first Tweet at 7:09; 30 responses by 8:14am!)
2. quick feedback on survey: where is LinkedIn, questions confusing
3. retweets by many people
4. contacting people overseas - Germany (Matthias), US, Canada. I also chatted on Twitter with Malaysian contact who asked if he could retweet it (shall see how many responses we get from Malaysia!)

10:57am: 66 responses!"

## Results

### Our respondents

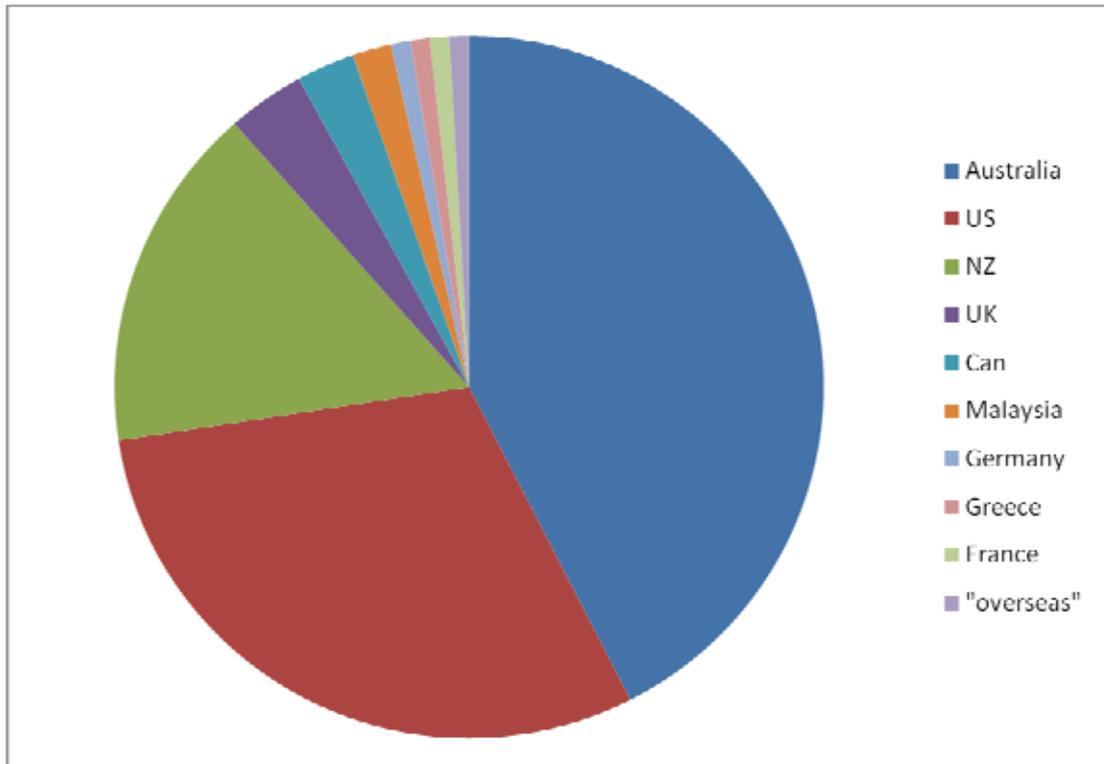


Figure 1. (Question 14)

137 responses were received. The survey tool recorded 119 “completions”, that is, respondents working from the beginning through to the end of the survey, even if not all questions were answered.

113 respondents answered the question about their location, with the most numerous group coming from Australia (48), followed by the United States (34), and New Zealand (18). (Only two respondents identified themselves as being in Malaysia.)

How long have you been working in the library sector?

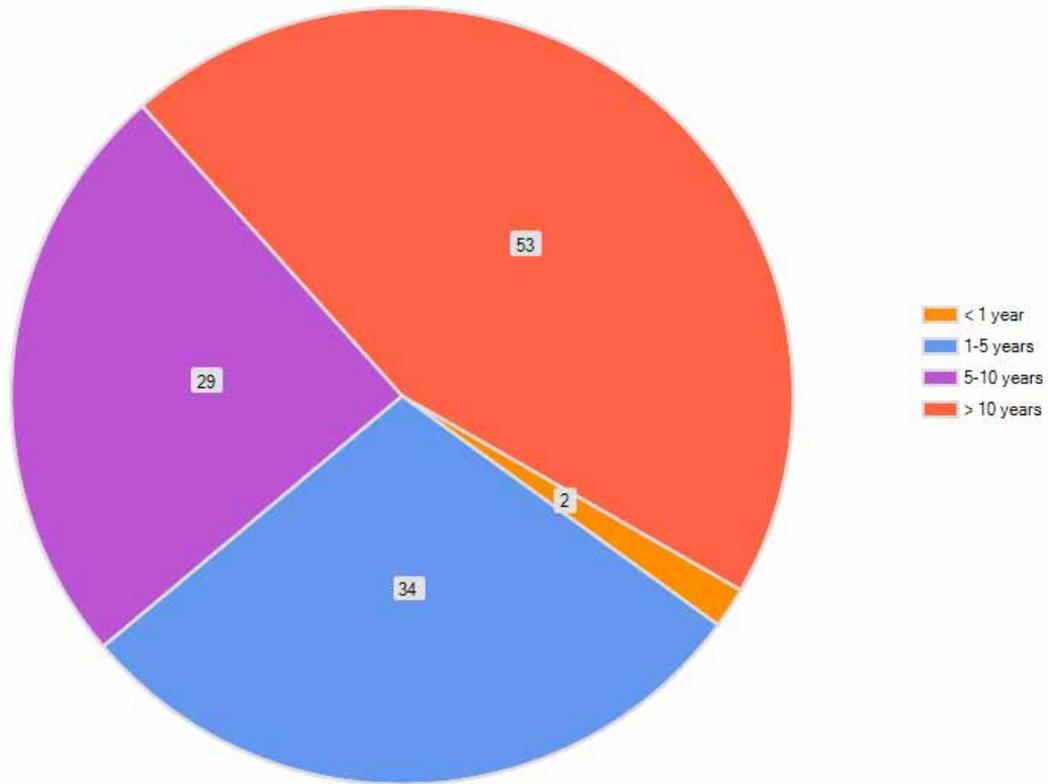


Figure 2 (Question 16)

Of 118 respondents who answered the question “How long have you been working in the library sector?” 53 (44.9%) said they have been working for ten or more years in the library sector. 29 (24.6%) respondents had been working for between five to ten years in the sector, while 34 (28.8%) had been working for one to five years. Only 2 (1.7%) respondents had less than a year’s experience in the library sector.

From these results it would appear that the age of a library professional does not necessarily predict their use (or otherwise) of SNS.

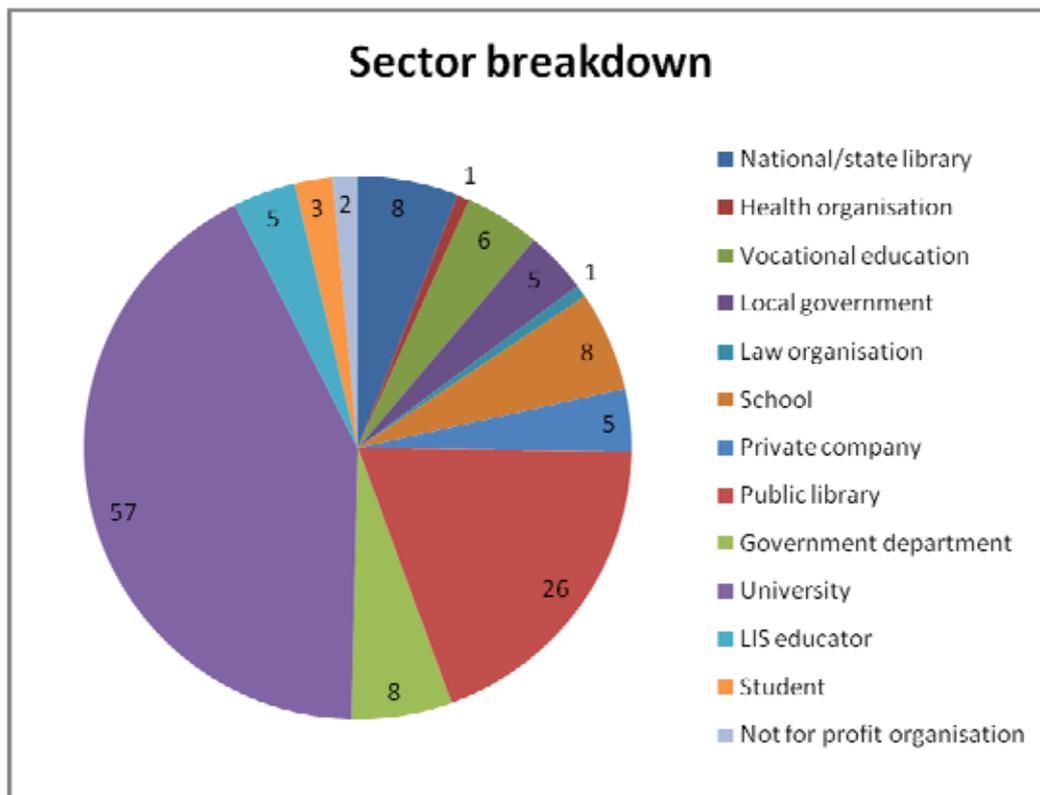


Figure 3. Sector breakdown. (Question 15)

The largest group of respondents (57) was from university libraries. Public library respondents were the next most numerous, with 26 responses. There were equal numbers of respondents from national or state libraries and school libraries, 8 responses from each sector.

## Which Sites?

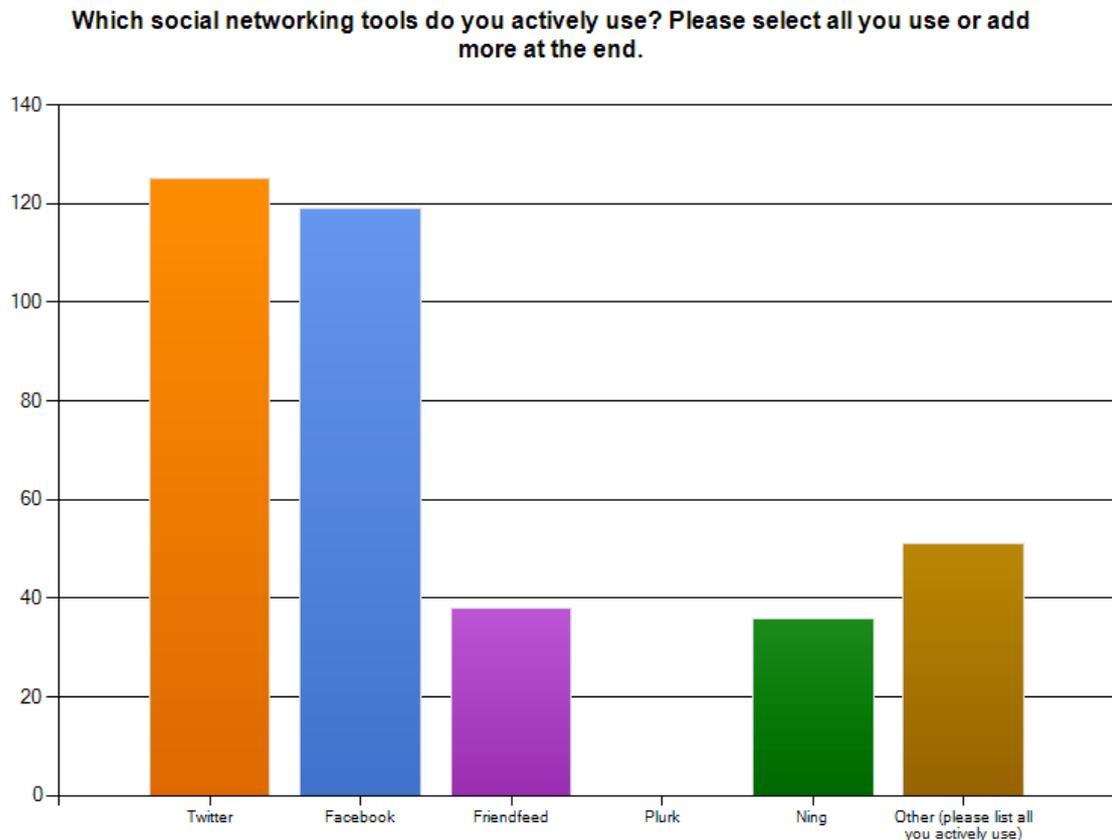


Figure 4. Social networking sites used (Question 1)

137 responses were received for the question: “Which social networking tools do you actively use?” Of this number, 125 respondents (91.2%) said they use Twitter, 119 (86.9%) use Facebook, 38 (27.7%) said they use FriendFeed, and 36 (26.3%) use Ning.

Flickr (16) and LinkedIn (15) were the other sites respondents mentioned most. The social bookmarking site, Delicious, was mentioned by seven respondents. Only three respondents said that they use MySpace. Blogs were also mentioned – three respondents mentioned Blogger and four said they “used blogs”. One respondent said: “I count Google Reader as a social network, as I regularly share articles with friends.” Another response: “water cooler, bar stool”. Other sites that were mentioned were Livejournal (3), Bebo (2), and YouTube (2). Some of the sites that rated single mentions show an interesting snapshot of people’s interests and how these are followed online: LiveMocha (language learning), Ravelry (knitting and crochet), LibraryThing (personal libraries), and AuthorsDen (writing and reading).

## Use of the sites

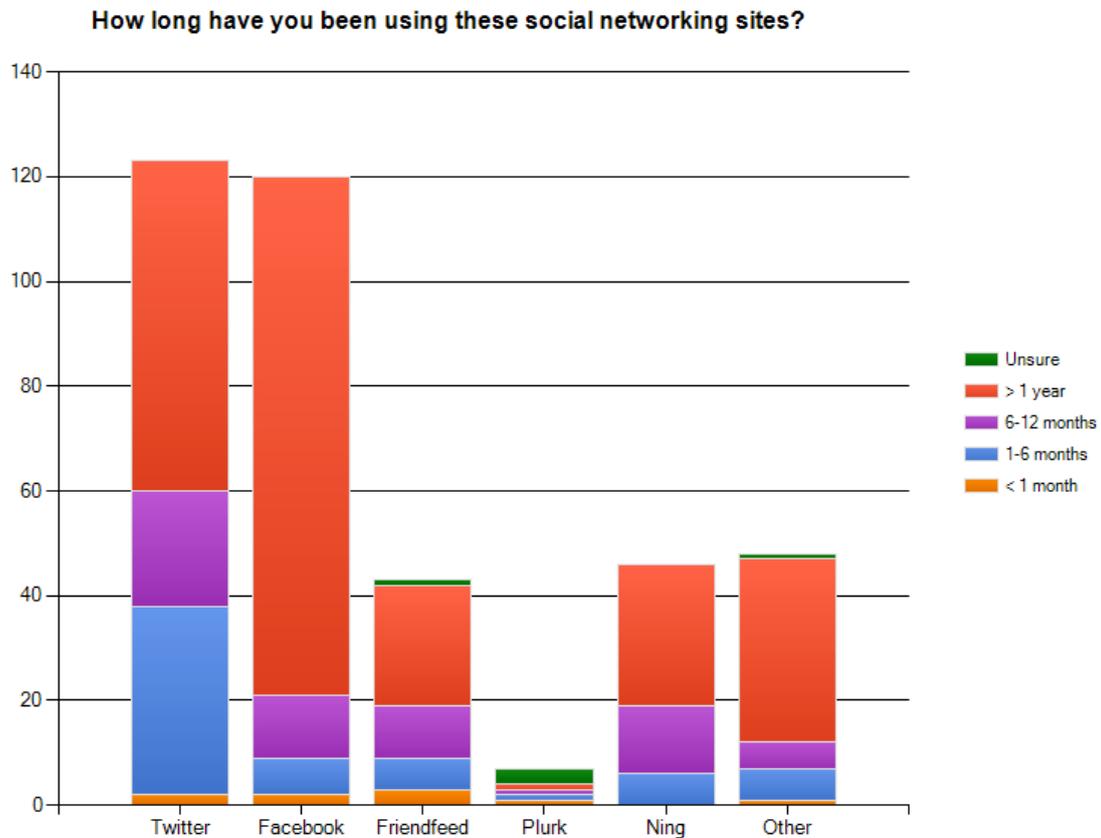


Figure 5 Length of time using SNS. (Question2)

133 responses were received for the question: “How long have you been using these social networking sites?” The majority of respondents had been using SNS for more than a year (see Figure 2, above). Facebook was the site respondents had been using the longest, with 99 respondents saying they had been using it for more than a year. 63 respondents had used Twitter for more than a year.

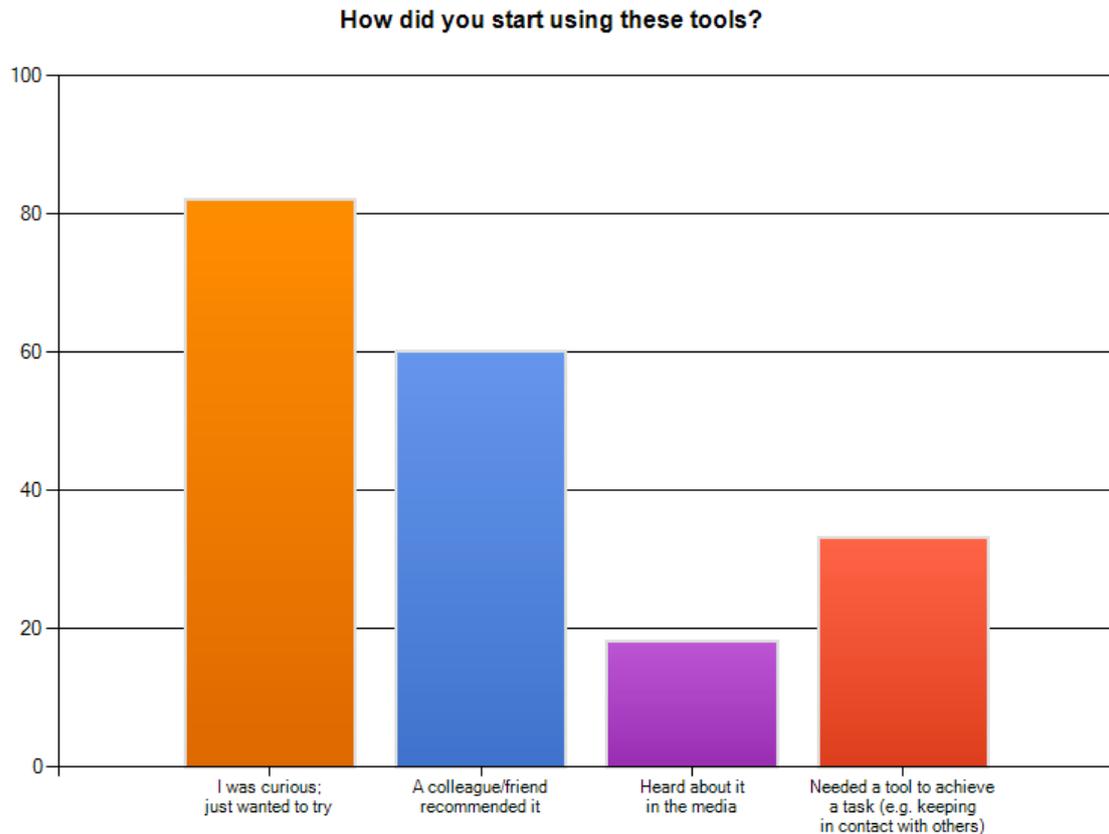


Figure 6. How did you start using these tools? (Question 6)

Curiosity was the main reason cited by respondents for starting to use SNS. One respondent stated that:

“As well as being curious, it is often the only point of contact I have for people living in different locations. Its [sic] a good way to keep in touch without being as formal as individual emails. I use Twitter as an environmental scanning tool to see what other interesting people in my professional/hobby fields are up to.”

Many also tried a SNS after it was recommended by a colleague or friend. One respondent noted:

“Actually, I don't think I heard about it in the mainstream media - but through blogs. I distinctly remember trying Flickr in 2004 or so because Jessamyn West linked to her Flickr photos via Librarian.net. Pretty sure I tried FB, Twitter and LinkedIn via links or discussions on various blogs that came up in my RSS reader. Twitter was probably the only one that I had heard about for quite a while before actually getting an account - the concept just didn't appeal or seem relevant to me at first.”

A number of respondents also said that they learned about these tools through “23 Things” or other Web 2.0 training provided at their workplaces.

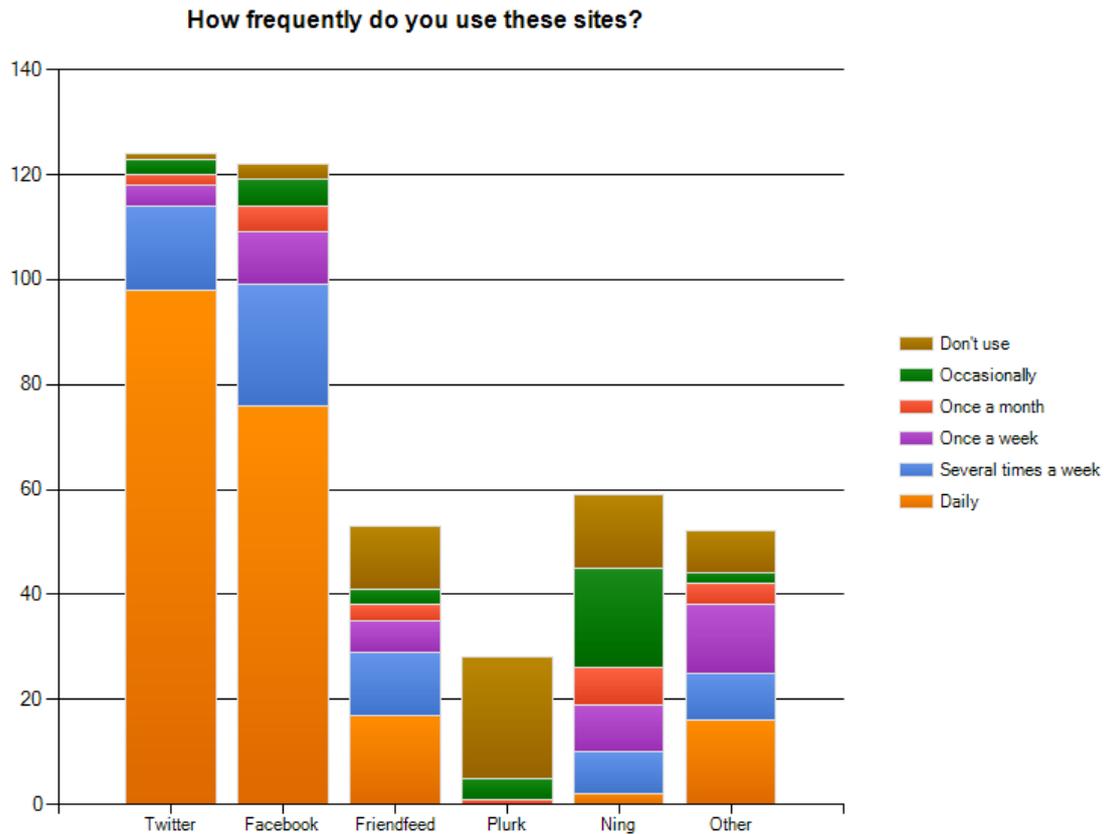


Figure 7. How frequently (regularly) do you use these sites? (Question 3)

133 responses were received for the question “How frequently do you use these sites?”

Twitter was the SNS most frequently cited (98 responses) as a tool used daily, followed by Facebook (76), Friendfeed (17) and LinkedIn (13). Flickr was also mentioned by respondents, with one person stating that they use Flickr “daily this year (as I’m doing a 365 day challenge)”

On average, how much time do you spend on each site?

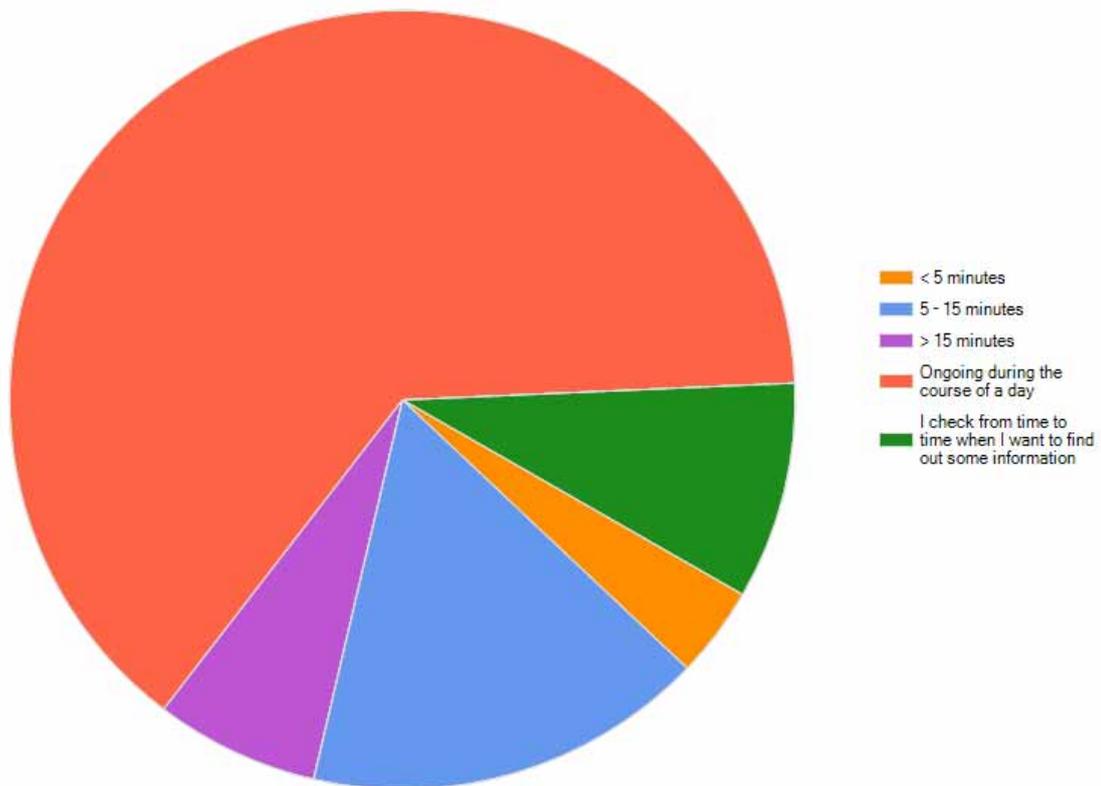


Figure 8. Average time spent on SNS. (Question 4)

133 responses were received for the question, “On average, how much time do you spend on each site?” The majority of respondents, 85 (63.9%), said that they used SNS on an “Ongoing [basis] during the course of a day”. This sort of usage is facilitated by some SNS. For instance, Twitter users might use a browser plug-in to view updates as they are posted throughout the day.

Most respondents actively used more than one SNS.

## Information uses

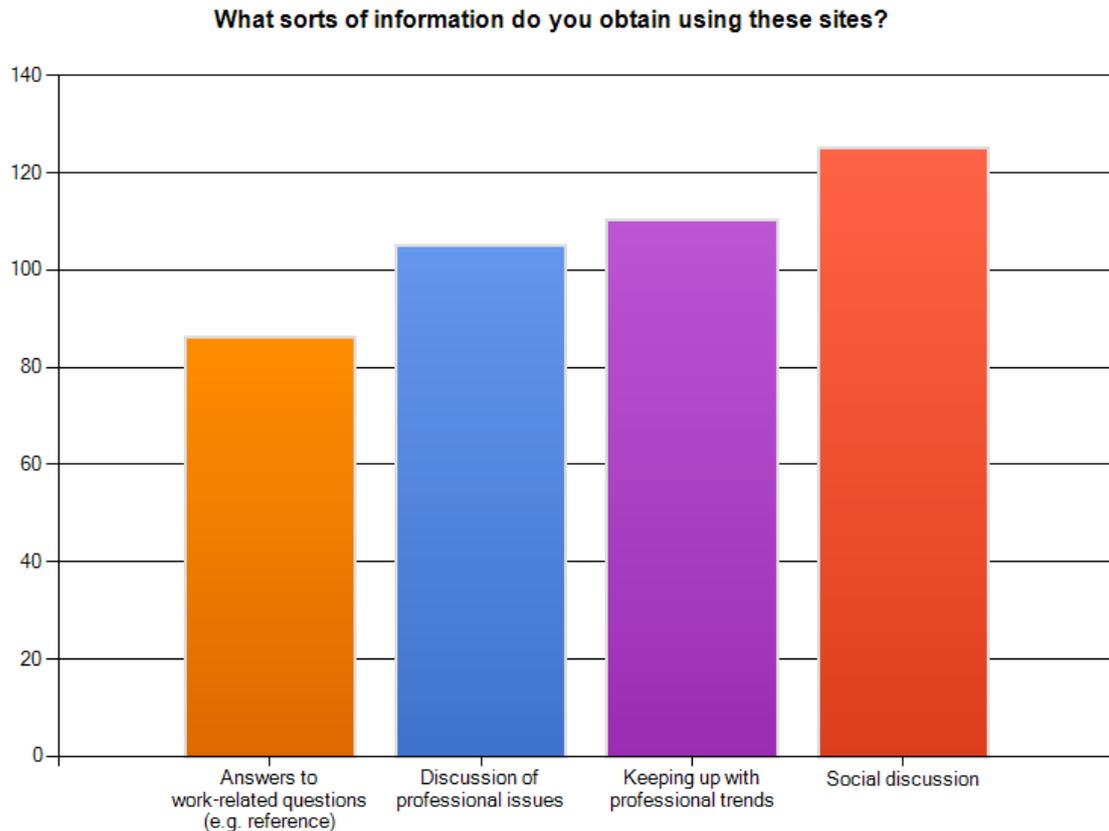


Figure 9. Types of information. (Question 7)

Most respondents said they used SNS for “social discussion”. One respondent said they use SNS to “share resources; as a filter - trusted professionals/frolleagues [sic] read other blogs etc... and recommend resources I mark and read when I have time...”

Other respondents said:

“I very rarely ask direct questions of the hive mind :) although when I have the answers have been interesting and varied! But I do enjoy the professional link-sharing and discussions that arise - particularly on Facebook and Twitter.”

“Serendipity - I find out that other people are working on the same things as me by accident. I also find Twitter is a good filter - if I don't have time to keep up with my RSS feeds, I don't need to worry too much, because I know the stuff I really need to know about will come thru via Twitter as well.”

Twitter was the site most used for sharing or obtaining information (68.5%) (Question 8). One respondent stated that they “Follow news services on Twitter and use for links to breaking news stories.” Facebook was most used for contact with friends and family. Interestingly, one respondent stated that they use it to vet “potential staff - usually check Facebook to get a feel for their use/knowledge of social networking

which I feel is a vital skill for positions I have been hiring for.” Another commented that they find it “Often easier to catch up with people and what they are doing through Facebook than through personal contact.”

Twitter was the most popular SNS used by respondents. The reason for this popularity: “It has the features that promote information sharing and discussion.” Respondents made the following comments about Twitter:

“Facebook tends to be more for social and people I know (friends/family). Twitter opens a wider community - it has enabled me to develop closer links and maintain contact with people in the Library/Information field I have met through conferences and workshops, as well as learn from Information professionals who I have never met.”

“Easy to dip in and out of. You can pick a suitable application that fits in with your style of working. I use TwitterFox at work to and dip in quickly and discreetly - even though it's pretty much all work stuff others may not perceive it that way; and Tweetdeck at home to scan at leisure.”

Twitter, Friendfeed and Ning were predominantly used for sharing and obtaining information whereas Facebook was used for contact with family and friends. Other replies included news, conference information and professional networking.

In this group of respondents, Twitter (68%) was the site that was most useful for professional information and for them it was because “it was easy to find valuable people to follow”. In contrast people who used Friendfeed did so predominantly because “it has the features that promotes information sharing and discussion” and people who used Facebook found it valuable because “it was where my community was”.

## **Features**

Each SNS has a range of features that facilitate information sharing or communication, such as the ability to search for or easily reshare information. While many of these features are “built in”, or part of the functionality of a SNS, the one feature that had nothing to do with the technical capabilities of SNS, the “number of members with similar interests”, ranked very highly in importance.

Please rate how important each of the following features are in the social network that you find most useful for current awareness information.

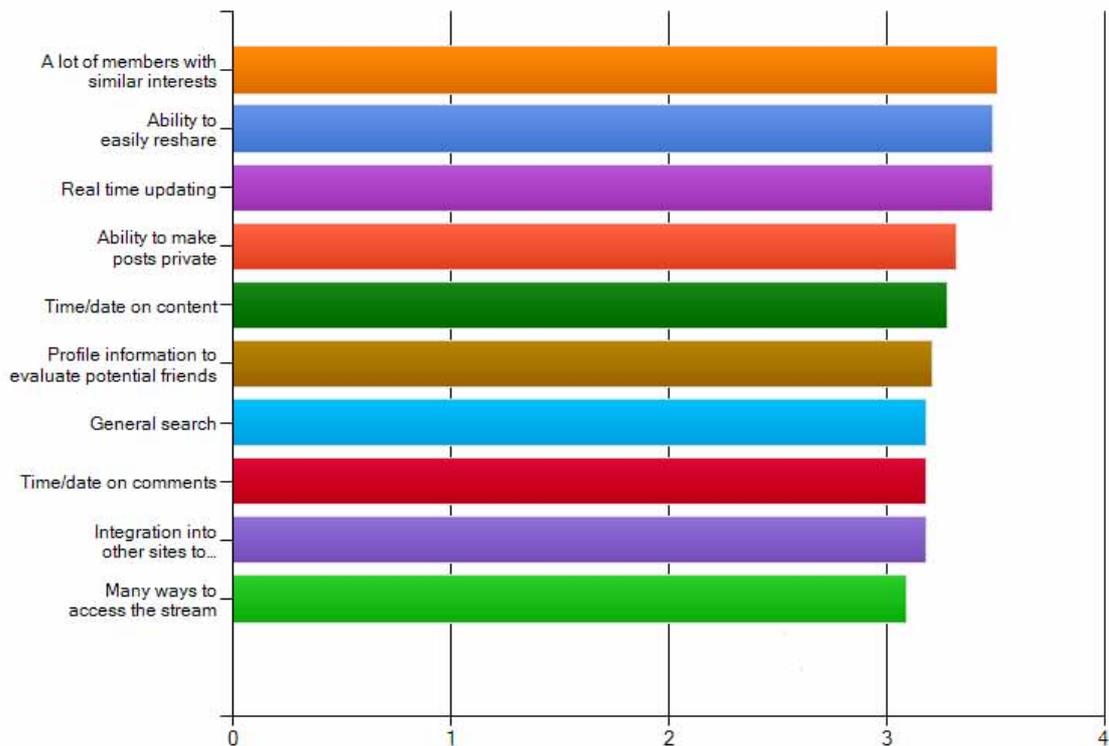


Figure 10. Important features. (Question 10)

The features that were ranked most highly by users of all SNS were, by order of importance:

1. A lot of members with similar interests
2. Ability to easily reshare
3. Real time updating
4. Ability to make posts private
5. Time/date on content
6. Profile information to evaluate potential friends
7. General search
8. Time/date on comments
9. Integration into other sites to facilitate link sharing

Twitter users ranked the ability to easily share information or links of interest as their favourite feature, followed by real time updating and the numbers of members with similar interests. For FriendFeed users, their favourite feature was the numbers of members with similar interests, the ability to hide or filter some kinds of information, and “Rooms/Groups/Pages” for particular topics or interest groups.

It was predictable that features that only appear in Friendfeed such as filters, rooms and threaded discussions are only rated highly by users of that service.

## **Strategies:**

More than 50% used the following strategies to get the most valuable information:

- Look at profile information to evaluate potential friends
- Carefully consider who to follow
- Participate in discussions
- Actively promote and share information
- Visit often
- Look at lists of friend of friends to find people to follow
- Ask questions
- Reshare information
- Use search

Given that who to follow is ranked so high as a strategy to add value to professional information seeking it wasn't surprising that the following were selected by more than 50% of respondents as strategies to select people to follow:

- People I know in real life
- Librarians
- People that already talk to the others I follow
- People with interesting blogs
- People who display wit and intelligence
- People with similar interests to me in their profile

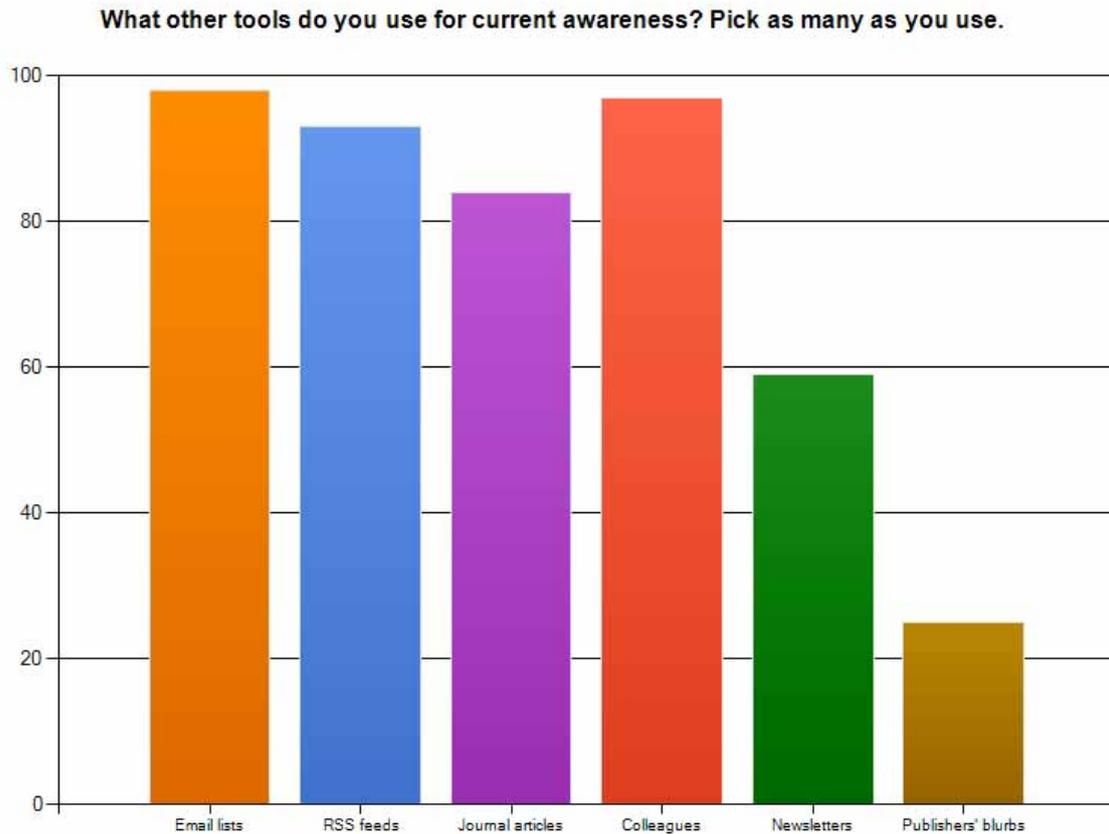


Figure 11. Other tools used. (Question 13)

Just because respondents were users of SNS for information, they did not exclude other information sources. Email lists continue to be heavily used, with 98 (83%) responses received. “Colleagues” were another source of current awareness information for our respondents, with 97 responses. RSS feeds (79%) and journal articles (71%) were also well used.

Comments were made on this question and on the invited comments to the survey that it was the speed of the information flow on SNS that was making other information sources less useful.

## Conclusions

In our introduction we stated that any current awareness tool should be able to deliver current, relevant information without a huge burden in time and effort for the client or adding to their information overload. Online social networks do seem to meet these criteria.

This survey itself is evidence of the value of SNS as a communication tool. We received responses globally from many sectors.

Twitter was the site that ranked highest by most people for professional information sharing and the most important factors for choosing an SNS was the availability of

people with shared interests and the ability to easily reshare information. Most people had a strategy for choosing who they followed.

With hindsight, we realise that we should have asked about strategies for finding people to follow. Are those directory sites any use at all and are they used at all? Or is following the people your friends are following or recommending the strategy actually used?

Since we completed the survey, CCH has reported on another survey of use of Web2.0 tools, particularly blogs and wikis amongst information professionals (Moore 2009). They found that:

"Web 2.0 is also facilitating the dissemination of information through professional-to-professional contact. CCH found that 72.2% of professionals value the opinion of their peers as much as published information. Previously, this was limited to colleagues, working relationships and industry associations; however online social networks now offer access to a global network of professionals. Asking a question of a broad range of peers allows for a response that is potentially more targeted than consulting a published work, while the greater number of people consulted should validate the final answer by consensus – the new “peer review”.

As we said in the introduction this is a fast moving industry. To quickly bring us up to date (30 September 2009) events that have occurred since the survey are:

- Facebook Lite was launched. (Eldon 2009)
- Facebook bought Friendfeed (Facebook 2009)
- Facebook introduced @ tags (Occhino 2009)
- Ning announced Ning apps (Lardinois 2009)

SNS seem to be converging and adopting features that are successful on other sites.

### **Recommended strategies**

So, the basic operating principles (not rules) are:

1. Choose a network.
2. Choose who to follow.
3. Read their "Status updates" in a news stream.
4. Contribute your own updates (see also Carscaddon & Harris 2009).

1. Experiment before choosing a tool that works for you. It takes time to join a site and discover whether it has the right combination of features and community for your needs. One of the authors has accounts on many sites that she no longer maintains. Her personal current favourite is Friendfeed. Through its FOAF features, she has found an active group of scientists interested in open access and open notebook science that she would have had a harder time finding on Twitter. However, this may not have been important if she were not a science librarian. The best tool for her needs may not be yours.

2. Take some time to find people to follow. Your news stream will not meet your information needs without a critical number of people to follow. The actual number will vary, depending on how often they update and the tool that you use to manage the stream. People who join an online social networking site, then abandon it without actually ever following anyone or only following one or two people, have not truly assessed the tool (Cheng 2009).

3. Start by following people that you already know or know of. Bloggers that you already read are a good idea. You will be following the influencers you already have. On Twitter or Friendfeed, they do not have to follow you. Look at who they are most frequently following and conversing with. Discovery tools such as #followfriday, directories and search may be useful. One of the authors has a Twitter search for CSIRO, for which she has the RSS feed going to her feedreader. She finds that it is mostly people tweeting CSIRO news, which helps her keep up with their impact, but occasionally she will find researchers or other people with whom she should be interacting. Following hashtags achieves the same thing. You can greatly expand your network by finding other people Twittering from the same event.

4. Contributing your own updates, while not entirely necessary for the purposes of keeping up to date, adds to your own profile and reputation, allowing others to assess the value of your own interest and information. If they have a private account they may not be willing to let you follow them unless they can assess your contributions to the conversations taking place online. Lurking has value but the value of professionally using any online social network for current awareness is greatly increased by conversation and interaction.

## References

- Anderson, C 2004, 'The Long Tail', in *Wired*, vol. 12.10, October.
- Bilotta, J 2009, *Following, liking and people searching*, 15 July 2009. Retrieved 25 September 2009, from <http://googlereader.blogspot.com/2009/07/following-liking-and-people-searching.html>
- boyd, d 2009a, 'The Not-So-Hidden Politics of Class Online', in *Personal Democracy Forum*, New York, 30 June 2009.
- boyd, d 2009b, *Twitter: "pointless babble" or peripheral awareness + social grooming?*, 16 August 2009. Retrieved 29 September 2009, from [http://www.zephorio.org/thoughts/archives/2009/08/16/twitter\\_pointle.html](http://www.zephorio.org/thoughts/archives/2009/08/16/twitter_pointle.html)
- boyd, d & Ellison, NB 2007, 'Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship ', in *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol. 13, 30 August 2009.
- Carlson, N & Angelova, K 2009, *CHART OF THE DAY: How People Share Content On The Web*, 21 July 2009. Retrieved 24 September 2009, from <http://www.businessinsider.com/chart-of-the-day-social-networking-sites-dominate-sharing-2009-7>
- Carscaddon, L & Harris, CS 2009, 'Working the Social: Twitter and FriendFeed', *Library Journal*, vol. 134, no. 11.
- Cashmore, P 2009, *Twitter: You Can't Give Us a Feature Then Take it Away #fixreplies*. Retrieved 24 September 2009, from <http://mashable.com/2009/05/13/fixreplies-2/>
- Chen, A 2008, *Social network death spiral: How Metcalfe's Law can work against you*, 19 May 2008. Retrieved 26 September 2009, from [http://andrewchen.typepad.com/andrew\\_chens\\_blog/2008/05/when-facebook-a.html](http://andrewchen.typepad.com/andrew_chens_blog/2008/05/when-facebook-a.html)
- Cheng, J 2009, *Most Twitter users never tweet, don't follow anyone*. Retrieved 23 September 2009, from <http://arstechnica.com/web/news/2009/06/report-most-twitter-users-dont-tweet-dont-follow-anyone.ars>
- Corbett, P 2009, *Facebook Demographics and Statistics (August 2009) – 55+ Grows 25% in One Month*, 7 August 2009. Retrieved 29 September 2009, from <http://www.istrategylabs.com/facebook-demographics-and-statistics-august-2009-55-grows-25-in-one-month/>
- Eldon, E 2009, *Facebook Lite Reveals Bigger Changes Afoot*. Retrieved 24 September 2009, from <http://www.insidefacebook.com/2009/09/10/facebook-lite-reveals-bigger-changes-afoot/>
- Facebook 2009, *Facebook Agrees to Acquire Sharing Service FriendFeed*, 10 August 2009. Retrieved 29 September 2009, from <http://www.facebook.com/press/releases.php?p=116581>

Fry, S 2009, *Pointless babble*, 18 August 2009. Retrieved 26 September 2009, from <http://www.stephenfry.com/2009/08/18/pointless-babble/>

Gray, L 2009, *Should RSS be Jettisoned On the Information Journey?* Retrieved 25 September from <http://www.louisgray.com/live/2009/02/should-rss-be-jettisoned-on-information.html>

Gunderloy, M 2008, *Are you hyperconnected?*, 19 May 2008. Retrieved 26 September 2009, from <http://webworkerdaily.com/2008/05/19/are-you-hyperconnected/>

Hooker, B 2009. Retrieved 6 August, from <http://friendfeed.com/coturnix/e067f385/arvindsays-day-i-joined-friendfeed-was-last>

Hoover, JN 2007, *Web Credibility: Hard Earned, Harder To Prove* Retrieved 2 June, from <http://www.informationweek.com/story/showArticle.jhtml?articleID=199900170>

Howe, J 2006, 'The rise of crowdsourcing', in *Wired*, vol. 14.06, June

Karp, S 2007, *Twitter is a publication*, 2 August Retrieved 30 August, from <http://publishing2.com/2007/08/02/twitter-is-a-publication/>

Kemble, G 2009, *Dust whips up storm on Twitter*. Retrieved 23 September 2009, from <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2009/09/23/2693890.htm>

Kirkpatrick, M 2009a, *Confirmed: Twitter is Saving All Your Tweets, After All*, 25 September 2009. Retrieved 29 September 2009, from [http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/confirmed\\_twitter\\_is\\_saving\\_all\\_your\\_tweets\\_after.php](http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/confirmed_twitter_is_saving_all_your_tweets_after.php)

Kirkpatrick, M 2009b, *Is This Why Twitter Changed Its Replies Policy?* Retrieved 25 September 2009, from [http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/is\\_this\\_why\\_twitter\\_changed\\_its\\_replies\\_policy.php](http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/is_this_why_twitter_changed_its_replies_policy.php)

Lardinois, F 2009, *Ning Launches Ning Apps With 90 New OpenSocial Apps*. Retrieved 29 September 2009, from

[http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/ning\\_launches\\_ning\\_apps.php](http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/ning_launches_ning_apps.php)

LinkedIn 2008, *About us*. Retrieved 29 September 2009, from <http://press.linkedin.com/about>

McBride, M 2009, *Why my Twitter updates are protected*, 10 March. Retrieved 30 August, from <http://beyond140.posterous.com/why-my-twitter-updates-are-pro>

McGiboney, M 2009, *Twitter's Tweet Smell Of Success*. Retrieved 2 June, from [http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online\\_mobile/twitters-tweet-smell-of-success/](http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online_mobile/twitters-tweet-smell-of-success/)

Milstein, S 2009, 'Twitter FOR Libraries (and Librarians)', *Online*, vol. 33, no. 2, p. 34. Retrieved 25 September 2009, from ProQuest database.

Moore, L 2009, 'Professionals and Web 2.0: Findings from the CCH whitepaper and what it means for information providers', in *Australian Law Librarians' Association Evolution conference*, Darwin, Northern Territory, Australia, 2 September - 4 September 2009.

Ning 2009, *About*. Retrieved 29 September 2009, from <http://about.ning.com/>

Occhino, T 2009, *Tag Friends in Your Status and Posts*. Retrieved 24 September 2009, from <http://blog.facebook.com/blog.php?post=109765592130>

Ostrow, A 2009, *18 Million Twitter Users by End of 2009*, Mashable: the social media guide, 14 September 2009. Retrieved 29 September 2009, from <http://mashable.com/2009/09/14/twitter-2009-stats/>

Papworth, L 2008, *Twitter: Reputation Management in Social Networks*. Retrieved 26 September 2009, from <http://laurelpapworth.com/reputation-management-in-social/>

Papworth, L 2009, *Ripple: Social Network Influencers*. Retrieved 26 September 2009, from <http://laurelpapworth.com/ripple-social-network-influencers/>

Pear Analytics 2009, *Twitter Study Reveals Interesting Results About Usage – 40% is “Pointless Babble”*, 12 August 2009. Retrieved 29 September 2009, from <http://www.pearanalytics.com/2009/twitter-study-reveals-interesting-results-40-percent-pointless-babble/>

Pesce, M 2008a, *Only connect*, 22 May 2008. Retrieved 29 September 2009, from <http://blog.futurestreetconsulting.com/?p=54>

Pesce, M 2008b, *This, that, and the other*, 27 September 2008. Retrieved 29 September 2009, from <http://blog.futurestreetconsulting.com/?p=76>

Reid, M & Gray, C 2007, 'Online Social Networks, Virtual Communities, Enterprises, and Information Professionals — Part 1. Past and Present', *Searcher: The Magazine for Database Professionals*, vol. 15, no. 7. Retrieved 25 September 2009, from

Silverthorne, S 2009, *Understanding Users of Social Networks*. Retrieved 20 September 2009, from <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/6156.html>

Sturges, P 2001, 'Gatekeepers and other intermediaries', *Aslib Proceedings*, vol. 53, no. 2, pp. 62-7. Retrieved 29 September 2009, from ProQuest database.

Sullivan, D 2009, *What Is Real Time Search? Definitions & Players*, 9 July 2009. Retrieved 29 September 2009, from <http://searchengineland.com/what-is-real-time-search-definitions-players-22172>

Thompson, C 2007, 'How Twitter Creates a Social Sixth Sense', in *Wired*, vol. 15.07, June.

*Twitter*, from <http://twitter.com/>

University of British Columbia Health Library wiki 2009, *Survey of academic librarians attitudes towards Twitter - References*, 24 August 2009. Retrieved 25 September 2009, from [http://hlwiki.slais.ubc.ca/index.php/Survey\\_of\\_academic\\_librarians\\_attitudes\\_towards\\_Twitter#References](http://hlwiki.slais.ubc.ca/index.php/Survey_of_academic_librarians_attitudes_towards_Twitter#References)

Vascellaro, JE 2009, 'Facebook acquires start-up FriendFeed', *Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved 11 August 2009, from <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124993350820120361.html> database.

Wikipedia 2009a, *Dunbar's number*, 24 September 2009. Retrieved 29 September 2009, from [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Dunbar%27s\\_number&oldid=315880505](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Dunbar%27s_number&oldid=315880505)

Wikipedia 2009b, *FriendFeed*, 8 September 2009. Retrieved 11 September from <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=FriendFeed&oldid=312545921>

Wikipedia 2009c, *List of social networking sites*, 29 August. Retrieved 30 August, from [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=List\\_of\\_social\\_networking\\_websites&oldid=310760871](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=List_of_social_networking_websites&oldid=310760871)

Wikipedia 2009d, *Microblogging*, 10 September 2009. Retrieved 11 September, from <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Microblogging&oldid=313014271>

Wikipedia 2009e, *Ning*, 1 September 2009. Retrieved 11 September, from <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ning&oldid=311206616>

Zuckerberg, M 2009, *300 million and on*, 15 September 2009. Retrieved 16 September 2009, from <http://blog.facebook.com/blog.php?post=136782277130>