Should we be more Social? Law Librarians and Social Media

Abstract: This article by James Mullan is based on his paper delivered to the BIALL Conference 2009. It examines the role that social media and Web 2.0 technologies can play in the life of the legal information specialist.
Keywords: law librarians; social networking

Introduction

When I started thinking about how law librarians could use social media and talked to colleagues who were using social media tools, what struck me most were the misconceptions that people held concerning social media. This might be because, when many people think about social media, they think about Facebook and, as a result, believe that social media tools are purely for "fun", or for people who want only to talk about themselves, but social media are much more than this. So let's start on a positive note. Being social and using social media tools is not about "poking" people, throwing sheep, and becoming less productive. Being social should mean becoming more productive, but how?

Increasing productivity

I believe social media tools have a significant role to play in helping law librarians to become more productive. Before I explain how, I want to explain why. To begin with, let us think about our working lives. I am going to use James Mullan as an example.

People know James works in a library and that his job title is "Information Officer" but what does that say about him? Not much apart from that fact he "might" work with information. His job title certainly describes an element of his work but, like most people, he probably does a lot more than his job title itself suggests. Allowing people to see what "hidden talents" and knowledge he might have, which may potentially be useful to them, is one area where social media, and social networking sites in particular, can help.

Most law librarians work within a team and, if asked, will say that they don't rely solely on these individuals to get the job done. They have to draw on the expertise and knowledge of individuals outside their team and possibly outside their organisation. Making this knowledge and expertise available to people is another area where social media tools can help. Not convinced? A recent study found that employees with the most extensive personal online networks were 7 per cent more productive than their colleagues[1]

The good news is that law librarians are already very good at "being social". Every year 300+ law librarians descend on an unsuspecting city to discuss developments in law librarianship. Law librarians also regularly contribute to mailing lists, including the BIALL mailing list and LIS-LAW. There are a number of informal groups which law librarians use to network with their peers, which include the Information Leaders in Law group, the BIALL Irish Group, the BIALL Academic Law Librarians special interest group and many more. Law librarians are ideally placed to make the most of the social media tools that are available. So what are some of the tools that we could use?

Twitter

Launched in 2006, Twitter (http://www.twitter.com) is one of the most talked about web applications. Twitter is a micro-blogging platform that lets users communicate with each other by exchanging short, frequent messages (Tweets) of 140 characters or less. The site encourages users to interact by allowing them to reply to Tweets, either publicly or privately, or to re-tweet the Tweet to a much broader community.

What value could a law librarian gain from using Twitter on a regular basis? One of the best ways to use Twitter is to follow people who you are interested in. These might not even be individuals, they might be organisations like 10 Downing Street (http://twitter.com/DowningStreet) The Office of Public Sector Information (OPSI) (http://twitter.com/legislation) or a semi-commercial organisation like the BBA (http://twitter.com/BBALIBOR)

By following a diverse range of tweets you will soon start to see news and information that is published only to Twitter and you will at least stay on, if not ahead of, the curve. If you have the time and desire to demonstrate your experience and subject knowledge, Twitter is a great place to do exactly that. The intuitive interface and limit of 140 characters makes it the perfect place for individuals to showcase their talents and highlight resources

they think will be of interest to their Twitter followers, without having to spend significant amounts of time writing posts for blogs or other websites.

Twitter also comes with a fantastic search engine (http://search.twitter.com/) that allows anyone to search across all public Tweets. The Twitter search engine is RSS enabled so users can track particular subjects without having to revisit the site regularly. For anyone who doesn't currently use RSS searches, they can be refreshed as and when users visit the site.

Twitter is also a great tool for spotting trends. The easiest way to do this is to search the Twitter Hashtag site (http://hashtags.org/), which displays the most popular hashtags at that moment. You can also use the site to search for any Hashtag. The Twitter search application also displays topics that are currently trending in a similar manner to the Twitter homepage.

There are also some social networking elements to Twitter, including being able to "Direct Message" people you are following and being able to "nudge" people who might not have posted an update in a while. For most people this is a very small element of their Twitter usage.

Facebook

Facebook is perhaps the most well-known social networking site in the world. Established in 2004 as a networking tool for college students, it is now available to all web users and has more than 200 million users. Facebook lets users share information about themselves, both professional and personal, in a number of ways. The main Facebook user-interface aggregates the individual's

content into "mini-feeds" which show what a person is doing. This could be when they update their profile, when they add a new application, or when they tag content. Content can also be published from other sites into users' "mini-feeds." This might include content from an individual's blog, their Twitter feed or LinkedIn.

Unfortunately Facebook is more infamous for some of the applications that are available to users than the networking possibilities. These applications include Mob Wars, Pirates, Zombies, Superpoke and Compare People. Compare People is actually quite a fun application, which merits some discussion.

Compare People presents users with a series of questions about their friends; who would they rather go on a date with, who would they rather marry etc. Friends can see how they are doing against other friends, but the actual results for each individual's questions were kept hidden from users. That was until 2007 when it was revealed that for a small fee users could see what your friends "actually think of you"[2] Unsurprisingly this caused outrage amongst Facebook users and is one of the reasons many people don't use Facebook for professional social networking. There is however one very good reason why law librarians should use Facebook.

Facebook groups

Facebook groups are a great way to communicate and share information with peers. Anyone who uses Facebook can create a group and decide whether they want it to be public (open to all) closed (moderators approve membership) or secret (only the members and invitees know the
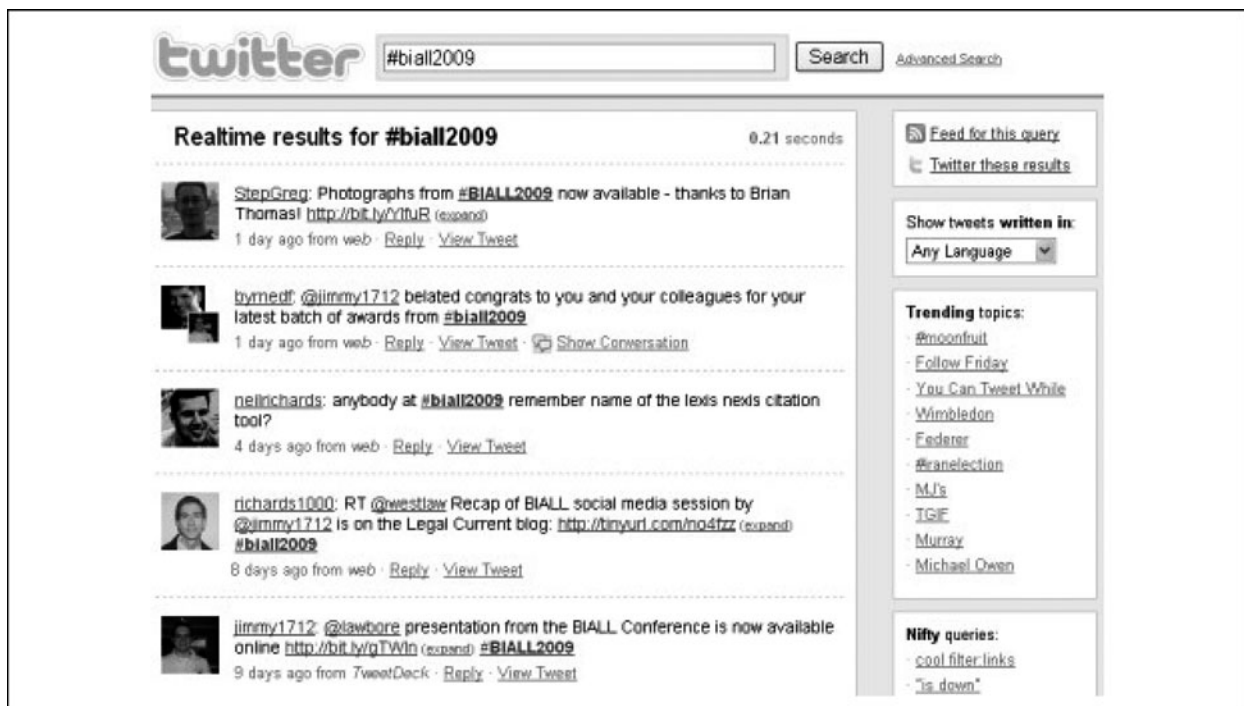

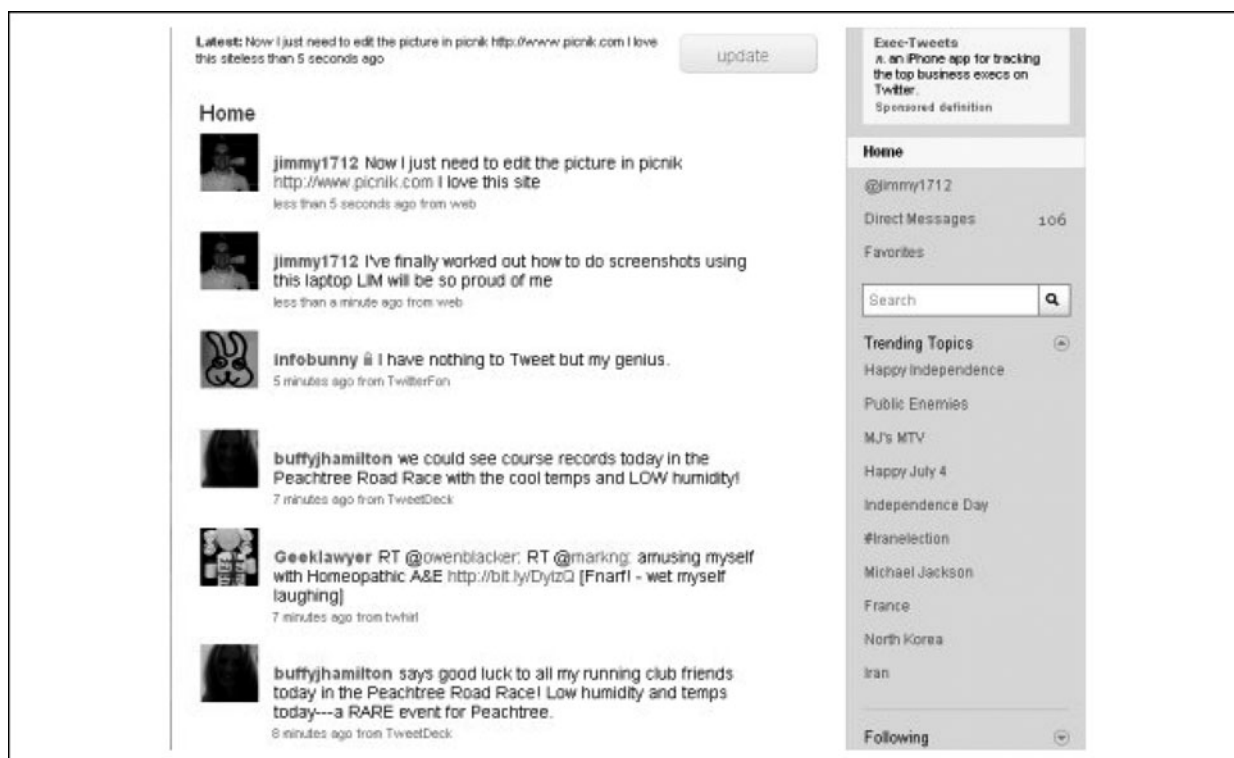*Figure 1: Twitter search for #biall2009*

Figure 2: Twitter homepage with Trending topics displayed

group even exists). There are a number of groups which law librarians can join, including: the BIALL Facebook group; Librarians and Facebook; CILIP Members; Law Librarians; Law Librarians for RSS, and many more. Regularly contributing to, or administering, a group on Facebook is a great way to develop your online network and to demonstrate your knowledge of particular topics.

Unfortunately there are two significant issues with Facebook Groups. The first is that anyone can create a group around any topic, which can be good, but at times can be really bad! The second is that updates to the site only appear within an individual's "mini-feed". Facebook don't currently have a better mechanism for delivering group updates to individuals. The alternatives to Facebook Groups are Facebook Pages, which are primarily designed for business users, but which are being used by organisations within the legal sector to advertise and promote their services. Notable Facebook pages include those from the Inner Temple,[3] the College of Law[4] and the Middle Temple Library.[5]

LinkedIn

LinkedIn (http://www.linkedin.com) is a professional social networking site with over 35 million users in more than 150 industries. A bit like a giant Yellow pages, the site allows individuals to "connect" with people they know, post CV's and demonstrate their expertise in the field they work in by posting answers to questions added to the site. LinkedIn also enables people to ask their connections for "recommendations." This is a significant way

in which connections can help people build their profiles and reputations online.

Recently LinkedIn launched a new platform, containing some open-source applications. These include reading lists from Amazon; presentations from Slideshare and updates from blogs which users might post to. For most people LinkedIn will solely be a place for them to connect with business contacts and if asked to recommend people. For law librarians LinkedIn could potentially offer much more.

LinkedIn groups

Like other social networking sites, LinkedIn offers users the ability to create groups, which can be started by anyone, and are intended to connect people who work in the same industries or professions. In general, groups on LinkedIn tend to be more professional in nature. Once established, group members can share information and post questions. For law librarians several groups exist which may be of interest. These include CILIP and Law Librarians.

Although similar to the groups on Facebook, LinkedIn groups have one advantage in that you can receive updates from the groups you belong to via email. Group updates are also available on the LinkedIn homepage alongside updates from your connections.

LinkedIn answers

LinkedIn answers (http://www.linkedin.com/answers) was launched by LinkedIn in 2007. This feature lets you post a
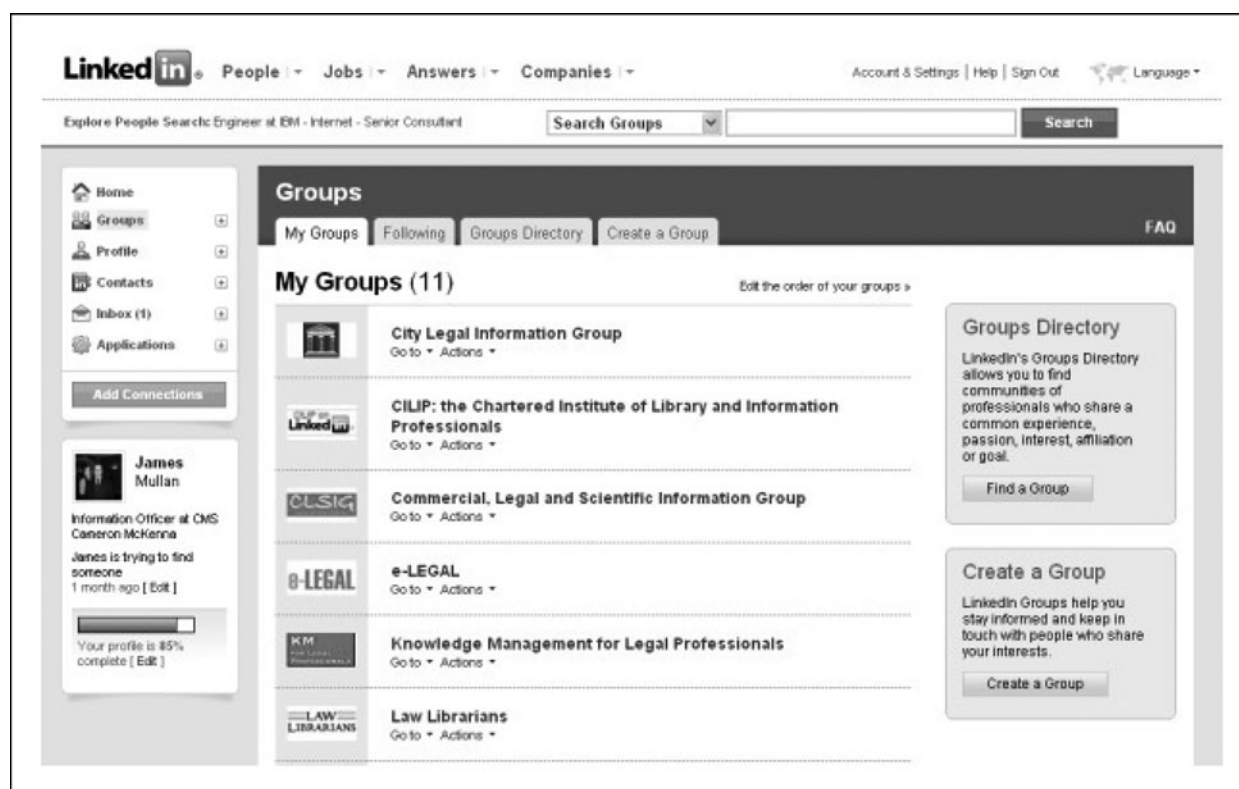
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Figure 3: LinkedIn My Groups

question to the site, pick the individuals within your network who are likely to know the answer and receive answers from your connections, their connections, and other experts who use LinkedIn. If you answer a question, you gain expertise points every time the person asking the question chooses your answer as the best one. The top experts then appear in a ranked list.

Ning

Ning (http://www.ning.com) is an online platform, which allows users to create their own social networks. The main reason why people use Ning is that the site does not restrict users to one template. Users can create their own social networks around specific interests, with their own visual design, choice of features and member data.

Ning offers a number of sites, which will be of interest to law librarians. These include Librarians, Librarian 2.0, Savvy Librarian and Business Librarian. The most relevant network is of course Law Libraries and Librarians.[6]

Ning is similar to most social networking sites in that it enables users to upload content and interact with other users either via discussion forums or, if you are friends with the individual, by sending them a secure message. Ning also allows users to customise their "profile pages" so they can add text, videos and photos, as well as third-party widgets and RSS feeds. There is one issue with Ning and that is its US focus. This can mean

that at certain times of the day you might be the only member of a network who is logged on!

Delicious

Delicious (http://www.delicious.com) is one of several sites which are classified as social bookmarking sites. They enable you to save any resources you find during your travels on the internet to a public website. That's right – public – which means they can be accessed by anyone who knows you or finds your account on delicious. This is significant, because being able to see what other people are reading and saving is potentially very powerful, especially where that user is acknowledged as a leader or an expert in their field.

Delicious also enables users to rename and tag websites with any number of keywords or categories. For anyone who has ever struggled to remember where they have saved a bookmark in internet Explorer favourites, delicious enables users to search across all saved bookmarks. As the saved websites are public, users can easily forward or direct people to a link, which could contain any number of other links. Users can also subscribe to RSS feeds for all a user's bookmarks or, if they are only interested in a particular subject, the RSS feed for these. Delicious is a truly "social" website and one that I recommend to anyone who isn't currently using it, or is still using internet Explorer favourites to save and administer their bookmarks.

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Figure 4: Law Libraries and Librarians on Ning

Slideshare

SlideShare (http://www.slideshare.net) is a presentation sharing website where users can upload, view and share presentation files. Slideshare is the best way for law librarians to publish slides on the web, so that they can be found and shared by a wide audience. Slideshare isn't just about uploading PowerPoint Presentations though. Slideshare also enables users to embed slideshows into blogs or websites, synchronise audio with the slides and join groups and connect with other users who are interested in the same subject area.

Increasingly Slideshare is being used as a tool by conference organisers to make PowerPoint presentations available to anyone unable to make the conference in
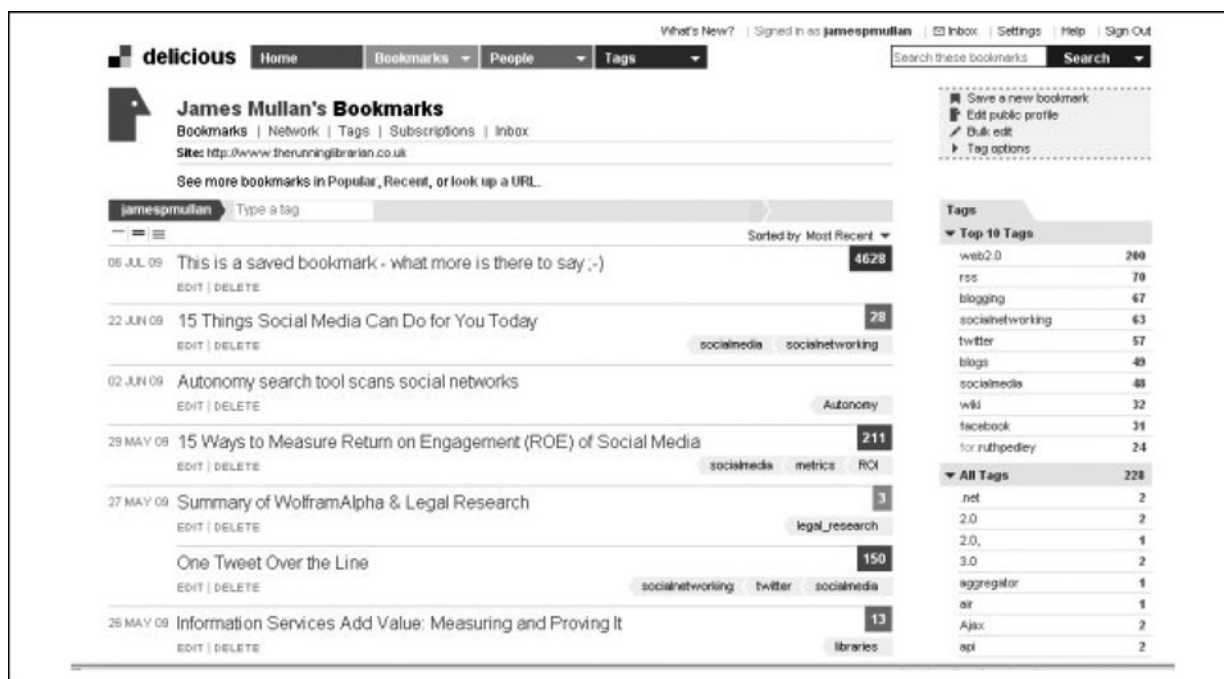

Figure 5: James Mullan's Bookmarks

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person. Several of the presentations from the BIALL conference, including my presentation, which forms the basis of this article, are available on Slideshare. It is also a great way to search for presentations on subjects you may be interested in and follow via RSS any future presentations published on the same subject.

Friendfeed

Friendfeed (http://www.friendfeed.com) is a site that "aggregates" an individual's activity from other social media sites and creates a feed or "stream" of information. Other users can then subscribe to this feed and see all social media activity in one place.

The only downside to Friendfeed is that it records everything you do on a social media site so, if you have registered your Youtube (http://www.youtube.com) account with Friendfeed and frequently add Girls Aloud videos to your Youtube favourites, then this information will be displayed for all to see.

The "challenges"

No article on social media would be complete without a discussion of some of the challenges associated with using social media. I have called them challenges because I don't believe they are insurmountable.

Privacy

Privacy is a major concern for anyone contemplating using a social media site. Thankfully established sites like Facebook and LinkedIn have policies and procedures that will stop spam. Twitter users can protect their updates so that only individuals who request access and are approved by the Twitter user can see the protected Tweets. Contacts on most social media sites can be blocked or removed if they behave inappropriately. There are also safeguards in place on social media sites to ensure that access to your profile or personal information can be restricted or blocked. Unfortunately, many individuals remain unaware of these privacy settings, so need to exercise caution when publishing personal information or when accepting friend or connection requests, especially where they don't know the individuals.

Any user of a social media site should also apply good judgment when posting content. A general rule is that, if you don't want the wrong person to see it, don't put it on the web. This is a difficult area and is one in which many people, including myself, struggle to find a balance. Doug Cornelius sums up this issue rather nicely on his blog Compliance Building[7]

"If you are a professional, you are marketing yourself and want some of your professional career public. Conversely, there are aspects of your social life that you want to be private. But there are many personal things you would want to be public and some professional things that you would want to be private"

Clearly the issue of balance is something that everyone who uses the internet needs to think about. But it does not mean that we, as law librarians, cannot make effective use of some of the social media tools that are available.

Time

One of the most common reasons given for not using social media is the threat of lost productivity but, when used wisely, professional value can almost certainly be derived from social media.
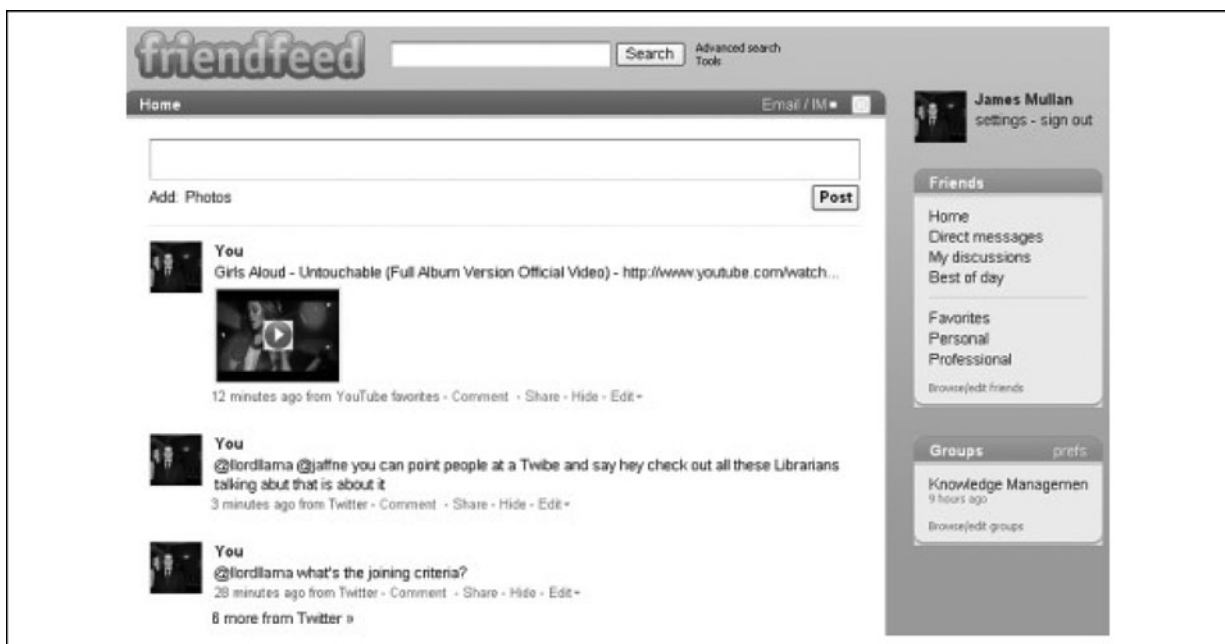

Figure 6: James Mullan's Friendfeed "stream"

Unfortunately many law firms have been quick to block access to social media sites because they believe their employees are going to be spending significant amounts of time wasting time! Perhaps more importantly many IT departments feel that consumer-orientated tools like Facebook don't have a place in a business setting. This can only be detrimental to the end user. As already noted there are a number of opportunities for individuals to undertake research within social media sites and to uncover information using these tools.

In terms of productivity, everyone needs a short break during the working day, and these can actually increase people's output, by allowing them to re-energise and get a fresh perspective on the task at hand. If a short break translates into an individual browsing the internet to check Facebook or watch a video on Youtube, I don't see a problem with that.

Conversely, there is also the issue of being time poor. Many law librarians might feel that they don't have enough time to invest in looking at a new set of tools. Fortunately these tools do not require huge amounts of time investment for them to be valuable. Monitoring Twitter on a semi-regular basis, or contributing to one of the many groups available on Facebook or LinkedIn, will soon deliver benefits. The other time issue is that of information overload. Increasingly individuals are finding that the information they are receiving from social media sites, in addition to what they receive from their "normal" sources is becoming too much. Yes, this can be a challenge. Being prudent about the number of RSS feeds you subscribe to, and choosing one social networking site and then sticking with it, should help avoid this situation.

Frolleagues

This is an interesting development in the field of social networking. The term refers to friends who might be colleagues and the blurring of the lines between an individual's professional and personal life. Frolleagues became a household name with the publication of a series of guidelines published by LinkedIn, which were designed to help prevent users damaging their careers by mixing professional contacts and friends online.

LinkedIn's claim was that *"47% of the UK's web users are mixing their social and professional lives by accepting networking invitations from "frolleagues"*[8] So how can you avoid mixing your professional and personal lives? As already mentioned, it is actually quite difficult to do and increasingly the lines between the two are becoming blurred. The advice from LinkedIn was to keep separate accounts for socialising, so that business contacts don't mix with social and vice-versa and that you should only add a colleague if you know them socially outside work.

What you could be missing out on!

If you are not using at least one social media site right now, then why not? The number of social media users is growing exponentially and will only increase over the next few years. Law librarians who use social media sites will have a distinct advantage over those who don't. Not just because they will be ahead of the game in terms of using new technology, but also because they will be demonstrating their expertise, developing their networks and, with the help of their immediate colleagues and individuals outside their organisations, developing their reputation and profile online.

Used properly, and for professional reasons, social media sites can deliver real benefits to end users, but you should understand the perceived risks with these sites. If you're prepared to, then there are a wealth of opportunities available for law librarians and the libraries they work in.

Footnotes

[1] http://hbr.harvardbusiness.org/web/2009/hbr-list/how-social-networks-work-best

[2] http://www.sugarrae.com/compare-people-facebook-app-pulls-a-bait-and-switch/

[3] http://bit.ly/eC3Uy

[4] http://www.facebook.com/home.php?-/pages/The-College-of-Law/7997263549?ref

[5] http://www.facebook.com/pages/London-United-Kingdom/Middle-Temple-Library/76552642593?ref=s

[6] http://lawlibraries.ning.com/

[7] http://www.compliancebuilding.com/2009/04/13/the-4-ps-of-the-social-internet/

[8] http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2008/aug/14/digitalmedia.socialnetworking

Biography

James Mullan is an information Officer at CMS Cameron McKenna LLP. He is the recipient of the 2009 Wildy BIALL Law Librarian of the Year Award. James is a member of BIALL Council and the administrator of the BIALL Blog.