Library Hi Tech News

WeChat in the library: promoting a new virtual reference service using a mobile app
Raymond Pun

Article information:

Users who downloaded this article also downloaded:

(2015),"Uses and gratifications of social media: a comparison of microblog and WeChat", Journal of Systems and Information Technology, Vol. 17 Iss 4 pp. 351-363 http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JSIT-06-2015-0052

(2015),"Usability study of the mobile library App: an example from Chongqing University", Library Hi Tech, Vol. 33 Iss 3 pp. 340-355 http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/LHT-05-2015-0047

For Authors

If you would like to write for this, or any other Emerald publication, then please use our Emerald for Authors service information about how to choose which publication to write for and submission guidelines are available for all. Please visit www.emeraldinsight.com/authors for more information.

About Emerald www.emeraldinsight.com

Emerald is a global publisher linking research and practice to the benefit of society. The company manages a portfolio of more than 290 journals and over 2,350 books and book series volumes, as well as providing an extensive range of online products and additional customer resources and services.

Emerald is both COUNTER 4 and TRANSFER compliant. The organization is a partner of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and also works with Portico and the LOCKSS initiative for digital archive preservation.

*Related content and download information correct at time of download.

WeChat in the library: promoting a new virtual reference service using a mobile app

Raymond Pun

Introduction

Seeking information on mobile devices is not a new phenomenon; today more and more people are finding information through their devices, particularly through smart phones and tablets. One might ask what kind of information are they looking for and what tools are they using to find the information on their phones? (Wilkonson, 2011; Murphy, 2010). Social media has become a prominent resource in sharing and discovering information on the phone and on the Web. One of the latest and popular social media tools used today, particularly in China, is WeChat, (called *weixin* in Chinese) a mobile app that allows users to send text, image, audio and video messages for free.

Launched in 2011, the app currently has over 355 million subscribers, mostly from China where it was developed. The app has many useful features that can be expanded to virtual library service program. To understand how it has been and can be used effectively, this paper provides an introduction to the app, a brief analysis of the short messaging service (SMS) data of the daily interactions through the app and the opportunity on how to maximize the usage of the app in a library setting.

About New York University Shanghai

New York University Shanghai is the first Sino-US higher education joint venture university in the People's Republic of China. Part of the "Global Network University" in New York University, NYU Shanghai is an important portal campus for NYU students to study in. In the fall of 2013, approximately 300 full-time freshmen students enrolled in Shanghai: 150 are international students from the USA, Australia, Canada, Europe, Latin America, India, etc., while the other half are Chinese national students from various provinces of China.

In the fall of 2014, another group of 300 freshmen students enrolled, making the current population about 600 students from all over the world. This hybrid of student body makes the university a very diverse community. The WeChat in the Library was released as a soft launch initiative in spring 2014 (March to June) but has been utilized for as a virtual reference tool and as a student engagement resource in the forthcoming semester in 2015.

Getting started with WeChat

To start WeChat, users must download the app on the smart phone through the company's Web site (www.wechat.com). WIFI connection is necessary to use the app; the alternative is to download the program onto the Macintosh computer (OS X10.7 LION). Once the download is complete, new users must create a WeChat ID and password with an active mobile number. This number will not be identified or released in the profiles but to start the WeChat ID and to allow future users to "add" you into their group via mobile numbers. The challenge with this part is that an active number is needed. If none is available or provided by the institution then the app will not be able to start properly.

Another main concern that became apparent was that the WeChat ID could be traced by the users. This is can be an issue because it may identify the users and breach privacy. A fundamental principle of virtual reference is to maintain the privacy of individuals. It can be problematic if one explores the WeChat ID, but if one only answers questions from the app without exploring "moments" which serve similar purposes as a Facebook "wall" where users can post various status updates, and information on their site.

When an account has been set up, one can add contacts or groups (usually companies with a WeChat group account create groups) via phone number or WeChat ID. Other interesting functions are also available in the app for mobile phones:

- Under the "Discover" feature, one can scan QR codes to add users; every WeChat user also has a QR code.
- Shaking feature: users can "shake" which is a special application that allows users to shake their phones to find other people who are shaking their phones as well.
- To find other users in close proximity: one can click on the "People Nearby" which will allow users to find other users as well.
- "Drift bottle" feature allows users to create and put the message in a "virtual bottle" and throw it across the "sea" and another user may find the message. Users can also find other drifting bottles in the sea as well.
- The "games" section of the app allows users to download mini games into their account and play them.
- For virtual reference purposes, one can send texts, emoticons, photos, live pictures, "location" that allows users to find one another, a name card, "favorite messages" which are self-crafted, voice messages and virtual face-to-face time as well. One other interesting feature is that the language of the app that can be adapted: English, French, Japanese, Chinese, Arabic, Korean, German, Vietnamese, Russian,

Thai, Turkish, Italian, Hindi and Hebrew.

Methodology and findings

To understand the positive results from using WeChat as a virtual reference tool, an analysis of the information exchanges is needed. All responses from participants and their identities on WeChat are anonymous. The research involves the collection or study of existing data but the information is private and identifiers are not recorded. It is also important to note that the WeChat app does not collect or store data for its own archive; the only way to see past transactions between users is to look at the "chat transcript". There is no way to store or transfer the conversation data to another medium. This may provide challenges for those who wish to find ways to improve their virtual service philosophy and expectation.

Another important element to consider is that the when users are using WeChat on computers, the current data on the phone does not transfer to the computer platform. This means that users cannot simultaneously be signed on to WeChat on their mobile devices and computers. The conversation data collected on the computer will also not be stored and transferred to the mobile phone. This may cause some challenges in assessing whether the data collected on the phone or computer can be utilized to understand information needs. The purpose of the paper is to demonstrate how students used the WeChat service to fulfill their information or research needs in the university. Here are a few samples of questions pulled from transactions in the Library's WeChat service:

Q1. When is the library available in the new building?
Q2. What time is the library closed today?
Q3. Can you give more library updates on WeChat?
Q4. What are the summer hours of the library?
Q5. Does the library have laptops to borrow today?

These sample questions are generally coming from students who are interested in using the library's resources; they are not unique or research-based, however, as it was a soft launch, the WeChat service has slowly picked up traffic from various student groups. All the transactions were conducted in English as well. For this case, the hours of service have been confined to two hours per day to support virtual reference on WeChat. If users had an in-depth research question, there would be a referral response to meet with a librarian consultation in-person instead. This would prove to be more meaningful and helpful for the student and librarian.

Because most questions are general, there have been a few important ones that demonstrate the WeChat app to be more than just an information service. In one example, as soon as the library has announced that it will be moving to the new campus on WeChat, questions came through the app and patrons asked about the new library hours and services in the new campus. This was an interesting case because the users responded to the announcement with questions about it. This indicates that users who have "added" the library's WeChat ID into their page do look at updates and announcements featured in their "Moments" section. The library's status updates on the WeChat prove to be useful to connect with students who may not have access to social media tools in the USA and heavily rely on this app to find updates about their university.

The app can also be utilized for multipurpose beyond the communication role that it primarily provides: to support virtual service, to create student engagement, to promote library services and to create an online community of student users. This part will be further explored in the next section. Because the users are not identified in this study, it may prove to be useful for further research to explore how WeChat can support international students, particularly Chinese students in an American university context to understand how the research and information needs differ from Chinese students in China and in America.

There have been several case studies across the library literature in China that cover the extensive and positive uses of WeChat for outreach or virtual services. From its general features such as sending text, videos and images by undergraduates (Mao, 2014) to special features such as "shaking the phone" to find other nearby users to connect with (Zhang, 2013), the study of the app has been numerous to understand students' information-seeking behaviors in the context of higher education and library research.

In one recent study, a researcher explored the factors of undergraduate students using WeChat in the Southwest University and Chongqing Youth Vocational and Technical College in China. Based on a survey with 200 randomly selected and anonymous students, 181 respondents gave complete responses and positive feedback and satisfaction to the app. They also revealed how much time they spent using the app. Users often use the app because their friends encourage them to use it (Mao, 2014). The researcher concluded that the app plays an important role in relieving student pressures and stress but more research needs to be conducted on the usage of the app to enhance online learning. It is still important to note that there has not been an extensive study conducted on the application of WeChat in the West because the app is still relatively new and undergoing major developments and upgrades.

Promoting, maintaining and assessing WeChat as virtual library service

To promote the WeChat services, one can use the traditional route of using QR codes printed on flyers or Web sites (including social media pages, LibGuides and other sites) to draw users to sign up for the app or to "add" the library's WeChat ID.

One of the most important elements of maintaining any virtual reference service is to have a virtual reference service policy. Generally, the guidelines and policies need to be discussed and agreed upon in the library in terms of service philosophy and expectations. With WeChat, patrons can ask for documents, specifically articles. Based on our assessment so far, none have asked for this but it would be helpful to include the guideline that the service is not a document delivery service. The

interactions between the librarians and patrons may vary but it should be consistent in terms of delivering or directing the appropriate resource. If users are seeking general information about the library using the app, then it is important to promptly respond to their needs. However, some transactions, particularly reference questions may be difficult to address their inquiries on the mobile devices. If the library is responding WeChat inquiries through the computer then that will not be a problem because it will be fairly easy to manage and respond.

Another important element of a guideline is scheduling: how can librarians support users who are active on a 24-hour basis? The WeChat app can set up a profile message – similar to an away message – indicating when the service is active and when users should email the library instead. This is useful to alert patrons to contact the library directly when seeking help remotely. The service should also be offered to the community within the university, including alumni group; this is a practical approach to focus and market the service to a particular group and create a communicative connection that can brand the university or library differently.

One major concern in using WeChat is that it may not fully censor the names of the users. Once users have added the library's WeChat ID to their own group, the library can access and see their pages similar to Facebook. They may contain inappropriate or sensitive content regarding the user. The library must be proactive and ensure that protecting the privacy of users is fundamental, and information collected through WeChat will not be shared with any third parties.

The app can be used as part of a "gamification" model. As addressed earlier, those features such as "drift bottle" or "shaking" can offer creative solutions to teach teamwork or research games where there are interactions between the librarians and students. Although not much study has been conducted on WeChat as a gamification tool in libraries, it is possible to utilize the app for this purpose considering how many students use the app in the university.

In one example, the librarians collaborated with an academic advisor from academic affairs to promote an activity for the peer-advising program, a program that facilitates connection between first-year students and upper-class students and support transition into academic college life within the university. The librarian and the academic advisor designed a scavenger game for 20 students in the program to search for clues throughout the university building. Students had to add the library's WeChat account into their own and then send an image of their team when they arrive in specific destinations. The purpose of this exercise is to build the peer-advising program and to strengthen the teams as they go through this program. Utilizing the WeChat app for this purpose allowed the students to connect with the library through another process. The app also served as a student engagement resource to support these student-related activities. In the future, the app will be utilized for other collaborations that involve library research and student engagement.

Conclusion

Overall, WeChat offers useful and unique features beyond the traditional social media outlets (Facebook and Twitter) and can provide a range of services and support for research and information needs. This paper introduces WeChat as one approach to serving communities who are heavily useful mobile devices to find and gather information; the questions as asked by the patrons are fairly simple for the period; however, some questions were timely and important, as the university was preparing to move and the information had just been announced.

This also becomes clear that new apps can be experimented in many other library elements beyond "virtual reference" – such as outreach programming – such as gamification in libraries and a teaching tool to find relevant information needs and to "promote" the library in the virtual setting. These are innovative elements for any library to consider. However, managing an extra app or service needs to be considered when resources are limited. As WeChat continues to expand in different platforms and reaching to the communities in the West, it may eventually become too useful to overlook.

REFERENCES

Mao, C. (2014), "Friends and relaxation: key factors of undergraduate students' WeChat using", *Creative Education*, Vol. 5 No. 8, pp. 636-640.

Murphy, J. (2010), "Using mobile devices for research smartphones, databases and libraries", *Online*, Vol. 13 No. 3, pp. 13-14.

Pearce, A., Collard, S. and Whatley, K. (2010), "SMS reference: myths, makers and modalities", *Reference Services Review*, Vol. 38 No. 2, pp. 250-263.

Wilkonson, C. (2011), *Mobile Platforms: Getting Information on the Go*, Rosen Publishing Group, New York, NY.

Zhang, M. (2013), "'Study on the shake' of WeChat usage and effects of the contemporary college students", *Electronic Test*, Vol. 13, p. 57.

FURTHER READING

Nowlan, G. (2013), "Going mobile: creating a mobile presence for your library", *New Library World*, Vol. 114 Nos 3/4, pp. 142-150.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Raymond Pun is a research and reference services librarian in New York University Shanghai, where he provides reference and instructional services, data and digital scholarship support. His research interests include virtual services, digital humanities, social media and Chinese cultural studies.

Raymond Pun (*ray.pun@nyu.edu*) is a Reference and Research Services Librarian at the New York University Shanghai, Shanghai, China.