

# Tired of Reinventing the Wheel? Then Stop! How to Use Online Communities for Solutions to Common Library Issues

Laura Warren

*San Jose State University*, [laura.nicole.warren@gmail.com](mailto:laura.nicole.warren@gmail.com)

Julie Obst

*Central Piedmont Community College*, [Julie.Obst@cpcc.edu](mailto:Julie.Obst@cpcc.edu)

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# Tired of Reinventing the Wheel? Then Stop! How to Use Online Communities for Solutions to Common Library Issues

*Laura Warren, MLIS Student/Libraries Thriving Intern, San Jose State University/ Credo Reference  
Julie Obst, Librarian, Central Piedmont Community College*

## Abstract:

Do you know that the library issues you regularly face cannot possibly be exclusive to your library? Would you like to find better solutions without “re-inventing the wheel”? Have you tried participating in an online library community? This lively discussion based session focuses on participating in online communities and networking through social media as free resources for theoretical and practical solutions to common library issues. Common community offerings, including continuing education and far-reaching collaboration opportunities, are discussed as tools for addressing any range of library issues. Furthermore, tweeting, e-mail digesting and other best practices for making the most of community participation will be discussed as beneficial acts of membership rather than time-consuming distractions from your real library work. This paper will summarize the experiences and concerns about online communities shared during the Charleston Conference session. It will offer ways to get the most out of online community participation and how online community participation has benefited librarians who have used it as a solution to their everyday work-related issues.

Librarianship is not a new career. Even focusing specifically on librarianship in America, the career itself went through its formative period in as early as the seventeenth century (Rubin, 2010, pg. 46). Furthermore, library science is not a small, limited career field. The American Library Association estimates that there are 122, 101 libraries (public, academic, school, special, armed forces, and government) in the United States today (2010). The American Library Association offers that there are a total of around 342, 343 paid staff (librarians, other professionals, paraprofessionals, clerical and technical personnel) in libraries (2011).

With these two points in mind, it becomes difficult to answer the question of why, in our digital age, librarians so often end up working in a vacuum when it is so easy to reach out to colleagues and find theoretical and practical solutions to common library issues. As information professionals who have benefitted from participation in online collaborative communities, such as Libraries Thriving (<http://www.librariesthriving.org>), we were interested in not only finding out what keeps our colleagues from taking advantage of all that online communities have to offer but also in offering support to address their concerns. To collect colleagues' responses, we used two data collection methods: a brief survey distributed online and an open discussion during a Charleston Conference session. This paper will offer a brief description of

the definition what is of the term “online community” as well as a discussion of the most common reasons offered for not taking advantage of these communities and responses to those issues.

“Online Community,” though a somewhat descriptive term, tends to mean different things to different individuals. For instance, though much of the literature about online communication designates online communities and social networks as closely related if not indistinguishable, Tharon Howard, a leader in the field of social networking with thirty years' experience researching and creating communities online, emphasizes the distinction between social networks and online communities. Howard offers that social networks put individuals at the center of relationships and online communities focus on “the user's commitment to a core set of interests, values, and communication practices” (2010, pg. 15). This is interesting to consider alongside the answers provided to our online survey. While an emphasis on the importance of the web as a space for communication of ideas and information between individuals with a common interest was a common thread in the answers provided, a distinction was not made between Facebook, Twitter and other commonly labeled “social networks.” Rather than this emphasis on a specific focus or agenda differentiating “online communities” that focus on one specific topic from “social networks” where information from family news to job-related occur-

rences are shared, the online survey participants saw many social networking sites overlapping with online communities. What mattered in defining an “online community” wasn’t necessarily all that is possible through the community but all that you did with the community. Based on that designation, we offer the definition of an online community as a space for online communication which may offer

but is not limited to: educational seminars/webinars, discussions on discussion forums/blogs, and/or lists of links to resources for information professionals.

With this general definition in mind, the number of online communities available to information professionals is overwhelming. A few examples include:

What’s it Called?	What is It?	What’s an Example?
Nings	A platform for creating social communities; Includes video sharing, “Pages” for members, Groups, Discussion Forums, Blogs, etc.	<a href="http://www.ala.org/ala/professionalresources/libfactsheets/alalibraryfactsheet02.cfm">http://www.ala.org/ala/professionalresources/libfactsheets/alalibraryfactsheet02.cfm</a>
Groups	Generally only one of many offerings from a social network or e-mail provider	(Facebook) <a href="http://www.facebook.com/carl.acrl?sk=wall">http://www.facebook.com/carl.acrl?sk=wall</a> ; (LinkedIn) <a href="http://www.linkedin.com/groups/Intruction-in-Academic-Libraries-158779?trk=myg_ugrp_ovr">http://www.linkedin.com/groups/Intruction-in-Academic-Libraries-158779?trk=myg_ugrp_ovr</a> ; (Google) <a href="http://groups.google.com/group/careers-in-federal-libraries?hl=en&amp;pli=1">http://groups.google.com/group/careers-in-federal-libraries?hl=en&amp;pli=1</a>
Virtual Worlds	A program that allows users to interact with other individuals in “Avatar” form.	Second Life
E-mail lists (commonly called “Listservs”)	Automated e-mail lists that are related to a web community or exist on their own as a way to e-mail groups of users who subscribe.	<a href="http://lists.ala.org/sympa">http://lists.ala.org/sympa</a>
Other Websites and Blogs	Pages sponsored by companies, campaigns, conferences that offer information and discussion opportunities around a central issue/focus.	<a href="http://www.voicesforthelibrary.org.uk/worldpress/">http://www.voicesforthelibrary.org.uk/worldpress/</a> , <a href="http://www.librariesthriving.org">http://www.librariesthriving.org</a> , <a href="http://www.against-the-grain.com/multigrain/">http://www.against-the-grain.com/multigrain/</a>

The next logical question is what solutions could these online communities that we’ve listed offer to colleagues in library environments? In our research we uncovered two ways that online community participation benefits library professionals: offering an outside perspective solutions and saving time.

Based on the American Library Association figures offered earlier, no librarian or library staff member should ever feel that they are facing a library issue that is singular to their facility. With so many

different types of libraries and so many different individuals filling similar positions, it is a shame to ignore the very relevant outside perspective that online communities place at your fingertips. By simply reading the discussions that others are having you may uncover situations similar to yours that are already being shared. Furthermore, posting your own questions with your specific details can lead to a discussion that extends beyond the vacuum that is your institution and into the library field as a whole, allowing for a bias-free conversation exploring the numerous sides of your problem.

Being a long standing subscriber to an e-mail list, we've often times had the experience of hearing the same or similar conversations repeating themselves with the convenient answer being a link to the archives where a problem has already been solved. Going back to refer to this conversation that has already happened means that a librarian does not have to spend the time thinking through a problem that has already been solved. How many times have you been faced with a weeding project and had the sneaking suspicion that you are not the first one to have a similar task at hand? How often have you been charged with teaching a one-shot session about source evaluation and had to take time creating a PowerPoint or planning as method of assessment? How often do you think fellow instruction librarians have already gone through this process?

Since the plethora of online community options makes a lack of relevant outlets an improbable excuse, we were interested in why colleagues still didn't take advantage of all that was out there waiting for them. We found that the most commonly expressed concern was time. It hardly seems necessary to acknowledge but may be beneficial to express the common sentiment that there will never be enough time in the day for all the tasks required of a library professional. From desires to somehow create extra hours in the day to a plea for more clerical help so that twelve plus hours would be enough for juggling daily task and online communication, time as a major hurdle to using online communities was the most commonly offered sentiment in our online survey question of what changes would be required for colleagues' to become more active participants in online communities.

If you're waiting with bated breath for the magical way to actually add to the length of the day, this may not be the advice you are looking for. However, we'd like to offer a way to keep up with what's going on in online communities without committing to poring through pages and pages of e-mail threads or discussion forum posts: subscribing in the way that is most convenient for your information need. As of right now, there are numerous ways to subscribe to information updates from various communities including signing up for e-newsletters, subscribing to an RSS feed or skipping

the physical forums all together and joining e-mail lists that bring information right to your inbox.

By no means do we claim to be experts in online community participation but, considering our personal experiences with online communities and our interest in them as resources for professional advancement, we feel capable of starting the conversation that will address why more colleagues do not make use of these free tools that are available to them. In fact, two main concerns that were brought up during our online survey were privacy and ease-of-use and, while concrete answers are discouraged because of the ever-changing nature of our digital library world, continued discourse and the openness to ask questions will help everyone reach a level of comfort with using online communities.

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