"Punctuality Is the Thief of Time": The Earnest Pursuit of Social Media in the Library

Elyse L. Profera
Taylor & Francis Group, elyse.profera@taylorandfrancis.com

Maria Atilano
University of North Florida, m.atilano@unf.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/charleston>

Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

An indexed, print copy of the Proceedings is also available for purchase at:

<http://www.thepress.purdue.edu/series/charleston>.

You may also be interested in the new series, Charleston Insights in Library, Archival, and Information Sciences. Find out more at: <http://www.thepress.purdue.edu/series/charleston-insights-library-archival-and-information-sciences>.

Elyse L. Profera and Maria Atilano, "'Punctuality Is the Thief of Time': The Earnest Pursuit of Social Media in the Library" (2014). *Proceedings of the Charleston Library Conference*.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5703/1288284315639>

"Punctuality Is the Thief of Time": The Earnest Pursuit of Social Media in the Library

Elyse L. Profera, Regional Sales Manager, Central US Region, Taylor & Francis Group

Maria Atilano, Marketing Outreach Librarian, Thomas G. Carpenter Library at University of North Florida

Abstract

The way social media tools are selected and used in the library changes regularly in an evolving digital and social climate. The opportunities social media presents to the library community includes, but is not restricted to, user engagement, professional networking, informational exchange, and increasing the discoverability of existing online resources at the library.

Taylor & Francis recently released its white paper entitled "Use of Social Media by the Library: Current Practices and Future Opportunities." The white paper has been researched and compiled by Taylor & Francis to provide an overview of current practices relating to the use of social media in the library from a world-wide perspective. This presentation shares results of the white paper, as well as a case study on creating a social media strategy that includes scheduling updates ahead of time to appeal to students throughout the semester, creating relationships with other on-campus clubs and organizations via social media.

Introduction

Social media has the potential to facilitate much closer relationships between libraries and their customers. In general, according to Taylor & Francis's research findings, many librarians agree that it is difficult to predict how social media and its use will evolve, and the priority for most of the librarians who participated in the research is to remain experimental and flexible.

There is little doubt that use of social media is well on its way to becoming an integral part of how people communicate with each other—not surprisingly, an overwhelming 88% of respondents to the online survey felt that social media would become more important to the library in the future. A more integrated future is imagined, and some librarians see their role becoming one of helping users find paths through complex content, and directing them towards making useful connections as efficiently as possible through the use of social media.

Research Objectives and Demographics

Taylor & Francis Group wanted to create an open forum for the library community to share their thoughts in formal and informal settings. The specific research objectives of the primary

research were to further understand how libraries are using social media in the library, to further understand for what purposes librarians are using social media in the library, and to further understand the opportunities and challenges libraries see when using social media in the library.

The research was international in scope and was conducted through a number of channels:

- Three focus groups with librarians (one held in the UK, one in the USA, and one in India).
- Ten individual phone interviews with thought leaders from the library community.
- A Twitter party, with participants from the UK, USA, Australia, Canada, and South Africa.
- Follow-up desk research to identify relevant studies and commentary articles.
- An online survey, which was distributed in July 2014 to librarians around the globe, including Indonesia, Singapore, Japan, India, and Pakistan.

Of the 497 survey respondents, the majority (56.0%) came from the United States; 15.4% from the United Kingdom, 3.7% from India, and 3.7% from Australia. The majority of respondents also came from librarians working in academic libraries (78%), with small representation from librarians in other sectors, including public and professional libraries.

How are Libraries Currently Using Social Media?

The results of this research highlight the growing role of social media in the library, with 72% of survey respondents noting that social media in the library is important. Survey data also revealed a general profile of the current use of social media in the library. More than 60% of libraries have been using social media for three years or longer, and 67% of libraries manage between one and four social media accounts, with 23% managing more than five accounts. Facebook and Twitter are the most popular social media channels, followed closely by blogs, and 30% percent post to social media on at least a daily basis.

Approaches to social media policy implementation in terms of managing the output of social media channels is split, with 29% having a social media policy in place, and 28% are planning to implement one. However, 43% of survey respondents had no plans to introduce a policy—perhaps indicative of the early stage libraries are in when it comes to experimenting with social media.

Reasons for using social media covered a wide range of objectives, including seeking the opinion of library users; reaching users in their homes or virtual spaces; promotional purposes, such as publicizing events, services, or new content; connecting with specific user groups and network with other librarians; and building a sense of community.

The survey also suggested attitudes towards social media assessment are changing. While 72% felt there was currently no or little value to tracking social media results, a similar number (70%) envisaged spending more time in the

future with measuring the impact their social media activity had.

Conversations held during focus groups and phone interviews found similar results as the survey. For one, the social media channels most frequently mentioned by focus groups and in phone interviews were Twitter and Facebook, with the latter particularly key for engaging with students. Twitter is felt to be more effective for communicating with researchers and other institutions, and blogs are used for sharing information and news.

Librarians also reported an accelerating uptake of visual channels, such as Slideshare, YouTube, Pinterest, Flickr, and Instagram. YouTube is being used for educational purposes, such as providing instructional information and for collection management; while Pinterest is used for showcasing new acquisitions, and Flickr for posting photos of library activities such as a refurbishment.

Part of the rise of the usage of more visual channels seemed to be reflecting changes in the way in which people are responding to visual over verbal messages. Multiple sources report that in social media marketing, visual postings attract higher levels of engagement. We're able to process images 60,000 times faster than text, so part of this preference may be reflective of a growing preference as the volume of information that we're exposed to every day continues to grow.

In the Taylor & Francis survey, when asked whether they agreed that visual communication was becoming more important in social media, 81% of librarians agreed. With information overload continuing to be a problem, a continued move towards greater use of image-based social media channels by librarians is likely.

The survey also asked librarians to rate how important social media is to achieve a set of objectives in their library. The results indicate that social media is primarily being used by libraries currently to fulfil marketing and promotional objectives, whether that be the promotion of events, collections or services. However,

engagement with faculty and students is not far behind in terms of priorities, and the top five uses for social media include:

1. Events promotion.
2. Library services promotion.
3. Collections promotion.
4. Library refurbishment updates.
5. Promotion of new acquisitions.

At the other end of the spectrum, using social media in a teaching or learning capacity is a much lower priority; the five least popular objectives were:

1. Highlighting subject specific information.
2. Connecting with potential students.
3. As a teaching tool to promote information literacy.
4. To promote courses.
5. As a research tool to locate official documents.

Opportunities and Challenges

The most popular opportunity relating to the use of social media was the chance to raise the professional profile of the library, with 72% of survey respondents feeling this was an opportunity.

Other opportunities cited included the freedom to connect regularly with users and collaboration with other departments within the organization, indicating perhaps that social media is seen as a freer, alternative communication channel which can be used in a more informal way to reach key audiences.

Advantages and benefits of using social media in the library include the perceived low cost of using social media, and the fact that there is generally little training required to use the different channels. The speed at which news and promotional messages can be disseminated through Facebook and Twitter, among others, is also one of the major benefits of adopting social media policies. Increasing engagement and

interaction with library users (and thus increasing usage of content) is also an important opportunity libraries seek to take advantage of with their social media policies. Social media can also provide a new and different channel through which the library can get feedback from end users. They can then use the feedback to enhance services. Library staff can also share information on outreach activities beyond the library itself; consequently, social media is an opportunity to reach the community and people who do not normally get library messages through the university.

Despite the many opportunities of social media, there are several notable challenges to implementing social media policies in a library. The most significant challenge to the survey respondents was seen to be time and resources, with 67% stating this was a challenging issue. This was followed by judging an appropriate tone for communications (formal vs. informal, with 64% citing this as a challenge), and making sure others were aware of the library's social media activities (61%).

Other challenges which were seen to be a significant issue included:

- Levels of interest in and skills with using social media varying across library staff.
- Limited funds to support more advanced social media usage/features and training.
- Maintaining engagement with library users and attracting popularity (followers, likes and so on).
- Difficulty maintaining library branding for content/resources made accessible via social media.
- Potential copyright issues when using social media such as YouTube to build collections.
- External factors such as Internet connectivity, technological infrastructure, and government restrictions on the use of social media.

These common themes which reemerged from respondents indicated that they were concerned

about the amount of time and level of skillset needed in order to adequately maintain a social media channel and benefit from a good level of returned success.

Channel Applications

This research on social media in the library also looked at how libraries were using social media for specific tasks, and which channels they felt best served a specific purpose. These can be loosely grouped into a number of key areas, including customer service, engaging with users, and collection development and outreach.

Customer Service

Using social media as a customer service tool was frequently cited across the research. During the Twitter party, participants heard about some specific examples of how librarians are using the channel in a customer service capacity, from simple information broadcasting through to more detailed feedback. One participant in the Twitter party noted that, “Students use [Twitter] to tell us if they’re too hot, there’s noise in the quiet area; if they’re in a long queue.” Real-time feedback was also cited as a valuable return on social media messages.

Although social media challenges provide opportunities for engaging with patrons, a key challenge relating to customer service provision via social media is responding in a timely fashion, as users expect quick answers to their questions, whatever the time or day of the week.

Institutions in the focus groups reported declining usage of websites for accessing library service information, with some suggesting that these pages were now used primarily by external audiences. However, librarians were still putting effort into maintaining current information on them. It was felt that, because of its immediacy and transient nature, social media was a better way to provide ongoing updates of information that was changing with any degree of frequency. Emails are still used for important reminders.

Several key take-away points emerged from the research when looking specifically at applying social media channels as a customer service tool.

For one, a quick response to a customer query is essential. If users feel they will not get the response they need, they will quickly move away from the social media channel, use other means to voice their views, or won’t bother to provide the feedback at all. While an immediate response is generally unrealistic, aiming for a minimum response time will help ensure that users continue to provide feedback and return to the channel in the future.

Making the most of staff time is also imperative, with focus group discussions focusing on the importance of assigning a role to different individuals so that monitoring of social media channels for responses doesn’t just fall to one individual.

Driving User Engagement

User engagement also proved to be an important use of social media. Over time, social media can help create central communities which are strongly linked and have an influential voice.

According to one survey respondent, “One of the opportunities with social media is listening to your community . . . I think that’s primarily why we have a Twitter account, and we have also claimed our foursquare location, so we kind of can listen and monitor and do that kind of work, so that’s yielded some pretty positive reviews and results.”

For example, an image can be used to convey a message far more effectively than text and will grab the attention of the user base with more immediacy. Through telephone interviews, librarians shared their experiences with visual social media. One US library posted pictures of library buildings along with corresponding interesting facts, and found that students were highly receptive to this, being motivated to comment on the original post and go on to share their own pictures. In turn, they found that the number of likes to their channel dramatically increased.

It’s also imperative that librarians engage with users on topics that matter to them. One librarian commented how they liked to look out for events which were important to their students, such as exam week, and enter the conversation to offer

their support. This type of initiative adds a more human element to the social media channel, and demonstrates an open and receptive approach.

Variety is key when it comes to keeping users interested—maintain a mix of more informative messages with informal observations, opinion pieces, or questions.

Collection and Promotion

Social media is also regularly used to promote collections, particularly core databases, but current activities are diverse and ad hoc. From the results of the survey Taylor & Francis undertook, promoting the library's collection was within the top three objectives for using social media.

A key challenge, however, was found to be the niche interest of library users, which made it difficult to serve up tailored communications. One suggestion was to work more closely with subject experts in using social media to engage with users with relevant content.

Social media was recognized as having potential to encourage dialogue with users, providing opportunities for collection development. Listening was felt to be as important as broadcasting. Social media was frequently cited as a powerful collection management tool, both for hosting resources and transforming digital cataloging.

One of the librarians interviewed via telephone detailed how YouTube was a valuable collection management tool for the University of British Columbia. The library uses webcasting services as a way to deliver broadcasts through the internet. These broadcasts are delivered via YouTube so that end users are able to easily view content from the comfort of their own desktops.

It was apparent from much of the feedback from focus groups that approaches to collection development and management are ad hoc, and many felt that social media channels were restricted to promotional activity only. Research suggests that playing to each channel's strength is imperative for success.

Creating a structured approach so that collection development becomes a regular part of a social media plan is also important. Some libraries cited regular initiatives such as "Information Literacy Friday," when regular posts would be made about an aspect of the library's collection.

Posts that focus on a human interest element may also create buzz and encourage users to comment or repost to their followers. For example, a UK library posted pictures of an old phrenology map to represent content they held in their History of Psychiatry Section.

Policy and Management

The research also explored library experiences in managing the output of their social media channels and whether they had any metrics in place for measuring impact. Interestingly, only a small minority of libraries are scheduling their posts in advance, with a majority of 75% of librarians approaching the output of their channels on a more ad hoc basis.

Of those who do manage the output of their accounts using online tools, there are a range of sites currently being used. These social media management tools can be helpful when managing multiple channels, or multiple accounts on the same channel, and can cut down on time spent planning posts considerably. Hootsuite was used by the majority of respondents, with 44% choosing to plan posts in advance using this service.

The research found that measurement of impact is generally ad hoc, but some institutions were beginning to analyze results more closely, indicating that perhaps social media account management is still at a relatively early and experimental stage.

Comments from the focus group suggest several tips for managing social media channels:

- Implement an easy-to-follow social media plan to maintain appropriate and engaging output for a social network. Introducing complicated style guidelines and rules may stifle creativity.

- Track results to ensure the library is not running a social media channel that no one is using. Basic tracking of followers, likes, mentions and sharing of posts is essential to ascertain the success of a social media channel.
- Correlate results with real-time data of the launch of key promotions to help evaluate posts and inform social media activity.
- Incorporate observations into ongoing social media plans—are certain topics more popular than others? Does the timing of posts influence their success?

The Future of Social Media

Across the survey, focus groups, and phone interviews, there was much common ground. Many librarians were particularly interested in the future of social media, and the majority of librarians see it having an important place in the library going forward and expect to see dedicated social media roles appear. How and what that

future might look like was harder for some to articulate, as the digital world is constantly changing.

One librarian commented on the growing need and demand for social media based on the next generation of students coming through the library, no matter what that may look like.

“It is crucial to note that our upcoming wave of library patrons—students, colleagues, and staff—will be from this generation of technologically sophisticated, well-connected on the social web, entrepreneurial, and oftentimes impatient,” the survey respondent said.

Other suggestions included a need for the library to be more strategic, integrating social media more closely with their other existing systems. While some feel that social media is a transient communication method, many believe that social media will form an increasingly central part of the librarian’s role and become an everyday part of communication with end users.