



WIDER CONNECT: A MAPPING OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE LIBRARY

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ABSTRACT

Social media has pervaded all spheres of life ranging from the personal to the political. It is revolutionising the whole world in a variety of ways. No business, professional or personal activity is today imaginable without social media. As it also spreads its reach in the academy, it is becoming a vital appendage to the libraries. After initial reluctance to include it in services and larger outreach, today the library community has harnessed social media in various ways for better and quicker services. The immediate and wide connect it offers has led to a paradigm shift in the field of library and information sciences. However, as it is a developing scenario, it will still take more time and many more adjustments to become a fully integral part of the library system.

HOW WEB 2.0 CHANGED THE WORLD

Computer-technology thinker and activist Tim O'Reilly popularised the term Web 2.0 nearly a decade ago. Those were the times when the dot-com bubble had burst in the United States and a large number of computer companies had collapsed. People had started thinking that the internet was an overhyped fad. Web 2.0 meant the next stage of the technological phenomenon of the World Wide Web which was the basis of the internet. The concept of Web 2.0 was based on the idea that the dot-com burst was just a stage in the technological progress and what lay ahead was even more exciting and revolutionary: the interactive internet rather than the static information storehouse that it mostly had been. One early mark of the transition from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 was replacement of Encyclopedia Britannica and similar resources such as Encarta with the interactive and collective enterprise called Wikipedia. After that came the revolutionary blogs that changed the way the world expressed

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itself, followed by Facebook and Twitter. Today, the world in all its dimensions, (personal, public and professional) cannot be imagined without the interactive world wide web.

THE RISE OF THE SOCIAL MEDIA

The Web 2.0 heralded an unprecedented phenomenon of social networking through engaging websites such as Wikipedia, Facebook, Flickr and Twitter. The new concepts of syndication, weblink and online groups offered a variety of interactive experience to the browsers. If Web 1.0 was all about information storage, Web 2.0 was about information sharing. Typically, a social media website allows you to post your profile, upload your information, get exposed to similar profiles and information and share your information and connect with others in many innovative ways such as 'likes' on Facebook or retweets on Twitter. On a blog, you can not only upload information but also link to similar blogs, get other bloggers to subscribe to your information feed and comment on other blogs and get comments on your own.

The huge popularity of these web-based innovations led to the term social media, for they had brought together the society like nothing else in the past. Twitter has 284 million monthly active users and 500 million Tweets are sent per day while Facebook has 1.35 billion monthly active users, according to the company websites. Very soon more than half of the world will be active online. This coming together of people has had far-reaching consequences. Twitter and Facebook have even helped mobilise mass movements such as the Arab Spring and the Anna Hazare's movement against corruption. Social media has started influencing voting patterns too. It has become the main platform for not only marketing but buying and selling too.

THE LIBRARY 2.0

The transition from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 was basically a shift from a static model of information exchange to a dynamic one. Since the academy too is about the exchange of knowledge and information, it was natural for these changes in the web to start reflecting in the academic systems of information exchange, i.e. libraries. The two could not remain mutually exclusive. Social media was originally a personal information-sharing platform but soon it became a means to share all kinds of information. In no time, teachers and students began using it enthusiastically. While many in the field of library and information regarded Web 2.0 as another passing fad, slowly there were people who also saw it as threatening, especially when Google began scanning library books and putting them online. Today, social media has come to be an essential part of all kinds of activity in the world and libraries too are finding it a welcome addition.



It is not that libraries were untouched by Web 1.0. We saw many libraries putting up online catalogues. So it is quite natural today for libraries to take to the dynamic tools of Web 2.0. Though the idea of Library 2.0 means several things to different people, its defining feature is diverse interaction between users and library, among users, between users and librarians and among librarians. It is a user-centric model and has innovative ways of bringing the user closer to the library with the help of blogs, social networking websites and multimedia resources.

One of the most comprehensive pictures of Library 2.0 and its components is the model of Library 2.0 presented by Holmberg, Huvila, Kronqvist-Berg, and Widén-Wulff (Holmberg, K., Huvila, I., Kronqvist-Berg, M., & Widén-Wulff, G. 2009). This model of Library 2.0 consists of seven building blocks: interactivity, participation, users, social aspects, technology, Web 2.0, and libraries.

A whitepaper on the use of social media by libraries (Taylor & Francis 2014) says the early experiments with Facebook and MySpace were beginning to show promise by 2008. An article (Chu M and Nalani-Meulemans Y 2008) which showed that librarians displaying their online status as 'on' or 'off' helped users identify and connect with them. In another article from 2007 (Charnigo L and Barnett-Ellis P 2007), the Kimbel Library in the Coastal Carolina University was highlighted as providing a range of services through Facebook, such as library tours and promotion of resources. "An additional and unexpected benefit was that these activities also helped forge closer working relationships between staff, simply by virtue of getting to know each other on a more personal level through their social media accounts." The whitepaper cites several studies on the widespread use of social media in libraries in recent times. A 2012 study (Kai-Wah Chu, S. & Du, H. S. 2012) shows how use of social media by the library has now become mainstream. In this survey of libraries in Asia, North America and Europe, 71 per cent were found to be using social media tools with a further 13 per cent saying they planned to use them. Facebook and Twitter were the most commonly used tools.

The survey conducted for the whitepaper in 2014 with the international library community too reflected the trends. It received 497 responses in which over 70 per cent of librarians felt that the use of social media was important. This research comprised three focus groups (one held with UK-based librarians, one with librarians based in India, and one with US-based librarians); 10 individual in-depth phone interviews; a Twitter party; an online survey (distributed in July 2014 with 497 responses); and desk research to identify relevant studies and commentary articles.



The white paper states, “From our survey, over 70% of libraries are using social media tools, and 60% have had a social media account for three years or longer. 30% of librarians are posting at least daily. Facebook and Twitter remain the most popular channels currently, but the range of channels being used is expanding rapidly; there is a particular acceleration of interest in visual channels such as YouTube, Pinterest and Snapchat. Specialist research networking sites such as ResearchGate and Academia.edu are seen as having potential, but their perceived disconnect with publishers and the library community is a barrier. “

THE PARADIGM SHIFT IN LIBRARIES

A 2011 article in Information Today (Kho, N. D. 2011) lists many ways in which libraries are benefiting from the use of social media. It quotes Keri Thompson, head of the web services department at the Smithsonian Institution Libraries, who has seen the communication and marketing benefits of the organisation’s social media efforts firsthand. Thompson mentions recent efforts by the Biodiversity Heritage Library at the Smithsonian as an example. BHL is a consortium of 12 natural history and botanical libraries that cooperate to digitize and to make accessible the legacy literature of biodiversity that is held in their collections. “Once they took over the @bhl account on Twitter,” says Thompson, “We saw a 10-fold increase in followers within two weeks.”

Social media is impacting libraries in several profound ways. It turns the library into a virtual space so that anyone, anywhere can have access to the basic features. The most primary use of social media for libraries is to put out information in the public domain. It helps them inform the reader not only about new services or additions but also about several events. Promotion of library resources becomes very easy with the use of social media. Client servicing can be prompt as users can be accessed quickly on Twitter and Facebook. Social media is not only helping foster user communities but also forges relations between libraries and among the library professional. The areas where the use of social media is making a concrete impact are promotion of content and customer service in real time. It is expected to also enhance teaching and learning and institutional capacity building in the whole sphere of library and information sciences.

ADVANTAGES AND CHALLENGES

The main advantage of social media for libraries is that it costs little but is prompter than other means. A mere presence on the internet can lead to a huge enhancement in the services of a library. Since it is so pervasive in the society today, it also does not require the library staff to get any special training to use it. If client servicing is quick with social media, so is the user feedback. It can also offer an effective model for inhouse interaction for the library



staff and foster a sense of community and purpose among them. Since personal and public are interlinked online, the use of social media helps build a more personal interaction between users and the staff which leads to a better knowledge of user preferences.

However, it is not without its own challenges. Though operation of popular websites requires no specialised knowledge, new applications designed exclusively for the library may require special technological knowledge. Increasing and maintaining internet presence can be quite time-consuming. Social media is largely an informal space where delivering formal services can require library staff to maintain the thin line between being totally casual and more accessible.

Today, social media is also a highly contested space rife with several controversies. Time to time, it requires government oversight. Until social media is fully integrated into real systems of governance, its use will be fraught with risks and it can at best act as supplement to the offline library services. However, there is no denying the fact that in future, social media is going to redefine the libraries as we know them today. The survey conducted for the Taylor & Francis white paper (Taylor & Francis 2014) found that 88 per cent of the respondents felt that social media would become even more important to the libraries in the future.

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