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Revisiting Librarians and Professional Identity on Social Media

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Abstract

Librarians have been present on social media since its earliest days, as have studies about librarians on social media. Early attitudes expressed concern about the way social media use might impact one's professional reputation. This study revisits the attitudes and behaviors of librarians towards social media in 2019. It is found that early concerns remain, with only 38 percent of respondents indicating that they felt free of the responsibility of presenting a professional persona in social media. However, respondents were nearly unanimous in affirming social media as a positive resource for librarians.

Introduction

Librarians were early adopters of modern social media. Blood (2000) noted "weblogs" as a new trend in 1999, and librarian.net was already present at that time. *American Libraries* had a feature on blogging as early as 2001 (Crawford). The modern social media landscape arguably began with Friendster in 2002, MySpace in 2003, Facebook in 2004, and Twitter in 2006. Within the literature, one can trace the development of librarian social media from an eccentric hobby of the hyper-technological to an assumed element of the professional sphere. While the idea that maintaining boundaries between professional and personal identities on social media

has been described, literature focusing on these behaviors and attitudes within librarianship is scarce. This study examines librarian attitudes and practices in this complex area in 2019.

Literature Review

In 2007, Stephens found that the majority of blogging librarians used their blogs to discuss the profession. Farkas (2007) described a stereotype that librarian bloggers were low on the career ladder and new to the profession. They were perceived as avoiding traditional publishing. In 2009, Ahmad et al. (2011) found that approximately 35 percent of academic librarians in their study were using social networking sites. Of those, 95 percent used social networking sites for knowledge sharing while 53 percent used these sites to make friends (p. 117). Aharony (2009) looked at what personality traits correlated with Web 2.0 adoption. She found that librarians who identify new situations as challenges rather than risks, librarians who felt empowered in their position, and extroverts were more likely to use Web 2.0 technology (p. 33). She also noted that librarians who adopted social networking "understand that in order to survive, remain relevant, attract new patrons, and be professional, they should master the newest technological applications and apply them" (p. 34).

A few years later, Barbour and Marshall (2012) identified five types of academic persona online. The formal self, where one has little more presence than a digital CV, the networked self, in which one engages in professional networking, the teaching self, where one focuses on student engagement rather than colleagues, and the comprehensive self which mixes both

professional and personal interactions. Finally, they identified the uncontainable self, an online

presence created by others (p. 185).

Around the same time, Ollier-Malaterre et al. (2013) observed, "In the new world of

work, collisions of one's professional and personal domains are increasingly frequent online.

This presents new opportunities and challenges for boundary management and identity

negotiation in cyberspace that are not directly addressed in past theory and research" (p. 645).

Further, "Online boundary management may even lead employees to revisit offline interactions

at the workplace. For instance, they may reconsider who they view as trustworthy or not

discuss online social networks with coworkers from whom they would not want to receive an

online connection request" (P. 664).

In 2013, Del Bosque conducted a comprehensive survey that received 765 responses.

She found that 85 percent of responding librarians had a social media account. Fifty-one

percent used privacy settings to control access to their accounts. Twenty-nine percent would

not be "friends" with a colleague or boss. Fifty-five percent felt their social media activities had

no impact on their work relationships. No negative impacts were reported in this paper, but

they seem conspicuous in their absence. Only 21 percent had no concerns about social media,

which is similar to the findings of the present study.

In 2015, Tanner looked specifically at librarians and Twitter. He advocated the platform

as a tool to identify themes and trends within the profession and make connections with like-

minded professionals (p. 4). More recently, Radford et al (2019) described social media as a

new form of curricula vitae that incorporates an individual's personal brand. They also found a

much more relaxed attitude, notably revealing that only 30 percent of librarians were concerned about damage to their professional or personal reputation.

Skyrme and Levesque (2019) looked at social media as an element of the experiences of new librarians. They found that "social media is an example of an individual solution to a mass problem, one that places extra burdens on the individual and requires them to be active participants in a system that does them harm" (p. 15). They posited that social media can serve as a coping mechanism for a new professional who may be lacking other support systems. "Posting subversive content anonymously on Twitter shows how individual librarians might cope with stressors. And Twitter is not a frivolous example. It is both an artifact of popular everyday culture… and a forum for new librarian community-building" (p. 13).

Materials and Methods

A survey of 18 questions was created in Qualtrics. This survey was approved by the University of Idaho Institutional Review Board. A call for participation was sent to every state library association in the United States via email, a call was placed on the Social Media Librarians Facebook group and three calls were placed over three months in early 2019 via Twitter. By design, all questions save for Gender were constructed to self-tabulate. An opportunity for participants to comment was provided at the end of the survey.

Results

There were 101 responses to this survey. More than half (52 percent) of the responses came from people working in public libraries. Thirty-eight percent came from people in academic libraries, 7 percent from people who identified themselves as working in another kind

of library, and 3 percent from people working in special libraries. Fourteen percent of

respondents identified as being at a Director/Dean level in their organization. Thirty-one

percent identified as being at a Department Head level, 46 percent identified as librarians with

no formal management responsibilities, and 10 percent identified as library staff.

The age of respondents centered around the category of 30-39-year-olds and fell into a

curve in both directions from there. Seventy-eight percent of respondents identified as female.

Age range	Responses
19 or less	0
20-29	13
30-39	45
40-49	24
50-59	13
60-69	5
70+	1

When asked what social media platforms they personally used, overall, Facebook was

the most used platform with 83 respondents (83 percent). Instagram followed with 69 (69

percent), Twitter with 56 (56 percent), Other with 14 (14 percent), and Tumblr with 10 (10

percent) responses. When broken down by age range, the percentages remain constant in all

categories through 40-49, with about 2/3rds of respondents using Facebook and Instagram, half

using Twitter, and about 15 percent using Tumblr. At 50-59 Tumblr disappears completely and

Instagram use drops to about half, matching Twitter usage. At 60-69 Twitter use drops to about

33 percent and Instagram usage drops to 25 percent. Facebook usage remains consistent at roughly 2/3 across age groups.

When asked how they identify themselves on their social media accounts, 53 percent explicitly identified themselves in their professional role. (The example given in the survey was including their place of employment in their bio.) However, 88 percent used their real name on their "primary" social media account. Seven percent reported using a pseudonymous account to protect their professional image and 16 percent reported using such an account for other reasons.

One respondent noted, "My Twitter account is more professional. I don't say exactly my library, but there is only one so it is really easy to guess. But I still post personal content there. It is where I get most of my professional contacts. My Facebook account has many librarian friends, but tends to be more personal and is more locked down."

Another commented "If I have to hide and censor myself at work or in my personal life- what does that tell you about being a "professional". I value authenticity and if I can't be myself at work or in my private life- then those are spaces are not welcoming or nurturing. I don't view libraries as inherently good, I look at the profession through a critical lens- I stay in this profession because I won't be pushed out- I want to be a part of the solution, not the problem."

Conversely, "For me keeping the personal and professional separate is sacrosanct. This is likely a result of my age and preference for privacy."

When asked whether anonymous accounts that criticize librarianship are good for the profession, 34 percent said yes, 29 percent said no, and 36 percent indicated that these accounts were neither good nor bad.

One respondent opined, "As a general rule, I find that anonymity doesn't promote good behavior, so while it may be necessary under some circumstances, I'm very cautious about it."

In response to a question about whether they intentionally create a "personal brand" with their social media accounts, 42 percent make no effort to create a personal brand, 30 percent prefer not to attract attention online, 18 percent indicated that they make an effort to "be seen as a person beyond my job", 8 percent indicated they make a "proactive effort to be seen and heard as an influential person in the profession," and 2 percent try to get as much interaction as possible. Fifty-nine percent indicated that networking via social media is the same as networking in person.

Conversely, 48 percent indicated that they believed librarians who are influential or have a large audience are good for the profession, and only 1 percent indicated that this was bad for the profession. 19 percent indicated that influential librarians have an obligation to call out problems in the profession and 3 percent indicated they have an obligation to only present positive things.

Regarding social media as a whole, 47 percent indicated that social media is a public space and librarians have a responsibility to act professionally and 24 percent indicated that social media is a public space but librarians have no particular obligations. 14 percent indicated that social media is a private space where people should feel free to be themselves, and 14

percent indicated that social media is a private space, but librarians should protect their professional reputation by using a pseudonym.

One respondent wrote, "I find this so challenging. My Twitter presence started out personal and is still personal, but I interact with other librarians and post or react to professional things there, is now I have a social media account that's mixed. While I'm careful about what I post and somewhat careful of what I retweet, I like tweets pretty much without worrying about it at the moment, but I've started to wonder if I'd need to lock down my Twitter if I were job-hunting."

Another respondent elaborated, "The "Social Media is" question was very difficult. I have yet to see a policy at my company that regulates personal social media accounts, but I have seen people get in trouble, or miss out on promotion opportunities, for things said on their social media accounts. In some cases, I feel that even constructive criticism in a public space is still seen as negative, even if done professionally. I have seen a lot of "fumbling" and confusion on handling younger employees' social media presence by management from older generations, but this is something that needs to be discussed as we encourage diversity and inclusion in the workplace."

Discussion

Librarians have interacted with modern social media for more than two decades, beginning with "weblogs" which were often used as platforms for professional discourse. (Stephens) In fact, they were perceived as a way for the technologically-savvy to avoid the peer-reviewed publishing process. (Farkas) Today, a social media presence is not generally seen as a

replacement for traditional scholarship but there are certainly librarians who actively seek "clout", or social media renown. Ten percent of the respondents to this survey self-identified with this behavior. Of course, this is not unique to social media. There are a variety of awards in librarianship that reward the same sort of self-advocacy, and even the boards and leadership structures of library associations and organizations are made up largely of volunteers to whom a title appeals. Social media is just one more avenue for that type of recognition, and one that is perhaps more accessible to librarians who may have geographic or economic barriers to participation in traditional professional groups.

There remains confusion about how social media interacts with professional identity. Radford et al (2019) described social media as a type of active curriculum vitae. Skyrme and Levesque (2019) describe it as a coping mechanism for disenfranchised librarians. Tanner (2015) categories social media as more of a clipping service that facilitates professional development.

Fifty-three (53 percent) of the librarians surveyed explicitly identify themselves and their institution, which speaks to a C.V. style reputation-building approach. Thirty percent of respondents prefer to avoid attention online, and another 42 percent make no effort to create a personal brand, suggesting that they are using social media much like a clipping service or RSS feed, as a way to ingest information but not necessarily serve as a creator in this space. Ten percent make "an active effort to be seen and heard" and this is perhaps the most dynamic use of social media. Where earlier, punditry was limited to a handful of columns in major trade magazines and journals, now anyone can theoretically be a thought leader in the profession through social media. Indeed, the aughts saw a class of "internet famous" librarians emerge

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from the biblioblogosphere. An argument can be made that that moment has passed. The newly opened door of the World Wide Web that gave space to more voices has been supplanted by social media, which gives space to all of the voices, making the distinction of being heard very difficult for reasons which are the exact opposite of thirty years prior.

Interestingly, fifty-nine percent of respondents expressed that online networking was the same as networking in person. This attitudinal shift is ever more relevant in a post-pandemic world.

The author acknowledges that one of the challenges of this study is that the majority of the recruitment for participation took place via social media, although announcements were also sent out to state library associations for distribution on listservs and in newsletters. So it is likely that those who do not engage with social media are under-represented. It is always a challenge to measure non-participants in any activity. That said, Del Bosque (2013, p. 433) actively solicited over 3000 librarians via their institutional email addresses and only 15 percent of respondents did not have a social media account, so the number of responsive non-participants would likely be low for any kind of survey instrument.

Conclusion

The results of this survey suggest that many of the concerns that librarians had about social media a decade ago continue, but the preponderance (88 percent) are comfortable having their real name attached to their social media presence. Respondents were nearly split on whether librarians should maintain a professional persona online. A significant 72 percent of respondents avoided or did not seek a "personal brand" online and only 10 percent actively

sought social media notoriety. A third of respondents felt that anonymous accounts that are critical of the profession have a negative impact, while another third felt such accounts have a positive impact. One issue left unexplored in this study is whether social media is still a viable avenue for making an impact upon the profession. The once-vaunted "biblioblogosphere" has withered, and discussions on other forms of social media are notoriously ephemeral. Nonetheless, an overwhelming 97 percent of respondents indicated that social media is a positive tool for librarians.

The results of this survey suggest that despite twenty years of experience, and a significant adoption rate within the profession and society as a whole, social media is still approached with caution by 62% of the respondents. It may be prudent to maintain a "living CV" distinct from personal accounts and to consider options for securing personal social media accounts or making personal accounts pseudonymous. For a moment in time, the "biblioblogosphere" seemed to be a viable path to professional prestige, but without that potential benefit, there may be insufficient reward to offset the risk, however minimal, of mixing personal and professional identity online.

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Appendix

Librarians and Social Media Use Survey

1. What type of library do you work at?

   - Public

   - Academic

   - Special

   - Other

2. What is your general level of responsibility?

   - Administrative (Director, Dean, etc.)

   - Department Head or similar (management role)

   - Librarian or other information professional (no management)

   - Staff

3. What is your age?

   - 19 or less

   - 20-29

- 30-39

- 40-49

- 50-59

- 60-69

- 70 or older

4. What is your gender?

   - [Open response field]

5. What social media platforms do you personally use?

   - Facebook

   - Twitter

   - Instagram

   - Tumblr

   - Other (please specify)

6. Do you explicitly identify yourself in your professional role on your "primary" social

   media account? (i.e. "Librarian at xyz library" in the bio?)

   - Yes

   - No

7. How do you manage your social media presence?

   - I engage in both professional and personal discussions on the same account

   - I have separate professional and personal accounts

   - I have anonymous accounts specifically for expressing controversial or unpopular

     ideas

8. Do you use your real name for your "primary" social media presence?

- Yes

- No

9. Do you use your social media to create a "personal brand?"

- Yes, I make a proactive effort to be seen and heard as an influential person in my profession

- Yes, I make a proactive effort to be seen and heard as a person beyond my job

- Yes, I make a proactive effort to get as much interaction as possible

- No, I make no special effort at creating a "personal brand"

- No, I prefer to not garner attention online

10. Social Media is:

- A public space and professionals should act professionally

- A public space but professionals have no particular obligations to act professionally

- A personal space where people should be allowed to be themselves

- A personal space but professionals should protect their anonymity with psudeonyms, etc.

11. Librarians who are influential or have large audiences on social media:

- Are good for the profession

- Are bad for the profession

- Neither

12. Librarians who are influential or have large audiences on social media:

- Have an obligation to only present positive things

- Have an obligation to call out problems within the profession

- Have no particular obligations

13. Networking on social media is equivalent to networking at conferences

- True

- False

14. Social media is a positive tool for librarians

- True

- False

15. Other comments