Social Media Collaboration: a Case Study from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Sarah Christensen
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, schrstn@illinois.edu

Jaena Manson
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, jcmanso2@illinois.edu

Leah Dudak
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, dudak2@illinois.edu

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Author Information

Sarah Christensen, Visual Resources and Outreach Specialist Jaena Manson, Graduate Assistant Leah Dudak, Graduate Assistant

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Purpose

Large academic libraries with a decentralized structure can lead to individual library units creating and maintaining their own social media accounts with little standardization or cohesiveness across the library system. As a result, social media account owners often duplicate efforts, overwhelming patrons with communication channels, and lacking a consistent message. At the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), for example, the library system comprises nearly thirty separate library units, and maintains nearly eighty social media accounts. These accounts are spread across platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Tumblr, YouTube, and Flickr, as well as a plethora of blogs. Having a vibrant social media presence is important for libraries to be able to reach patrons in spaces where they are frequently spending time. However, social media trends and platforms are continually evolving, making it challenging for librarians to keep pace with technology while effectively engaging and communicating with patrons online.

In response to these issues the UIUC Library created the Social Media Working Group (SMWG), which has developed templates for policies and best practices and created channels for streamlined communication. The group hosts speakers and discussion panels on topics such as content strategy, assessment, diversity, scheduler tools, crisis communication, handling negative feedback, and politically sensitive posts. In addition, the SMWG supports the UIUC Library's *Framework for Strategic Action, 2015-2018*, which promises to ensure an integrated and coherent user experience and to develop a consistent and integrated library-wide outreach,

engagement, and marketing strategy (University of Illinois Library at Urbana-Champaign, 2015).

The SMWG meetings are open to any library employee, though attendees generally consist of social media managers across individual library units within the overall UIUC Library system. This open, transparent model encourages participation, and through collaboration and discussion each library unit is better equipped to maximize the reach of social media to communicate and engage with our patrons. While each library unit may use a different strategy to communicate to their specific audiences, developing a consistent message about the overall mission of the library system together will result in increased impact in all areas, including engagement, collections, and services (Burclaff, 2014; Burgert, Nann, & Sterling, 2014).

Literature Review

Librarians currently are trying to navigate social media platforms and figure out how to best use them to communicate with and engage patrons online. Social media is an online tool that allows people to connect with others on the Internet. The invention of the Internet presented a new way of thinking of the world, and social media provides people with a means to share their thoughts, interact, and connect with one another. Although the platforms' relative popularity often changes, the communicative aspect of social media remains the same.

Increasing numbers of people have online social media accounts. Pew Research Center found in 2013 that 73% of adults maintain a social media account and an online presence. Libraries are starting to follow suit, but are adapting at a slower rate than users (Bosque, 2012). Often the concern is that time and resources will be put into a project that will not be viable. However, it seems that the benefits of using social media outweigh the costs. The costs of creating and using social media in libraries are typically small since these platforms are free and

the content disseminated content is often already created (Chu & Du, 2013). Libraries need to reach out to users in a way that is meaningful and relevant to their patrons' lives, and as students in universities are spending more time online, libraries should follow suit.

While there are many kinds of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, Flickr, Snapchat, and blogging platforms, the two most popular for users are Facebook and Twitter (Taylor & Francis, 2014). As such, these are the main platforms that libraries use to connect with patrons. Different platforms may communicate the same message but how the message is presented is unique to each platform. For example, Tweets must be short and fit the 140 character limit, while Instagram and Snapchat use images to communicate information. However, there is not a single platform that reaches all patrons, so often times multiple social media platforms must be used, and the message tailored to the medium. Since library patrons can be found on multiple platforms, it follows libraries should as well.

The hardest part for libraries in creating a social media account is to figure out what content will help and engage users. While it is worthwhile to use social media to promote the library, social media is used by patrons for creation, engagement, and communication, and as such, libraries need to consider ways to engage and create a dialogue with patrons online. As Young (2015) suggests, libraries need to use social media not to just disseminate information, but also to engage users.

Social media is constantly in flux, as are the people who use it (Fernandez, 2016; Gaha, 2015). The only way to understand these changes is to directly engage in social media through library accounts. It may take some time to create and market the library's social media brand, but it is worth the effort so libraries can better connect and communicate with their users. The more time the library invests in social media the more they will be able to engage their patrons. Many

libraries are already starting to use social media to reach out and engage users. While there are articles written about libraries implementing social media, there is little written about libraries managing multiple accounts and platforms. When a library system includes multiple units with different audiences and uses different social media accounts, connecting the library accounts is important for patrons and poses a unique challenge.

Background

The use of various social media platforms in the UIUC Library system parallels each platform's popularity in the mainstream media. For example, blogging started in the late 1990s and gained in popularity during the early and mid-2000s. According to surveys conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, blog ownership and readership had notably increased between 2005 and 2006 (Aharony 2009). An easily accessible technology, blogs allowed for individuals and organizations to instantly publish information. Libraries were among those who embraced this technology, as they searched for new and innovative ways to reach their patrons. Libraries at the UIUC were no exception, creating numerous subject-specific blogs as early as 2005. Examples include a blog entitled *Postings on posters* (University of Illinois Library Urbana-Champaign, 2006) about digitizing a special collection, and *Reading culture in 19th Century Russia* (University of Illinois Library Urbana-Champaign, 2005), about the literary marketplace and reading interests in 19th Century Europe. As more blogs were created, content became less about highlighting specific collections and more about highlighting services. Individual library units began to use the blog format to publish information not only about their collections, but also about news and upcoming events.

Development of microblogging platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, in the mid-2000s created new avenues to reach and engage with patrons. In line with the rising popularity of

these sites, University Library accounts were created to share information such as news, events, collections, and research tips. The Undergraduate Library was the first to adopt Twitter as a communication platform, starting in 2007, and currently has nearly 3,000 followers. As each unit caters to a different group of patrons – from undergraduates to faculty, artists to scientists – each social media platform may appeal to different units for different reasons. While Twitter is popular among undergraduates, units with special collections are now utilizing media-centric platforms such as Instagram and Tumblr to showcase their materials. The Ricker Library of Architecture and Art, for example, maintains Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram accounts and posts the same content on each. However, they have about four times the number of followers on Instagram as they do on Twitter or Facebook. Instagram's focus on image pairs nicely with Ricker Library's audience, which consists of disciplines reliant on visual media. Twitter and Facebook remain the most popular social media platforms amongst University Library units, though the development of newer platforms engenders more opportunities to tailor content to specific audiences.

Organizationally, social media accounts in the UIUC Library system are managed by individual units, rather than a centralized communications office. Content for these accounts is typically created by one or more graduate students, and overseen by a librarian or staff member. Parallel to this structure, the SMWG is co-chaired by two graduate students from the Research and Information Services unit, and overseen by a librarian from the same unit. This low-threshold leadership model is unique and benefits the graduate students by giving them a rare opportunity to chair a working group within the Library. The SMWG benefits from having graduate assistants as its co-chairs because graduate assistants are often more in-touch with students and the ways students obtain information. Although the group deals with a high

turnover rate for the co-chair positions, it helps the group stay relevant and viewing social media through the lens of students.

Initial meetings of the SMWG focused on discussion of policies and best practices, social media needs, technical tools, and development of a shared social media calendar. When the group was new, we hoped that account managers would work together to create a unified policy that would provide clear instruction for handling issues such as copyright, negative feedback, and crisis situations. We also sought to create a document with guidelines for best practices, including information about what types of content engages followers, how many times of day to post, and re

ciprocity with other cultural heritage institutions. As Enders and Wineland (2012, p. 16) wrote, policies should "not be viewed as a document of negatives, but rather as a way to generate confidence and provide support to library staff as well as library patrons." While we set out to create an umbrella policy for all of the social media accounts in the library, we found that members of the group were hesitant to create such a document as individual account best practices and goals can vary greatly. With this feedback, we instead created templates that libraries could use as a foundation for their own policies and best practices.

Other initial meetings involved discussion of technical tools, such as various schedulers, and establishing a shared social media calendar. The calendar was based in Google Sheets, and included a list of national holidays and University related events that could be used as a template for content. The purpose of the calendar was to streamline content creation and promote cohesiveness among Library communications. However, adding content to the calendar was seen as an extra step for managers, and so the calendar was phased out. While our original goals in forming the SMWG centered around concrete tasks such as developing policy and attempts at

streamlining processes, we quickly found that these goals did not fit needs and priorities of the membership. As a result, our goals have shifted and are now focused on providing a support system for those new to social media or individuals who simply want to improve certain aspects of their accounts, as well as providing a space for discussion around social media related topics.

Group dynamics proved to be a catalyst in organizing future meetings. Some individuals had a lot of experience using social media in their libraries, while others either did not have any social media accounts or their accounts are rarely updated. As this was the first time a group that focused on social media got together, many of the people who attended raised concerns that they had been grappling with on their own. Such concerns included how often accounts should be updated, if an umbrella account could quickly promote other accounts' events/information, and deciding when and if they had enough time to put into having a social media account. They also were able to share what types of topics they would like covered in these SMWG meetings. Top on the list were engaging users, interesting content, unified hashtags, and assessment.

Suggestions from the SMWG members shaped the content of the meetings, which take place once a month. We have brought in guest speakers from other campus departments, such as an employee from the Office of Public Affairs. This employee was involved in running one of the most followed and popular Twitter account for the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (@IllinoisAlma) and spoke to us about engaging users. We wanted to involve individuals from across campus, especially those who are already successfully implementing social media accounts in their workflows. Along with individual speakers from across campus, we invited librarians, even those without social media accounts. For example, the coordinator of assessment led a meeting on tools used for assessing social media accounts.

Practical Implications

Meeting content is also shaped in response to cultural events. Just as social media needs to be timely and culturally relevant, we felt that the SMWG meetings needed to follow suit. In the first couple of months that the group was created, the protests of police brutality toward people of color and the Black Lives Matter movement were in the forefront of the news. In the wake of this movement, we were left wondering how libraries should deal with these issues in their social media accounts. Library neutrality, advocacy, and participation in social justice movements are common topics in library literature. In libraries, social media is often perceived as a tool to increase inclusion and outreach to diverse communities, but it can be hard to assess its effectiveness and incorporate theory into practice. We invited a panel of library faculty and student activists to help us discuss how the library can use social media platforms to lead dialogues of inclusion, diversity, and advocacy. These types of meetings must continue so that the working group can stay culturally competent, as well as to spark discussions on having inclusion as a part of social media policy. This would combine a top-down and bottom-up approach to inclusion, striking "a balance between providing user-driven services to reach out to users and controlling social media use by means of social media policy" (Abdullah, Chu, Rajagopal, Tung, & Kwong-Man, 2015, p.45).

The library is well placed in the university system to lead and promote information literacy efforts through social media. Some studies have shown that "80 percent of college students, use social media for their academic as well as their everyday-life information-seeking purposes" (Kim, Sin, & Yoo-Lee, 2014, p.442). If this is true, social media is a platform where students are already present and where libraries can promote information literacy concepts to students in a non-threatening environment (Gaha, 2015). Libraries can use social media to reach

students not only to share information about resource, but also to help students implement information literacy concepts into their own social media presence. To do this well, libraries need to be active and engaged in their own social media presence. Students are more likely to engage with these entities that use current and popular forms of technology (Abdullah, et. al., 2015).

A major reason for creating the SMWG was the need for a unified library effort in the arena of social media. We hope that a collaborative effort between units would result in an increase in the Library's impact in all areas, including engagement, collections, and new and existing services. There is already an effort across the university level to increase collaboration and idea sharing with the annual University of Illinois Social Media Conference. We encouraged the members of the SMWG to attend this conference in the hopes that we could alert the greater University of the Library's social media efforts. In addition to participating in social media discourse at the university level, we also seek to coordinate efforts with two Library Working Groups: Marketing and Communications Strategy and the Public Engagement and Outreach. Both of these groups are focused on communication and outreach to the library community and are charged with closing the gaps in those areas. Social media is one of the main ways that units can communicate with their audiences. If we can support the work that these two groups do, we can help to increase Library impact and support the University's mission through increasing the ways students can interact with the Library and its resources.

Conclusion

Future steps of the SMWG must include an assessment and subsequent updating of any original goals of the SMWG. Now that the group has discussed policy and how collaboration should look between all of the social media accounts in the library, members of the SMWG must

decide what they want the group to accomplish. Should the meetings focus on group sharing of social media accounts and their innovations/ideas? Should the group focus on more theoretical discussions of the role of social media in the library? Each member of the SMWG should have a say in answering these questions. In the move forward, we will send out a survey to the SMWG members to gain insight on how the group has been helpful to them and their suggestions for improving the group.

As the SMWG continues, we hope to see its communication network expand. Over time, we have changed the way that the SMWG can communicate to increase involvement. A SMWG wiki was created at the beginning of the group's existence with the hopes that the members of the group would use that platform to share events and relevant materials. However, the wiki was rarely used by anyone but the co-chairs of the group. We asked the group how they would prefer to communicate and they all agreed that they would rather use the SMWG listserv to share events and important information. Since that change we have seen an increase in sharing and promoting events. Individuals who are not in the SMWG can also use the listserv to get their events promoted through library social media accounts. As this listserv expands with subscribers, we hope that it becomes a wider network of individuals across the library and the greater campus.

In less than a year, the SMWG has streamlined communication among social media account managers in the UIUC Library system and facilitated enhanced online engagement with patrons. In the process, the organizational structure of the group has created a unique leadership opportunity for graduate students to co-chair a library wide working group. We've found this model to be successful as the graduate students co-chairing the SMWG are directly involved with the needs and issues of managing social media accounts, and it is less of a time-

commitment for a librarian to chair the group. Ongoing success of the SMWG will depend on ongoing internal assessment of meeting topics and structure in order to stay relevant to UIUC Library account managers.

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