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Results of a Survey of Social Media Use in NYS Libraries

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Results of a Survey of Social Media Use in NYS Libraries

Introduction

When I was asked to write this column about social media for this issue, I decided to reach out to librarians across the state through a survey. I felt fortunate to have the opportunity to ask questions that had already been on my mind, and to get answers from a diverse group of librarians across New York State. I was relieved to learn that many of you have the same questions I do... and even have some questions I hadn't yet considered.

The Pew Research Center reported that 68% of all U.S. adults use Facebook; 76% of those Facebook users report that they visit the site daily, and 55% say they visit multiple times per day. Additionally, 28% of all U.S. adults use Instagram, 26% use Pinterest, 25% use LinkedIn, and 21% use Twitter (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016).

Gottfried and Shearer (2016) reported that a majority of Americans are now getting their news from Facebook. In Facebook's most recent quarterly report Daily Active Users (DAUs) were 1.18 billion on average for September 2016, an increase of 17% year-over-year. (Facebook reports third quarter 2016 results).

According to a recent article in *The Atlantic Magazine*, "[r]oughly 500 million tweets are sent each day. Nearly seven hours of footage is uploaded to YouTube each second, in up to 76 different languages" (Brooking & Singer, 2016, p.73).

Growing numbers of Americans are communicating and seeking information through social media networks. Events are planned and promoted; discussion groups are formed; products are advertised, sold and reviewed; our own cognitive biases are reinforced as we read and share news and information within our "filter bubbles" of likeminded friends (Pariser, 2012).

We are only starting to understand the myriad ways social media is influencing and changing our lives. How can libraries make the best use of these tools; while avoiding (or teaching users to avoid) their pitfalls?

Survey

Of the 4968 NYLA members who received the email with the link to my survey, 310 responded. All of the respondents were self-selected – they chose to respond to the survey. The results aren't presented as a scientific enquiry, but to spark discussion and to suggest areas for further research on the subject.

The tool I used to conduct the nine question survey was “Survey Monkey,” and all of the statistics displayed below are from that website’s data analysis tool. The comments in quotes are from the open ended questions.

Now on to the results!

Q1: Does your library engage in any social media?

Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	92.90%	288
No	7.10%	22
Total		310

Most libraries who responded are using social media. Of those who said they don't, the majority were K-12 school libraries who reported that social media use was either banned or actually blocked by the school district or institution. Several complained about this policy and wondered how they might work to change it. At the same time, addressing privacy and security issues were significant concerns for school libraries.

Q2: Which are the best reasons for libraries to use social media? (Choose all that apply)

Answer Choices	Responses
Outreach to social media users who might not know about the library otherwise	80.46% 247
To promote libraries events	95.44% 293
To promote library collections	65.15% 200
To promote library services	89.90% 276
To inform about library holiday closing/hours etc	73.62% 226
To stay current	59.28% 182
To share ideas/information that support the library's mission	60.91% 187
To connect with other libraries and/or community organizations	57.33% 176
Other (please specify)	10.10% 31
Total Respondents: 307	

Some responses to “other” (these are quotes):

- We have also provided reference service through social media.
- To answer reference questions and engage in reader’s advisory. To support book discussion groups.
- To interact with patrons: to answer patron’s questions, to get feedback from patrons about programs/services.
- To share photos taken at library events, to emphasize the human side of libraries and their services.
- To just be a presence in our patron’s lives - Basically to be SOCIAL!

While 95% said they use social media to promote library events, one commented that they wondered how effective this type of use was: “[o]ut of 170 completed surveys over a 10 month period regarding where patrons found out about the event they just attended, only 3 people said Facebook was the medium.” Another wrote: “[o]ur program evaluation forms do not

reflect patrons learning about our programs through social media. In short, it's another tool to get the word out, but I don't think it's as critical as some would have me believe.”

A common theme was the desire to have some quantifiable data to justify the time spent on social media. One respondent noted: “[p]ersonally, I don't want to use social media if it doesn't work. I want to see the numbers and decide if it's worth it.” Another said: “I would like to know if there is truly value to this potentially time consuming endeavor.”

Some questioned the use of social media for outreach at all: “[i]t seems that typically anyone who subscribes/monitors the library's social media channels probably uses the library's services anyways...” But this comment was thought provoking: “...should we consider any engagement on the social media itself to be a form of library use and engagement, regardless of whether it translates to in-person visits?”

The way I phrased and structured the questions probably reflects my own assumptions about the purpose of libraries use of social media. Upon reflection, I assumed libraries were primarily using social media for advertising, promotion, outreach, etc. I didn't consider the human, social aspect which is really more the original purpose of services such as Facebook. Using social media to connect with students might make us seem more human to our users, and perhaps more approachable when they do have an actual reference question.

What if “To be SOCIAL” could be a goal in itself? In a recent workshop held at Albany College of Pharmacy, I had the pleasure of meeting Daniel F. Chambliss, professor of sociology at Hamilton College, and discussing his book, *How college works* (Chambliss & Takacs, 2014). Chambliss described finding “an adult who cares” on campus as critical to student happiness, and thus, retention. I have answered many reference questions over Facebook chat, but I have

also chatted with students about the stresses they are feeling: deadlines looming, worries about their professor's responses to their work, family issues, work scheduling issues, financial issues, health issues, boyfriend/girlfriend issues... etc. In short, all the many things that concern the average college student are expressed to me over social media, just as they are expressed to me at the reference desk, in my office, or in the campus center. Many seek me out for emotional support as well as for research assistance. Facebook in particular gives them another way to reach out to me as an adult who cares. These types of social media use are harder to quantify.

While I am glad to accept when students friend me on social media, I do recognize that this could be problematic for a number of reasons. Obviously librarians have different boundaries about the types of social interaction they want to have with users... and this is another area which would benefit from discussion. Accepting or rejecting "friend requests" from library users is, of course, up to the librarian's discretion. There are many reasons why a librarian would want keep their work life and personal lives separate. Accepting a library user as a social media friend can also open up possible messages during off duty hours about work. Professional and personal boundaries on social media is another topic for future research.

Q3: Which social media platforms do your library use (check all that apply)

Answer Choices	Responses
Facebook	86.13% 267
Twitter	63.23% 196
YouTube	24.84% 77
Instagram	44.84% 139
Pinterest	30.65% 95
LinkedIn	4.19% 13
Google+	5.81% 18
Tumblr	7.42% 23
Vine	0.65% 2
SnapChat	3.23% 10
Other (please specify)	11.94% 37
Total Respondents: 310	

Most responding libraries are using Facebook, and this corresponds with the national trend, as it is the largest and fastest growing sector of the social media platforms. Instagram was less used by respondents than Twitter, but it has a larger percentage of users nationally. Almost all who responded are using multiple platforms. Of those who used only one platform, it was Facebook.

While almost 12% answered “other,” most of those who chose that option used the comment section to describe how they are using, or planning to use, the social media platforms listed above (rather than to list other social media platforms they used).

For example: “I plan to add Instagram and Twitter as soon as I can free up a staff member next year.” or “Taking a class on Twitter in school libraries this fall.” There seemed to be a bit of anxiety about Twitter generally. One example: “I have just recently created a Twitter account. Not proficient in it yet, but trying.” As Twitter is declining in use rapidly and losing money, it

may not require so much study in the future. Twitter also announced at the end of October that it will shut down Vine. (Perez & Roof, 2016).

Those who responded “other” and actually listed another social media platform gave these answers: Flickr, YikYak, Foursquare, Yelp, and Goodreads. One respondent said: “I’ve been trying to get us to use Goodreads more, as it is pretty much made for librarians to use and you can have a feed of what staff are currently reading on your website.”

Q4: How often does your library post on any social media platform?

Answer Choices	Responses	
Multiple times per day	26.28%	77
once per day	15.70%	46
several times per week	37.54%	110
about once a week	12.29%	36
once per month	1.71%	5
occasionally	4.44%	13
rarely	4.10%	12
it varies a lot	8.87%	26
Total Respondents: 293		

These results ran the gamut, with most either posting “several times per week” or “multiple times per day.” While there wasn’t a comment section for this question, comments that came up elsewhere were pertinent. For example: “[h]ow often is too often” and “is there some kind of formula or recommended schedule that is a preferred standard?”

One respondent said: “[w]e try to post at least once per day. However, we learned at a recent workshop that in order to show up in News Feeds we need to be posting multiple times per day. Additionally we learned that Facebook recently changed its algorithm to promote people

first, over businesses. We post multiple times per day to stay in people’s feeds.” Another respondent simply wrote: “[w]here do people find the time?”

Q5: Do you have an actual social media strategy and is it written down anywhere?

Answer Choices	Responses	
We have a written strategy	7.89%	24
We kind of have a strategy... but it's informal	46.05%	140
We have no strategy	36.18%	110
I don't know what a social media strategy is	6.91%	21
Comments?	11.18%	34
Total Respondents: 304		

There were so many diverse comments on this question. I was impressed that some were so advanced that they had invested in a strategy and adapted it as they monitored results. One example: “[s]omething that has helped me greatly is setting mission statements for each platform. That way I make sure I’m reaching my target audience for that platform (for example alumni and faculty use Facebook, students use Snapchat) and that frequently guides my posting.”

One respondent gave this useful comment: “[w]e have a written strategy; we also have an editorial calendar for each social media platform and a content repository document of things we post. We track engagement using this tool to make decisions on posts in the future...We often schedule posts so we're aware of what the other is doing.” I was intrigued by this and I personally will be looking into editorial calendars for our social media use at Saint Rose.

A few respondents said that they were working on developing a strategy, or said that it was a goal, and one explained why this was a goal: “...paid ads are a great way to reach a larger

population for special events. A written social media plan would support budget allowances for marketing.”

Another response: “[i]s there a template policy or a prescribed way to develop a formal strategy? We’re informal, but moderately successful. Perhaps the organic nature of our social media growth is directly related to our informal/go with the flow approach?”

This response reflected the difficulties faced by many:

We have no strategy. As an institution we struggle with this. As a director, *I* struggle with this. We’re a mid-sized library. Any smaller, I could do all the social media myself. Any larger, we could have a marketing coordinator to... coordinate. How can a mid-sized library allow staff to participate and promote their departments/programs/services while maintaining a consistent message and not overdoing it?

Many respondents said: “I would like to see an example of a written formal social media strategy.” For those who have developed and refined social media strategies - sharing them would be very helpful to other libraries.

Q6: Do you have one person responsible for posting on social media, a team of people who are responsible for it, or do people just post on it when they can/feel like it?

Answer Choices	Responses
It is a part of a specific person's job description	20.00% 56
It's the responsibility of one person, but not in his/her job description	27.86% 78
It's the responsibility of a specific team of people	40.00% 112
People add to social media as they feel inspired to do so	21.43% 60
Total Respondents: 280	

It seems the team approach is most popular. One respondent wrote: “[i]t's out of our library's hands. If we want something posted, we have to send it to our PR department. Sometimes they'll post something if we're having a particular event.” In this case it seems the larger institution’s branding and consistent message were prioritized over the library’s ability to communicate with users.

Q7: How much/how often does your target audience engage with your posts on social media?

Answer Choices	Responses
We get a lot of likes/comments/feedback/retweets/responses from our target audience	14.24% 41
We get some likes/comments/feedback/retweets/responses from our target audience	44.79% 129
We get a few likes/comments/feedback/retweets/responses from our target audience	32.29% 93
We don't get much response at all to our posts on social media	9.38% 27
Total Respondents: 288	

This was a big area of concern for most respondents. The most common question was: “[h]ow can we get more engagement from our users?” (or some variation of that question). “How do libraries get patrons to engage with them on social media? We've tried contests, questions,

etc. but don't get much in the way of responses.” Others saw growing engagement: “[r]ecently, we seem to be getting more and more comments/responses and likes from our community. We are up to 1.1k likes which we are very happy about as we are a small public library.”

However, even some of those who were successful at prompting engagement with their users wondered about the value of the engagement they did get: “[s]ome posts (cool new furniture! Look at this pretty sunset! We are open on Sundays now!) get a ton of likes. Reposts of calendar events seems to go under the radar.” Another wrote: “[h]ow do you get people to interact with program plugs, not just videos of kittens and memes?”

One respondent wrote: “[t]he most important question is: How do users *want* their library to engage with them on social media?” That is a certainly a question deserving of a lot more thought and attention.

Q8: Are you satisfied with your library's use of social media?

Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes, I think our library does a great job with its social media presence	19.54%	59
Sort of... I think we could do better...	55.63%	168
I feel we are lacking in this area	25.50%	77
I don't care about social media and don't think libraries should invest in it	0.99%	3
Total Respondents: 302		

Most respondents felt their library could do better at using social media, and many felt their library was lacking in this area. If this article does nothing else, I hope it demonstrates that if you are feeling this way, you are not alone! Libraries across New York State have common questions, concerns and difficulties with social media. This is an area where more research would be welcome and useful to many.

Q9: What questions do YOU have about libraries using social media?

A few respondents wanted to know which platforms to focus their time and efforts on: “[w]hat social media platforms get the most engagement from users?” Another wrote: “[w]ith limited time and finances in a small rural library, it isn’t easy to post on multiple social media. Which ONE social medium is best?”

Respondents also wanted more demographic data about each platform: “I would like to know what age group we should be reaching on Facebook versus Instagram...” This led me to wonder: how can libraries get more granular and local data from the various social media platforms? In preparing for this column I could easily find demographic data about national or international social media use... but what about data at the state level, or even the county level? It may be that libraries may need to conduct research on their own users to get more specific local data.

One commenter wrote:

Public libraries seem to have invested more in it than academic ones. I think we, falsely, have assumed we don’t need to because everybody knows about the college/university library. Unfortunately not so, and even more in these days of the Internet and Google. We need to do way more!

Another:

Social media is impossible when one has no internet or cell service at home. Did you know about ¼ of the US population has no internet access? Not sure where modem access fits in there, but it’s really not useable anymore, too slow.

Other questions included:

- How can I automate posts using a 3rd party app like Hootsuite?
- What are some recommendations for platforms that allow for posting/scheduling across multiple platforms (that aren't tied to a personal account the way that Hootsuite requires?)
- How are you gathering analytics without a business account?
- Would like to know more about how public libraries with active writer's groups use blogging.
- Has anyone had any success or use in Facebook Live streaming or Periscoping yet?
- We don't post videos – should we, and what type? What sorts of response do videos get?
- Why doesn't the NYS Annual Report consider social media engagement in addition to website hits?
- How do libraries use Snapchat to engage their patrons?
- How to develop strategies to keep good content flowing?
- What are really successful libraries using and how?
- Do they have a dedicated staff/staffer for their social media presence?
- Is it more coherent and effective if only one person is in charge of the social media presence of the library? What about each department having their own pages?
- How to engage a social media team from various constituent groups to maximize connections beyond the staff and within the target community?

- While using social media can be a good tool, it can also open things up to negativity and inappropriate discussions.
- How to be interesting without being the least controversial?
- How to keep staff from using it non-judiciously?
- Is anyone else limited by oversight (for example, I'm in academic and the dean only wants me posting about our department, not about larger goings on in the world. I feel this limits our interactions).

Further Questions

A question I personally didn't think of asking until after I'd started the survey, but which I would like to ask now is this: What can libraries provide to social media users that other institutions don't?

"Fake news" is proliferating across the Internet, and social media in particular. Social media can, and is being used for disinformation and propaganda. People are being bombarded with disinformation and many lack the ability to distinguish it from actual factual, credible sources. Some even question the authority of "credible" sources at all...some claim we live in a "post-truth" society (Word of the year 2016 is...post-truth, n.d.). Some platforms are willing to censor fake news, which brings other problems (Wingfield, Isaac, & Benner, 2016).

How are librarians responding to these serious threats to the very foundation of our profession, and to a democratic society? Can librarians band together to fight disinformation and promote information literacy using social media as our tool? Maybe we could offer a fact checking service for our users via social media? We certainly can and should be teaching classes

about the dangers of the “filter bubble” and sharing fake news via social media. Can we share lesson plans with each other?

Collaboration Opportunities

Many respondents wanted to discuss social media in more depth and provided me with contact information to do so. Because of the large number of respondents interested in this, I am considering starting an online group to discuss social media with NYLA members. Should it take place via social media... maybe a Facebook group? Or could we have weekly Twitter chat? Or, for those who are not able to access social media while at work... maybe the old fashioned Listserv? If you haven't already given me your contact information via the survey, contact me at the email at the end of this article to find out more.

Lisa Shaffer, References & Education Librarian at Albany College of Pharmacy, and I are also starting a monthly special interest discussion group with Capital District Library Council members about reference, instruction and outreach. I think social media use would be a great topic for that group as well.

As librarians we understand the value of sharing ideas and information. We know we don't have to reinvent the wheel. Let's brainstorm ways to be more central and vital in our users' social media lives.

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