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Beyond broadcasting: customer service, community and information experience in the Twittersphere

Social media and its applications for library and information services have received a significant amount of attention in the library and information studies (LIS) literature in recent years. Tools like Twitter have been lauded for their marketing potential and institutions have clambered to claim Twitter handles and harness the power of this two-way conversation channel to promote their services to potential clients, broadcast announcements, and monitor sentiment about the organisation. Libraries use Twitter in particular to promote products and services, broadcast outage notifications, and draw attention to library programs.

There is, however, little recognition in the LIS literature of the power of social media beyond the boundaries of marketing. It could be said that the focus on marketing and broadcasting, using tools like Twitter, represents a failure to understand the participatory nature of the new web; a failure to recognise that the web is no longer a one way means for content provision.. Social media tools like Twitter offer a range of opportunities to libraries that are, to a large extent, going unrecognised.

What opportunities does a channel like Twitter offer to libraries, beyond the realm of marketing? We would like to highlight three roles for Twitter in the academic library environment: Twitter as a service delivery and service recovery channel; Twitter as a community builder; Twitter as a site for information experience.

Twitter and customer service

Libraries have long offered chat reference services, but few proactively provide services via Twitter. Why is this? Directional, reference and academic skills enquiries could easily be answered via Twitter or referred on in a triage based system of enquiry management. Yet, there are few libraries that proactively advertise their willingness to answer enquiries via Twitter. Indeed, in our own experience, we have made explicit enquiries of libraries using their Twitter handle and received no reply. We would argue that libraries with a Twitter account should be open to answering enquiries received via Twitter and should actively monitor their accounts to ensure enquiries are answered. Arguably, a library's presence in the Twittersphere represents implicit agreement to engage with users. For Twitter users, there is no difference between asking a question via an email or via Twitter, other than that Twitter is likely to be more convenient by virtue of the fact they are always connected in this channel. Savvy library services will recognise the potential of Twitter as a service delivery channel and actively promote it as such. Certainly, any library with a Twitter account should be prepared to answer questions and provide service via this channel.

Outside of libraries, there is a general awareness of the need to listen in to chatter in social media spaces in order to monitor brand and reputation, and importantly, to respond to customers and engage in dialogue with them. In this way, Twitter becomes a channel for service recovery, through which organisations can proactively address the concerns of their customers. In our experience, complaining about service levels via Twitter is far more effective and has more immediate results than what is achieved by calling a customer service telephone line. Indeed, there are entire hash tags dedicated to calling organisations out on poor service or products that don't meet their promises. In Australia, for example, the telecommunications provider, Vodafone, is so often tweeted about in a negative way that #vodafail has become a widely used hash tag to draw attention to the company's failings. Libraries are not immune to negative attention in social media spaces. As users increasingly live their lives connected to channels like Twitter, it is important for libraries to tune in to hear what their customers might be saying about them. Even more importantly, libraries must actively address the concerns their customers raise in public channels like Twitter by engaging in dialogue in these spaces and addressing their customers' concerns.

Twitter as a site for community

The emergence of social media as a means of communication has raised the question of whether virtual interactions alone can form the basis for a community. If a community is a group of like-minded people who interact, it stands to reason that there can be and, indeed, are, virtual communities. Libraries of all kinds exist to serve communities with specific needs, and increasingly, those communities exist in both physical and virtual spaces. Further, libraries have an important role to play in fostering community, and although we have traditionally focused on physical spaces, it is increasingly relevant for libraries to consider how they can foster and support virtual communities.

The example of the personal learning network (PLN) that functions in Twitter for the online community of information professionals is an excellent example of a virtual, long-term, relatively stable community that debunks the traditional definition of community. Not only does it not require a physical context in order to exist, the likelihood of all participants meeting one another is low, given that they come from all around the world. While members acknowledge that physical meetings at professional events or "tweetups" are enjoyable and enhance the online relationships, it is not this aspect that forms the underlying foundation of the group, nor does it ensure its survival. For the information professionals involved in this online community, social media spaces like Twitter provide opportunities to connect, communicate, collaborate, create and consume, activities that we see as core functions of learning communities.

"Online networks and communities connect and link people from different settings, around a joint topic, production or for socialising" (Ala-Mutka, 2010, p. 65). In many cases, these communities could not exist in physical spaces because of geographic distance between members. Immersion in online spaces like Twitter allows communities to form organically around topics and shared interests. There are opportunities for libraries to tap into the communities that are developing in social media and to actively plant and develop communities related to the library's mission and strategic values.

Twitter as a space for enacting information experiences

In our hyper connected world, the nature of information – and of information interactions – is changing. Just as individuals receive information in physical interactions with others, they also encounter information in social media spaces through their interactions with other users. As individuals become more and more immersed in social media, information experience becomes more and more immersive. Those who are connected to Twitter throughout the day encounter an enormous amount of information, 'grabbing' that which is of interest to them as it passes them by. Information behaviours like sharing, bookmarking, evaluating and co-creating are incredibly important in social media spaces, and allow users to manage the large volume of information they encounter daily.

Research currently being conducted by members of the Queensland University of Technology's Information Studies Group focuses on information experiences in social media spaces. This includes a study that explores social media interactions of new mothers and another that focuses on the information experiences of people using social media in relation to natural disasters. The ability to quickly and effectively create, join and depart online interactions makes these often temporary online communities powerful grounds for information experience (Goolsby, 2010). The versatility of social media platforms, such as Twitter, enable users to engage in rich and diverse information experiences. As users are increasingly embedded in social media, more and more of their information experience occurs in these spaces. It is important for libraries to understand the ways their customers use social media and the nature of their information experiences in these spaces, so that they can identify opportunities for the library to become involved in the flow of information in social media spaces.

As a communication tool for libraries, social media, including Twitter, offers so much more potential than the basic marketing and promotional activities for which it is commonly used. Developing a clear understanding of the library community's information experiences in the social media space will empower libraries to engage with their users in meaningful ways to enhance the customer service experience, provide and participate in quality learning experiences and build community.

Ala-Mutka, K. (2010). Learning in informal online networks and communities. *European Commission-Joint Research Centre-Institute for Prospective Technological Studies Report*, from http://satuportal.net/system/files/ICT%20for%20Learning.pdf

Goolsby, R. (2010). Social media as crisis platform: The future of community maps/crisis maps. *ACM Trans. Intell. Syst. Technol.,* (31 January, 2012), doi>10.1145/1858948.1858955