

Young Librarians Unite: Possibilities for Professional Transformation in Japanese Librarianship

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ABSTRACT

The interorganizational networking communities have spontaneously emerged among young Japanese librarians in recent years. This study explores the role of the communities from the perspectives of professional knowledge management, social networks and social capital, and the possibilities to reconstruct the Japanese librarianship. The research questions consist of; What outcomes did young librarians who had participated in the interorganizational social networking communities get especially in terms of knowledge acquisition and affections? What possibilities do the young librarians communities have to transform Japanese librarianship? *Method* –Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 5 librarians to gain insight into how they engage in and feel about outside social networking activities and training opportunities. *Findings* –The results showed that the young librarians' voluntary communities helped build social networks, provided opportunities for the transfer of tacit knowledge, and was felt to be a source of motivation for the participants. They also suggested that they had possibilities to give a significant impact on the transition of the Japanese librarianship.

Keywords: Social networks; social capital; profession in transition; knowledge transfer; interorganizational network; professional learning; Japanese librarianship

INTRODUCTION

Many interorganizational networking communities have spontaneously emerged among young Japanese librarians in recent years. This study explores the role of the communities from the perspectives of professional knowledge management, social networks and social capital, and the possibilities to reconstruct the Japanese librarianship.

EMERGING COMMUNITIES OF YOUNG LIBRARIANS

The activities of the communities comprised of relatively young librarians have become conspicuous in recent years. The communities were emerged spontaneously in different places throughout Japan and in small groups at the beginning but with a few of them quickly growing into nationwide organizations. They appear to enjoy and make optimal use of the new web-based social networking tools such as Google Group, Wiki, Skype, and Twitter. These types of networks were referred to as “electronic networks of practice” by Wasko et al. (2004). Unlike traditional library associations, these young communities have neither membership systems nor steering committees and are willing to communicate and collaborate with other professions. Here are a few examples:

1. “U40 Future Librarian” (<http://futurelibrarian.g.hatena.ne.jp/>) was organized in 2009 as a loose community of librarians under 40. It seeks to encourage librarianship by creating a loose network of library stakeholders. They have hosted nationwide gatherings composed of many different simultaneous meetings in 2009 and 2010 and have attracted to their ranks hundreds of librarians and related professionals.
2. “Lifo” (<http://www.lifo-club.org/>) was originally created by several young librarians working in rather small academic libraries who had difficulty finding hands-on learning opportunities. Its members are scattered throughout Japan; they communicate via Wiki and listserv, and they frequently organize study tours and collaborative activities with other groups.
3. “Code4Lib Japan” (<http://www.code4lib.jp/>) is an overseas branch of Code4Lib, a community of systems librarians and other IT/Web-related library professionals based in the U.S. Unlike the aforementioned communities, Code4Lib Japan is funded by Japan's Library Advancement Foundation. Conducting ICT-related training programs and making a proposal of the standardization of the API of online catalog are just two of its current initiatives.

Two main factors are considered to drive the development of voluntary communities. The first is the dysfunction of traditional professional organizations. Traditional librarians' associations, such as the Japan Library Association, have tried to encourage librarians to renew their constructs of their profession, but their efforts seem to have had little meaningful impact on the workplace. The power such organizations had to build cross-organizational relationships and manage professional knowledge has been weakened in this age of rapid change in digital technology.

The second factor is the shrinkage of libraries. This has affected universities; for example, as each library has gotten smaller due to human resources cost-cutting, the number of professional librarians per university has been halved over the last 30 years (17.3 librarians per library in 1980 and 7.8 in 2009 on average) and over half of these are part-timers (Ministry of Education, Japan, 1980; Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, Japan, 2009). While managerial expertise is becoming more important to the profession, the development of part-time paraprofessionals is also becoming increasingly essential for both libraries and the professional community as a whole. Despite the discrepancy between the ideal and the stagnant reality, young librarian communities might have begun to emerge.

This movement of young librarians in Japan has not been introduced in the context of Library Science and Education. Effective professional transitions within the librarian community are challenging in every country (Hardesty, 2002; Hillenbrand, 2005; Shen, 2006), but this voluntary practice among young librarians might be a unique example of change creation.

SOCIAL NETWORKS AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

The social network theory has been developed by various researchers to explore the structure and the role of social networks as social capital from various perspectives (Lin, 2001; Baker, 2000). Adler and Kwon (2002) in their review article taking account of achievements in social network research, argued that social relations as social capital benefited many aspects of human practice.

The young librarian communities help members build social relationships outside their own libraries and allow them to expand their networks beyond their immediate communities. This form of network has been described by social network theory as "weak-tie." Granovetter (1973) was the first to point out that weak-tie helped job seekers get better information than strong-tie (e.g., family member, close friends) did.

The aspect of knowledge transfer has also been discussed both in interorganizational and intraorganizational context. Burt (2001), using the concept of 'structural holes', compared the role of individuals who had rich interorganizational relationships with the ones who had rather intraorganizational networks and his study concluded that the person who could fill the structural holes between organizations brought benefits to the organization because the person could gain more innovative information through human network outside than the person who acted only in a closed organization. One of the advantages of network forms of organization Podlny and Page (1998) discussed was the learning benefit. Individuals could exchange their knowledge within interorganizational network and it brought benefit to their organization. By an in-depth study on large firms, Byosiere et al. (2010) described how the intraorganizational networks exchange both explicit and tacit knowledge. The richer a person's social network is, the better his or her performance is because the network offers a wealth of necessary information acquired from other people (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998). These previous findings in the social network theory lead us to predict that the participants of the young librarian communities bridge the structural holes, play an important role for knowledge transfer and have a positive effect on the organizational improvement.

In the context of the librarianship, we must refer to interorganizational network as professional network, and this study will discuss the roles and the possibilities of the young librarian communities at the level of profession. A few literatures have mentioned the possibilities of the non-traditional communities for the development of librarianship (Bordelon, 2008), and few Japanese studies exist on librarians' interorganizational knowledge transfer and social capital; thus, this research will contribute to the research into practice of Library Information Science.

RESEARCH METHOD

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 5 librarians to gain insight into how they engaged in and felt about outside activities and training opportunities. The interviewees were selected from participants and organizers of events and training programs hosted by the new librarian communities. They comprised 2 full-time, 1 part-time, and 2 (contract) full-time librarians (Males: 2; Females: 3). Four of them worked in university libraries, and 1 worked in a public library.

The interviews were conducted through online Skype chatting, a relaxing medium that is popular among members of the new librarian communities and that allowed interviews to take place cost-free across Japan. To ensure that a wide range of opinions (both positive and negative) were collected, the interviewees were encouraged to talk as freely as possible. Most interviews lasted between 50 and 60 minutes.

To begin, the interviewees were asked about their affiliations, current positions, job duties, ages, and experiences as librarians. The core interview questions included the following:

1. Which events organized by the new networking communities did you attend? What triggered your interest in the events?
2. Did you get anything from the experience (e.g., practical knowledge, emotional change, network, job information)?
3. Do you belong to any traditional library associations or groups, such as the Japan Library Association? Does being a member of such a group differ from participation in the events organized by the new communities?
4. What do you see in the future of Japanese librarianship if the new communities keep growing?

RESULTS

Expansion of Human Networks

Because the young librarian communities have been making the most of the Internet's free social networking services, rendering irrelevant issues of cost and distance, interviewees have been able to casually expand their human networks beyond their own libraries. Young employees are hard pressed to find like-minded colleagues in their shrinking organizations, which have held back on recruitment because of cost-cutting pressures. The new networks are especially useful to the part-time paraprofessionals working for lower wages, who welcome the lack of membership fees. The casual nature of the new networking communities is their most valuable feature.

Furthermore, events and training programs hosted by the communities have greatly helped all the librarians interviewed expand their networks. One academic librarian mentioned that, though he had not wanted to attend any weekend events, he began to attend such events as often as possible once he discovered the value of forming "analog" relationships with people of the same generation.

Knowledge Transfer

Network-driven activities became a field in which information professionals exchanged tacit, rather than explicit, knowledge. Despite their appetite for learning, some interviewees assumed that their attendance would provide no specific knowledge or skill that they could directly use in their workplaces. Nevertheless, one of the part-time librarians said the following:

I can't specify what helps, but what I learn from my external networking activities is definitely a big help to me in doing my job.

Participants must have exchanged knowledge through their networking activities despite not experiencing it as a conscious acquirement of explicit knowledge.

Knowledge diffuses as the network expands. Participants deeply value what they obtain from networking; thus, those with influence in their workplace encourage colleagues to join their networks. Doing so is very easy. You usually need only register to a mailing list, without paying a fee. Thus the professional knowledge is carried across Japan on the Web.

Motivation

All interviewees said that participating in the new librarian communities helped improve their motivation. For example, part-time librarians expressed frustration with the disparity between their working conditions and those of full-timers, as well as with their meager influence and their unfair workloads; they see the new communities as a field where they can share their feelings with people from other organizations living with the same situation.

The kind of library that used to offer rich opportunities for OJT ("On the Job Training") and off-the-job networking through mutual communication with senior librarians and colleagues is vanishing, while librarians are getting busier every day. The new communities fulfill the functions that conventional organizations have abandoned.

Getting a Job

Some part-time librarians said that they had obtained job information from people they had met during networking activities. The Japanese librarian job market lacks mobility. Nevertheless, as libraries under cost-cutting pressures need skilled librarians, some of them began to recruit experienced professionals externally: the weak ties developed in the librarians' new networks accelerate their recruitment mobility.

Reputation

An enhanced reputation in the immediate organization is supposed to be one of the outcomes of social networking, but this effect is detected only faintly in this study. Though they felt appreciated by other community participants, most interviewees did not think that their colleagues judged them on their outside activities fairly. An academic paraprofessional librarian complained as follows:

My colleagues have a negative impression of my activities outside university. Some said to me, "What is the point of doing this? It doesn't help your current work." The university does not even allow me to use its name when I do something outside of school.

Traditional libraries usually consider only those activities they regard as "official" as appropriate criteria for evaluation. Activities (even well organized paid training sessions) hosted by new communities are rarely recognized as things worth evaluating. One exception was a part-time contract librarian who was to be promoted in the next fiscal year because her activities were valued by her library.

Some interviewees declared that they regarded the participations to outside communities as individual learning opportunities rather than something directly related to their work. They had become distressed over the widening gap between their workplace realities and their fulfilling experiences in the networking communities.

Difference from Traditional Librarian Organizations

Interviewees considered participation in the new communities to be easier than becoming a member of a traditional librarian organization such as the Japan Library Association. They questioned the latter's typical annual fee and its value for money. This kind of opinions has been also given to the American Library Association (Gordon, 2004). Members of an association receive a monthly journal, which interviewees consider its least useful feature. However, even non-members have access to other services provided by the associations, such as training workshops and special events, for a one-time fee. Participants of new communities do not encounter this sense of "membership" while communicating online with tools freely

available on the Internet. Some workshops did require expensive fees, but one of the participants said, "It was definitely worth while."

Some mentioned that being part of a traditional organization required them to jump a psychological hurdle. A librarian who had attended an event and social hosted by a traditional association for academic librarians described the organization as "hierarchical." Though the interviewees admitted the value of these professional associations, they preferred light and quick communication with Twitter and membership in flat organizations where everyone is active and visible to others.

Expectations

Most of interviewees stated that they expect new networking communities to transform librarianship in Japan. Although networking's impact is not yet strong, they expect that young librarians willing to communicate outward will steadily change the atmosphere of the library and of librarianship. This view demonstrates that they consider external networking to be not only of great value to themselves but also something essential for a librarian as an information professional in the digital age.

Nevertheless, some interviewees expressed concern about the future of network management. Though its loose management style is the most attractive aspect of networking communities, it could weaken their sustainability. Keeping a balance between proper management and a casual atmosphere is the communities' most difficult challenge.

The positive effect of networking on improvement of librarians' skill was also mentioned. One of the interviewees pointed out that effective adaptation to the methods of online social networking brings power to a librarian, whose work is intimately related to the information society. Social networking is booming on the Web, and the library services' use of social networking tools such as Facebook and Twitter (Dickson and Holley, 2010) will soon become very popular, even in Japan.

DISCUSSION

The results show that the young librarians' voluntary communities built social networks, provided opportunities for the transfer of tacit knowledge, and were felt to be a source of motivation for the participants, as the social network theory had predicted.

A new style of professional knowledge transfer seems to be emerging in the young librarians' networks. The librarians, as information professionals, would become stagnant if they ceased learning. Some new communities focus on social networking rather than practical knowledge; others (Code4Lib Japan, for example) provide training programs on cutting-edge technology. Contributions to professional development are multiplying beyond the continuing education provided by traditional associations and OJT. The Japanese librarian community should acknowledge the new importance of the voluntary networking communities to librarianship.

Networking had emotional dimensions for the participants interviewed. They all felt a remarkably deep affection for the communities, and they enjoyed making casual ties with people. Both those frustrated by their stagnant workplaces and those satisfied with their work environments and surrounded by good colleagues saw significant value in external networking. The greater appeal of the new communities over that of the traditional associations is clear. The new connections formed in these communities will reconstruct the process of professional communication among librarians.

It is noteworthy that social networking of librarians has possibility to facilitate mobility and to optimize job market of information professionals. This direction will stimulate both each organization and librarianship as a whole. Some libraries under cost-cutting pressures are not able to cultivate full-time professionals by themselves and prefer mid-career employment of a skilled librarian. In the interviews, some librarians had got job information from their weak-ties. At the moment, though, "a freelance librarian" is not realistic in Japan where the life-time employment system is deeply rooted, the mobility may increase in the near future. Thus, it may be considered that a library will place more value on the social networking experience and skill.

On the other hand, the lower wages and work conditions of part-time skilled paraprofessionals have been a major issue in Japanese librarianship, that has to be solved.

CONCLUSION

As the results showed, the young librarians could acquire professional knowledge and motivation by participating in the interorganizational social networking communities. The communities gave the young librarians opportunities not only to expand their human networks, but to get essential resources they needed for their work.

Following from the social network theory, this study has also shown that the new networking movement among young librarians in Japan may inspire a professional reconstruction (which is essential in this digital age) and thus create a social capital that may benefit both the librarians' professional community and each organization. The seeds are being sown right now.

In this digital age, the technologies to be installed in library services advance day by day, while each library organization suffers pressure of human resources cost-cutting from its mother body. Young librarians, who are eager to provide good services to the library users, are aware that they can not depend only on the leaning opportunities provided by their own libraries and professional association. It is important that the young information professionals consider the social networking communities as the provider of necessary knowledge for the work and the social network itself as vital source of professional motivation. The whole librarian community should acknowledge the functional role of the emerging communities and encourage their activities.

This qualitative study took account only of the personal outcomes of insiders and did not clarify the outcomes for the libraries where they worked. It will not have made sense unless individual achievement should have been seen to evolve into innovation for each organization and an overall reform of Japan's stagnant librarianship. The number of interviewees was sufficient to accomplish the purpose of this study; however, a wider survey would be necessary to confirm that social networking among librarians could play an important role throughout Japan. Another study should conduct a quantitative survey of a greater number of librarians to investigate the structure by which interorganizational networking benefit to intraorganizational innovation through individual improvement.

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