

# Twitter and the Virtual Branch: the Public Library in Social Space

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## Abstract

This poster presents a study that examines online profiles of 300 U.S. public libraries on Twitter to analyze how public libraries are constructing online identity and creating a visibility and voice in social space through photographs, images, biographical text on profiles, and public postings. The study also examines library activity levels, followers, Peerindex scores and other metrics in exploring the influence and impact of public library presence within social space, and the impression management and information sharing activities of influential public libraries on Twitter to better understand how libraries can integrate information services into new and emerging online social spaces.

**Keywords:** cultural institutions, human information behavior, information services, social media

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## 1 Introduction

With the rise of Web 2.0 and social media, perceptions of the role of public libraries are changing to include new ways of engaging with the public, from participatory “library as conversation” models (Lankes et al., 2007) to the embedding of library services within the “lifeflows” where users are engaging with information (Brophy, 2008). In an ethnographic study of one library using social media, Carlsson (2012, p. 207) notes a staff member’s comment: “*We’re stuck in the site structure of website for the whole city... makes it harder for people to find us. Facebook and Twitter are very useful for that.*” The growing presence of public libraries within social spaces is underlined within two other recent studies (Del Bosque, Leif & Skarl, 2012; Stuart, 2010) that point in particular to sharp increases during 2009 in the number of libraries using Twitter.

This proposed poster for iConference 2014 will discuss results from research exploring how the “footprint” of today’s public library now increasingly includes a virtual branch presence within social spaces such as the Twitter microblogging environment. The study examines online profiles of 300 U.S. public libraries on Twitter to analyze how public libraries are constructing online identity and creating a visibility and voice in social space through profile photographs and images, biographical text on profiles, and public postings. The study also assesses library activity levels and influence metrics to explore the influence and impact of public libraries in social space, and seeks to identify information sharing and impression management behaviors of highly influential public libraries using Twitter.

This study asks the following research questions:

1. How are public libraries constructing online identity, visibility and voice on Twitter through information revealed and concealed in profile photographs, biographical text on profiles, and online postings?
2. How are public libraries presenting their role and mission through their Twitter profiles?
3. What are the information sharing and impression management behaviors observed in public libraries’ online interactions and information sharing activities within the microblogging environment of Twitter?
4. What are the impression management and information sharing behaviors of influential public libraries on Twitter?

In this study, online profiles of 300 U.S. public libraries on Twitter downloaded on August 31, 2013 are studied using content analysis to identify visual self representations of the public library in social space through the profile images and backgrounds selected by the libraries. Libraries' self-representations often focus on the physical "library as place," with images of exteriors or interiors of the library building; "library as function," with images of books or computers; and "library as conversation" with images of people conversing or interacting in classes and workshops. Visual representations of library Twitter profiles and the textual representations expressed in the biography field of the library's profile are examined for impression management of information revealed and concealed in conveying a presence in social space. This study uses content analysis of the visual images selected as the library's profile and background pictures and intercoder reliability testing in building a codebook of image descriptions for assessing public library visual self-representations. The study draws upon prior research into social profiles and impression management in Facebook and MySpace (Boyle & Johnson, 2010, Davies, 2012; Hum et al., 2011), but brings a new focus on Twitter and the social profile and online presence of public libraries.

As libraries move toward providing information and services on Twitter and other social media sites, key unanswered questions remain in terms of how to measure "success" in social media, and what constitutes impact and influence in information sharing by public libraries in social spaces. For example, public libraries fulfill a complex mixture of roles including memory institution for preserving knowledge, community center for social engagement (Brophy, 2008, p.8), technology center delivering access to research resources, and community learning center or "people's university." Yet conveying these many aspects of the library's role and "self" is constrained within the limits of social space in profile photos and backgrounds, and brief textual biographies on a Twitter profile. Text and visual representations will be explored for insights into key roles incorporated by public libraries into profile self representations, such as images emphasizing computers ("library as technology center").

This study examines facets of the activity and interactions of public libraries on Twitter in terms of total numbers of postings, original launch date, most recent posting, and other users followed by the library. For assessing the relative influence and impact of a library, this study uses metrics including total numbers of followers of the library's Twitter page, and the library's PeerIndex scores. A prior study (Mehta et al., 2012) has suggested that number of followers acquired may be a more reliable indicator of influence than retweets or inclusion on lists. PeerIndex scores, similar to Klout scores, are a popular social media influence metric comprised of scores for areas including *authority*, *activity* and *audience* (del Campo Ávila et al., 2013) which are aggregated into a single influence score ranged from 1 to 100.

## 2 Conclusion

Results of this study will identify influential public libraries on Twitter; provide new insights into how libraries present themselves, engage with users, and share information with the public on Twitter; and in particular will identify the information sharing and impression management practices of influential public libraries on Twitter. It is anticipated that this study will also provide insights into the lifecycle of a library's presence in social spaces from birth to death, and the lingering remnants of a dormant or defunct social presence. Results will have implications for how public libraries can successfully engage with members of the public in social spaces, and raise issues for further study of how public libraries can move followers beyond less-engaged actions of following in the social sphere toward more direct engagement and involvement in mission-critical actions in the larger world.

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