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Dustin Fife

Western State Colorado University, dustin.fife@everylibrary.org

Mary Naylor

Utah Valley University, mary.naylor@uvu.edu

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Libraries, Social Media, and Politics:

Do Library Professionals Post about Politics on Institutional Social Media Accounts?

Dustin Fife & Mary Naylor Stephens

Introduction

Social media tools are used for different purposes among libraries and library professionals, with nearly all engaging in some form of social media. Some libraries have intricate policies that determine what is and is not posted on their institutional accounts and others do not know who all have the passwords. Some institutions post multiple times a day across multiple platforms, while others are constantly changing whose job it is to manage social media accounts. How libraries use social media is a broad topic that deserves, and has been receiving, nuanced research from many directions. This paper focuses on one aspect of social media use, namely, do library professionals post about outwardly political topics, events, laws, and policies on their institutional accounts? This paper attempts to uncover the experiences of library professionals related to politics and social media posting. This exploratory study, as so many exploratory studies do, creates as many questions for future research as it answers.

Methodology

In order to gather information, the authors distributed a simple Qualtrics survey to library professionals via national social media groups and listservs. The survey was open for seven days, and was advertised several times throughout the week. The survey consisted of twenty-four questions; twenty-two were multiple choice and two open-ended. The survey received 458 responses from all across the United States, with 351 responding to all twenty-four questions. The survey did not seek identifying information, but did ask a few demographic or personal questions, such as age and education level, and a few questions about personal social media habits for comparison to institutional use. Since this research did not seek comprehensive identifying demographic information, the survey has not controlled for over or under-representation in any areas of our profession or society. Also, since the survey was distributed using social media, the self-selected respondents represent a group of library professionals obviously engaged in social media, though the survey was distributed through several email listservs as well.

Literature

Finding literature that specifically discusses librarians using social media for their institutions in a political way yielded few results. However, library professionals, as well as their institutions, have concerns regarding social media and posting that are worthy of note. Many of these concerns revolve around who is allowed to post, what they post, and whether or not there is an official policy.

Effectively using social media platforms was a significant topic for a number of articles and audiences. Social media management has become an explicit job duty for many library professionals, as Phillips (2015) states, “for many of the surveyed librarians (85%), updating the library’s social media profiles was one of their official responsibilities...indicating the high value these librarians place not only on the development and maintenance of online profiles but also on the responsibility of librarians to be involved in this process” (p. 189). She also found that a majority “indicated that more than one library employee contributes to his or her library’s Facebook profile” (p. 189). No matter the various workflows for the social media content and posts “the social media presence of the library has become a vital, and sometimes shared, aspect of library work” (p. 189). Cotter and Sasso (2016), also found that the responsibility of the library’s social media presence was frequently shared, at least in part; respondents indicated that groups of individuals were often involved in creating the content for posts, even if only one individual was authorized to actually submit the posts (p. 79).

A number of researchers have discussed how to develop an appropriate social media presence (Watson, 2017 & Ramsey, Ramsey & Vecchione, 2014). There was consideration given to what would maintain a “suitable image of the library” (Phillips, 2015, p.190). These branding and image concerns were not always specifically guided by formal or institutional policies, but as Phillips (2015) stated, “the influence of these institutional policies can be felt” (p. 190). Cotter and Sasso (2016) wrote, “Approximately two-thirds of the 230 respondents indicated that

content posted by library staff to library social media pages did not require approval; however, in the comments, they noted strategies that their library employed to ensure the appropriateness of social media postings as well as the practice of monitoring the content of replies to posts” (p. 79).

When Cotter and Sasso (2016) asked their survey respondents if the library had an official or unofficial social media policy, nearly 66% of participants indicated they did (p. 78-79). Others have found lower numbers of libraries with official policies. Phillips (2015) wrote, “Additionally, fewer than half (44%) of the librarians surveyed worked in libraries with an official social media policy” (p. 190). DiScala and Weeks (2013) took the question a step further and asked questions about how different librarians interpreted policies based on how formally their school’s rules or policies were presented (p. 8). They found that, “In the most explicit and formal presentation of policy, the four school librarians perceived the policy in the same way: understanding that it required strict adherence. However, as the school district presented policies less clearly, the responses by the librarians began to differ” (p. 8).

Outside of direct policies governing social media, library professionals are concerned with what political role libraries play in a democratic society. Childs (2017) states, “The most important finding of my research is that libraries are not neutral institutions and librarians are not neutral actors” (p. 65). Childs continues that because of both internal and external pressures libraries face while serving the public and because they subscribe to “lofty democratic ideals” they must “protect intellectual freedom by embracing their political agency and actively combating censorship and surveillance” (p. 65). As Childs sees it, libraries are not on neutral ground, and will lose their ability to meet their goals, and uphold their ethical ideals without engaging with politics and communities directly.

This paper sits at the nexus of these topics. Specifically, do library professionals have a policy to follow and does it describe what oversight measures exist for social media? With or without policies in place, are library professionals taking the opportunity to be political about topics that support our professional values on social media platforms, or do their institutions view that as beyond the appropriate scope of social media use?

Results

Though little demographic information was sought, the survey sought several points of information so that the group of respondents as a whole could be discussed. This research focused more on the general experience of library professionals than any group in particular. The responses to this survey came from library professionals working in all types of libraries; however, public libraries were most heavily represented. 61.79% of respondents work in public libraries, 24.89% in academic, 6.11% in school, 2.4% in special, 0.66% in archives, and 4.15% in other. Some of those who selected other described their workplaces as state agencies, consortia, prisons, military facilities, independent consultancies, for-profit companies, and several others. The research does not look at these groups individually, though it is important to remember that interactions between social media and politics may be very different depending on what type of library the respondents work in.

The survey also collected information about age, degree level, and job type to better understand the group of respondents. There was an even distribution in age. 17.03% were aged 21-30, 35.37% were aged 31-40, 26.64% were aged 41-50, 14.19% were aged 51-60, and 6.77% were aged 61 and over. Age can be a mitigating factor in any discussion of technology, but for the purposes of this research, the age of people was not as important as their awareness of existing policy and procedure and whether or not they directly control social media platforms for their institution. 77.73% of respondents said that they have a library degree (MLS, MLIS, MSIS, etc.), while 22.27% did not. 51.64% of respondents supervise staff in some sort of capacity and 65.26% of respondents have direct access in some nature to their institutions’ social media platforms. So, this group works in all types of libraries, though it is dominated by public library professionals. There is a more representative age distribution and most respondents have a library degree. The majority of respondents supervise staff generally and personally have direct access to their institutions’ social media platforms.

It is important to have at least a perfunctory knowledge of library professionals’ personal habits to compare to institutional habits. 59.47% of respondents use social media multiple times a day; another 33.41% use social

media daily. Only 0.45% claimed to never use social media. So, overall, library professionals regularly use social media in their personal lives. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest were the platforms used most by respondents. However, many other platforms were mentioned, including Snapchat, LinkedIn, Goodreads, Reddit, Tumblr and others. Lastly, we wanted to know how often library professionals thought that they posted about overtly political topics on their personal social media accounts. 27.68% answered that they never personally post about politics, 30.36% said monthly, 29.46% said weekly, 10.49% said daily, and 2.01% said multiple times a day. From that, we see that over 72% of library professionals responding to this survey use social media to personally post about politics. It is important to note that the survey did not define “politics” or “political posts” for respondents, but relied on each respondent to interpret these terms.

Institutional accounts for libraries are, for the most part, used actively. 17.08% of represented institutions post to social media multiple times a day. 42.37% post daily, and 33.03% post at least weekly. Libraries overwhelmingly use Facebook (445 of 458), Twitter (259 of 458), and Instagram (277 of 458), though everything from Pinterest to Google+ was mentioned as well. Concerning policies that guide social media posting, 38.05% of respondents said that their libraries have policies in place and that they are followed. Another 4.39% said that their libraries have policies, but that they are mostly ignored, and 39.27% of people said that there are no policies, but that there are unwritten rules that staff tend to follow. Finally, 18.29% of respondents simply said that there are no policies that guide social media activity.

Many of the remaining questions gave respondents situations and asked if they would be allowed to post on social media in those situations. Throughout the responses there was consistent ambiguity about what library professionals were allowed to do. For example, the survey asked, “Does your institution specifically bar you from posting about political matters/movements/ideas on the institution’s social media accounts?” 25.31% responded “yes,” 37.10% responded “no,” and a slight plurality of 37.59% responded “maybe.” Some of the respondents mentioned that they, “Can’t support our own library measures, but we can write about other local, state, and federal issues, and do;” “It’s not specifically barred, but it’s clear it’s not a space for political messages;” “We are

county employees and [are] barred from even discussing politics;” and finally, “We can post some information on sources but no commentary.”

Other questions gave even more specific scenarios. Question 14 asked, “Does your library allow you to post on the institutional account about official local/state/national political events such as caucuses, voter registrations drives, or political debates?” 30.81% of respondents said “yes,” 28.20% said “no,” and 40.99% said “maybe.” Some of the maybes explained, “We cannot be partisan;” “Only if county sponsored;” “If our take is nonpartisan, yes;” and many, many others. Question 15 was similar, asking, “Does your library allow you to post on the institutional account about non-official local/state/national political events such as political protests?” Only 7.58% responded “yes,” while 45.77% were able to respond “no.” This still left 46.65% responding “maybe,” and commenting with things such as, “No official rule, but it’s not done;” “Nothing said outright, but imagine that doing so would be problematic;” “Depends on viewpoint;” and “Nothing partisan.” A pattern with many responding “maybe” emerges early in these questions leaning towards not posting political information except in limited circumstances and remains throughout. It is a pattern of caution and some might even say fear.

Question 16 asked, “Does your library allow you to post on the institutional account about official local/state/federal legislation, executive policies, or court decisions?” 14.91% said “yes,” 33.92% said “no,” and 51.17% said “maybe.” Question 17 asked, “Does your library allow you to post on the institutional account about a federal issue such as IMLS funding?” 30.29% said “yes,” 26.18% said “no,” and 43.53% said “maybe.” Question 18 asked, “Does your library allow you to post on the institutional account about a state issue such as a state law that impacts school librarians?” 21.11% answered “yes,” 27.86% answered “no,” and 51.03% answered “maybe.” Question 19 asked, “Does your library allow you to post on the institutional account about a local issue such as an upcoming ballot initiative for library funding?” 26.98% answered “yes,” 29.91% answered “no,” and 43.11% answered “maybe.” Question 20 asked, “Does your library allow you to post on the institutional account about a social movement such as the Tea Party movement or Black Lives Matter?” 8.50% said “yes,” 48.39% said “no,” and 43.11% said “maybe.” Throughout all of these questions,

the “maybes” often added comments such as, “Depends on viewpoint;” “I don’t think so;” “Informational purposes only;” “Never mentioned, but would imagine it would be an issue” and “This might be discouraged.” While many people responded “maybe,” most of the explanations are less ambiguous as the respondents repeatedly leaned towards limiting political discussion.

Questions 21 and 22 were slightly different, asking, “Has your library ever removed a seemingly political post from the institutional account?” and “Are you aware of any employees in your institution who lost the right to post to social media because of past political posts?” Both of these were overwhelmingly “no” with 68.44% and 82.99% respectively.

Questions 23 and 24 were open-ended questions. Question 23 asked, “Give an example of a political event, issue, idea you have posted about in the past on your institution’s social media?” There are numerous responses here, and many mentioned earlier restrictions to keep a nonpartisan tone. Examples included net neutrality, IMLS funding, library funding, a “Black Lives Matter protest in front of the library,” and also “only informational posts such as election day details, etc. very neutral in tone.” Question 24 shows that many libraries do not feel comfortable posting about things that other libraries already have posted about. It asked, “Give an example of a political event, issue, idea you have chosen NOT to post about on your institution’s social media, even though you wanted to?” Responses included repeated references to IMLS funding, Black Lives Matter, “Pretty much everything,” and local politics.

Conclusions

There is so much research that can be done concerning social media, politics, and libraries. More research can be done actually comparing policies and their enactment and efficacy. More research needs to be done around what is legally permissible for libraries and social media under local and state law. More research needs to be done about how employees feel in a role that can often be uncertain. As we add to the literature surrounding social media, politics, and libraries, library professionals will be empowered to use these tools more aptly and comfortably.

Throughout the responses, the most popular answer was

“maybe.” Though this might seem to show that each situation is judged by the merit of the possible political post, the comments that came with those “maybes” would generally lean towards not posting political content, whether it be local, state, or national politics. The more official an event, such as voter registration or political caucuses, the more likely a library professional was to feel comfortable posting about it. However, this was not universal and many library professionals do not feel comfortable ever mentioning political information on institutional accounts.

This survey did not ask for social media policies to compare, but focused on the experiences and recollections of individual library professionals, so direct policy suggestions would not necessarily be obvious from this content. However, it is clear that library professionals need more guidance and training to ensure that they can fulfill the goals of their institutions when using social media. Social media is a powerful set of tools being used without the certainty necessary to regularly post political content that advocates for libraries. Leadership teams need to give clear guidance to library professionals because social media management will continue to be a job duty at almost every library. Leadership should define what it means to be political for their institution and push the boundaries of politics on social media for issues important to librarianship.

Full results for the survey can be found here: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1B4s01fXN-kwqsO57ZWmP2OYx-Acp1QUE7/view?usp=sharing>

For any other questions please contact dfife@western.edu or mary.naylor@uvu.edu.

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About the Authors

Dustin Fife (dfife@western.edu) is Director of Library Services for Western State Colorado University and Series Editor for *The Political Librarian*.

Mary Naylor (mary.naylor@uvu.edu) is Reference/Instruction/Assessment Librarian at Utah Valley University, Orem, Utah.