

SEIZING ON SOPA: ARE YOU READY TO GO VIRAL?

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In January 2012, it seemed like everyone was talking about SOPA and PIPA. You could not turn on a TV, radio, or computer without hearing about it. We at Texas A&M University Libraries knew our students would really take notice of the issue when one of their favorite websites, Wikipedia, announced on January 16th it would become unavailable on January 18th as a protest. Thus, we created a LibGuide (<http://guides.library.tamu.edu/SOPA>) to help educate our students on both our reference databases they can use as an alternative to Wikipedia, and the Libraries' government information resources. We did not anticipate the reaction we got. The email proposing the guide to the co-author, Laura Sare, was sent on the 17th at 8 a.m., the guide was created and posted by 12 p.m., by 3 p.m. it had been tweeted to over 3,000 people, by 8 a.m. the following day the Libraries were contacted by the University Marketing and Communications Department informing us they would be tweeting our guide to their 26,000 followers, at 2 p.m. the local news station called us to get a statement on SOPA, by 3:30 we were in front of a camera, and by 10 p.m. we were on the news educating the community about our guide and our dedication to providing accurate and timely information to our community. Undoubtedly, we were lucky, but most importantly, we were ready. Our unexpected golden opportunity arose, and we were able to capitalize on it immediately. This paper is an example of how we seized upon a teaching moment, but most importantly it aims to help other libraries develop their own plans for handling their outreach and instruction golden opportunities when they arise.

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The most remarkable thing about our moment in the spotlight is that we didn't do anything remarkable. Our libraries are heavy users of LibGuides and frequently create them to help inform students about current events and issues affecting our community. The main reason this guide gained popularity was our use of Twitter. This was the perfect venue for publicity because not only could we instantly reach a large number of people for free, but Twitter was also the hub of international conversations about SOPA and PIPA. The legislation had the potential to change the way users interact with the Internet so that is where the conversation was happening. Many colleges and universities have an institution-wide Twitter account in addition to those managed by individual departments and campus organizations. Make a point to know who manages these accounts and include them while tweeting.

While Twitter is always a good venue to publicize your guides, it is not the only location to consider. By answering the questions below, libraries can gather the information they need to construct their emergency success-management plan.

WHAT MATTERS TO MY COMMUNITY?

Again, Twitter can be a great resource to find out what issues are important to your campus community. Search your institution's hashtag or hashtags, and see not only the official communication but also tweets from students. The student newspaper is another great resource and an important organization with which to build and maintain a relationship. Student-run newspapers often have staff turnover every semester, so update your contacts frequently. Checking the institution's Facebook page and reading the local newspaper are also great ways to keep up with your community.

HOW DOES THE LIBRARY FIT INTO OUR COMMUNITY'S CURRENT NEEDS?

Now that you know what issues are important to your community, think about how your library's services can become a part of the conversation. Controversial issues are a fantastic opportunity for outreach. For example, if your institution's administration creates a controversial policy, create a guide. It is entirely possible to join the conversation without taking a side. Libraries are dedicated to providing timely and accurate information to our users, and we should not let anything prevent us from sharing resources on controversial issues. With our SOPA/PIPA guide we were careful to protect our library's non-partisan identity by presenting the issue neutrally and helping our readers understand the crux of the various sides of the argument. We linked to the full-text of proposed legislation so our users could read the actual language used. Our government documents and legal resources librarian, Laura Sare, also provided links to other copyright-related legislation so users were able to understand SOPA and PIPA in context. It is important to remember to promote library resources and help students understand that the libraries are helpful not just for this issue but future projects as well. The SOPA/PIPA guide presented a short, annotated list of databases that students could use in lieu of Wikipedia emphasizing their staying power and consistency. Responses to community issues need not be solely online: one example is when tuition is increased promote your scholarship-seeking materials with an in-library display, a handout at the circulation desk, and a corresponding online guide.

HOW DO I WRITE A PRESS RELEASE AND WHERE DO I SEND IT?

Press releases are easier to write than you think if you follow these guidelines: no more than one page; short, clear, jargon-free sentences; give all the details (who, what, where, when, why); and provide context (global, national, local, and/or institutional). Before you send your press release, research whose permission you need to contact the press so you're ready when the occasion arises. Don't be afraid to send your press release widely: the student and local newspapers, radio stations, and television stations are often looking for stories. Consider creating a group with your email client so you can reach all of your media contacts with one email.

Creating an emergency success-management plan will not only ensure that you are ready when your golden opportunity arises, but will also make you more likely to notice them. Remember to be aware, be bold, move quickly, don't be afraid to engage in political discussions, always protect your brand and institution, and allow yourself to get swept up. Going viral is a wild ride and one every library should experience.
