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Cataloguing and social media – is it really a good idea?

In my opinion, the short answer is 'yes'! There is a lot to consider when thinking about using social media in any context, but with planning and preparation and adherence to good practice, I think that social media can be of great benefit to cataloguers and those they catalogue for. I've recently been involved with setting up a Twitter account for our library, so I hope this article will be of benefit to other people thinking about using social media in an official capacity for the first time.

Benefits

Social media is an excellent way to increase visibility and awareness of cataloguing as a profession and ourselves, as cataloguers. As we know, plenty of people are unaware of or don't know much about what we do, so it is important for us to be able to communicate our value to our employers, as well as to those who use the catalogues we help to create. The fact that we're using social media indicates that we are actively seeking to communicate with our stakeholders. As well as being able to send out messages, social media provides a mechanism for stakeholders to feed back to us about the catalogue, giving a more accurate picture of user satisfaction levels and what kinds of information they need or would like to have from the records we provide.

More than this, social media provides excellent forums for the cataloguing community. This can be particularly valuable to new cataloguers, or cataloguers who work alone or are the only cataloguer in their institution. Social media enables people to make contact, share ideas and support one another. It is notable that cataloguers have a strong presence on social media; on Twitter particularly, but also through various blogs and wikis. Some forms of social media, such as blogs, can also be great tools for helping us reflect on what we do, and its democratic nature means that everyone can have a voice (if they want one).

Planning and preparation – considering problems and risks

Although there are clear benefits to using social media, it's not for everyone, so it's important to think about whether we really do have the time, expertise and resources to set up and manage social media accounts. This is particularly important for solo cataloguers, or people in small teams. While it might be great to be able to share information and get support from other cataloguers, it's a different thing to manage an 'official' Twitter account or blog, where you're committed to posting regularly to a personal account where it doesn't matter if you have a massive cataloguing backlog and no time to post.

So, it's a good idea to do some research. There are lots of cataloguers using social media already, so you could have a look at some of their accounts. Try and look at institutions similar to yours and see what they do, to get some ideas of how you might use social media in your own institution. If you're already using social media for personal use, this in itself can be a great source of example and information – contact any cataloguers you might know and see if they have any tips or advice from their experiences of using social media as cataloguers. Also, look at various forms of social media – YouTube, Flickr and wikis, as well as the more obvious Twitter, Facebook and blogs.

Try to decide what particular type of social media is right for you and your institution. Not everyone or all institutions will have the capacity or ability in terms of time and resources in order to manage a Twitter and Facebook accounts as well as a blog, for example, but you might be able to manage one (or maybe two) of these.

The next stage is to plan. It might seem odd to say that, because social media is often seen as something used 'casually' or 'on the fly', but to set up and manage an account effectively actually takes quite a bit of planning. Your institution may require a proposal and/or strategy document, which will focus the planning process somewhat! Things you might want to think about include:

- Which particular social media tools you want to use, and why you want to use them

- Who is going to manage them, and how they're going to do this. (E.g. will you have a rota for the management of a Facebook account? How are you going to handle any complaints or queries received via social media? When will the accounts be staffed?

- Who is your target audience?

- What resources will you need (staffing and equipment) to set up and manage the social media account(s)?

- How much time will be taken up with managing the account(s). Do you really have time to do this? How often are you going to post/tweet/write?

- Is there a need for staff training in the use of social media tools? If so, how is this going to be delivered?

- Branding. It's good to have a strong and consistent brand image to be applied across social media accounts so that your audience can instantly recognise the accounts as being "official".

- How are you going to promote your social media accounts? (E.g. links on main library website, links to/from existing institutional social media accounts).

- What are you going to tweet/post/write about?

If you're not sure that social media is for you (or your institution) you may wish to consider piloting an account. That way, if it doesn't work out well, you know you only have to continue for a finite about of time! It can also be reassuring for managers to know that a new tool is going to be piloted and evaluated thoroughly before they need to think about agreeing to its long-term use.

Other things to bear in mind are that the use of social media should be sensitive to and work cooperatively with the remit of other groups/services within the institution. You don't want to tread on anyone's toes or duplicate work, so try to liaise with other library staff involved with promotion of the library (for example the web team if you have one) and perhaps the institution's marketing department, if there is one. It is also worth finding out whether your institution has a social media policy – if so, you will need to adhere to this, and it may influence your choice of social media tool or even whether you want to go ahead and use social media at all.

If you work in a larger institution it's likely that other departments and teams will already be using some form of social media to communicate with their users and stakeholder, so liaising with them can be a great way of picking up tips, and you may be able to ask them to promote your social media accounts through theirs (e.g. via re-tweets on Twitter). We found that we received a lot more followers on Twitter once the Student Union re-tweeted some of our tweets!

Unfortunately, you may receive complaints about the service from users via social media – even if these may not be about cataloguing people might try to contact the library via the 'cataloguing' account. It's a good idea to have a strategy for dealing with any complaints, and also for dealing with any more involved queries you might receive. It's not a good idea to have lengthy discussions or conversations of a sensitive nature in a public forum, so try to set up a mechanism for dealing with these 'offline' – perhaps provide a generic email address for the complainant to use instead. If the complaints/queries relate to another aspect of the library service you can refer them to the appropriate team.

Getting started

If you decide to go ahead with using social media, you will now need to implement your branding strategy, set up a rota for managing the account(s) (if you have more than one person doing this) and make sure you have something to tweet/post/write about! You might find it helpful to have a list of 'regular' subjects you can post about for when news is slow!

We integrated a list of things to tweet about with our rota for the management of our Twitter account, so that people not only knew when it was their turn to manage the account, but also knew they had at least something to tweet about that week! Ideas for things to post about include:

- What we do!

- Library news

- New acquisitions

- Items of interest in your collection(s)

- Opening and closing times (e.g. for vacations)

- Library catalogue/e-resource downtime

- Reports from staff development events

- Statistics (e.g. how many new items have been catalogued this month/week/year, top books borrowed, top e-books)

- Information for academic staff about book ordering/link to book order form/reminders about deadlines for ordering new books

- Requesting and responding to feedback from users

- Improvements made to library services in general, or bibliographic services in particular

Obviously, what you choose to write about will depend to a certain extent on the social media tool you're using and how creative you want to be with it. Most social media tools can be linked in some way, but, as mentioned above, not everyone will have the resources to be able to manage more than one account.

Personally, I think it's great to include images with posts (whichever social media tool you're using) but if you do this they need to be of good quality otherwise it can make your account look unprofessional. If you're not skilled with a camera see if you can find someone who is!

You might want (or need) to keep statistics or other data about your accounts, for example how many followers/views the account has had, as well as more qualitative material that you could use for evaluating the account at a later date. It can be tricky to keep track of conversations held via social media, but there are tools available to help you do this. Storify is a useful tool for keeping records of conversations on Twitter, for example. In terms of quantitative statistics, most social media tools provide these quite readily.

Evaluation and reflection

Even if you're not doing a pilot, it's probably a good idea to do some sort of evaluation of and/or reflection your use of social media every so often. You should try to think about if the social media tool you chose to use is working in the way you hoped it would – is it of benefit to your stakeholders or to you? If not, you need to consider whether or not to continue using it.

Other things to consider are the amount of time it's taking to manage the account. Has it been manageable? Even if it has, can you continue with the commitment in the long term? If you're struggling but feel that the benefits of using social media make it worth continuing with, try and find someone to help you, even if they're not part of the cataloguing/acquisitions team. I know this might be easier said than done!

Doing an evaluation or simply reflecting on what you've done so far is a good opportunity to consider any changes you might like to make. Perhaps you could expand to use an additional social media tool, or try a different tool if the one you chose didn't really work for you. There are plenty out there, so don't get disheartened if (for example) you find that can't find the time to write a regular blog post – try Twitter instead, or maybe even an Instagram or Flickr account showing interesting new acquisitions. It's important to find the tools that suit you, and also to remember that it's OK to stop doing something if it's not working.

Good luck!