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SJSU ALASC DESCRIPTOR

Social Media and Learning at the Ferguson Municipal Public Library by Madelynn Dickerson

Nov 28, 2016



On August 9, 2014 a black teenager named Michael Brown was shot and killed by police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis. The boy, who was eighteen years old, was unarmed. His death spurred on protests in the city of Ferguson that drew international media attention both in August, immediately following the shooting, and again in November after a grand jury declined to indict Officer Wilson for any crime. There were both peaceful protests with organized daytime marches and violent protests that resulted in damage to the Ferguson community and a general sense of unrest. During the August protests, the Ferguson-Florissant School District closed schools out of concern for the safety of staff and students (Ferguson-Florissant School District Cancels Monday Classes, 2014).

By contrast, the Ferguson Municipal Public Library remained open. At the request of school teacher Carrie Pace, students met in the library building for tutoring and volunteer class sessions while the school district was closed. The Ferguson Municipal Public Library, led by the Library's sole full time librarian (and director) Scott Bonner, used social media, including Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to promote the Library as a place for rest, reflection, and learning during and after the protests. The Library was celebrated for the stabilizing effect it had on the community during the turmoil and went on to win awards and receive large donations as a result of its work. This article highlights the way the Ferguson Municipal Public Library used social media to promote opportunities for learning during the protests.

The Ferguson Library on Twitter

The Ferguson Municipal Public Library manages the Twitter account @fergusonlibrary. The Library's first tweet of August 2014 was made on the 11th, and referenced the ongoing unrest in the city occurring during that time. By the end of the month, @fergusonlibrary made a total of 104 posts on Twitter. By comparison, the Library's Facebook account made 4 posts. It is clear that the Library used Twitter far more often to communicate with the community than Facebook during this time.

On August 15, @fergusonlibrary tweeted a link to the Library's Instagram account featuring an image of a sign posted in the library building that reads: **"During difficult times, the library is a quiet oasis where we can catch our breath, learn, and think about what to do next. Please help keep our oasis peaceful and serene. Thank you!"**

It is this tweet that caught wide public attention, with 691 retweets and 398 favorites (Ferguson Municipal Public Library, 2014). The Library first used the Twitter hashtag “#Ferguson” to tag its posts on August 18 when it announced that teachers from Walnut Grove Elementary School planned activities for students while the school district was closed. Activities were planned from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., closely mirroring a traditional school day. Twitter posts show that the Library’s efforts to provide support for the city’s closed school system were highly successful.

Ferguson Municipal Public Library’s efforts were very well received by the public. The Library’s August 2014 tweets were retweeted (shared) a total of 1784 times and favorited 1078 times by Twitter users. Users from both the Ferguson community and further afield responded to the Library to share support and encouragement for the Library’s learning activities during the protests, and many others indicated a desire to make monetary donations. In addition to the outpouring of educational support from local parents and teachers, interest in donating to the library skyrocketed at the end of August and after. On August 25, @fergusonlibrary tweeted:

“Many have asked how to donate money to #Ferguson library. We finally got time to set up PayPal button at <http://ferguson.lib.mo.us> Thank you!” (Ferguson Municipal Library, 2014).

The Engaging Local Government Leaders organization selected Ferguson Municipal Public Library as its first “Social Media Superstar” that same month (Taylor, 2015). The Library’s work reached an international audience: even author Neil Gaiman participated online with tweets explaining where people could make monetary donations through the Library’s website (Gaiman, 2014).

Bigger than Social Media: Building a Culture of Learning

During a difficult period of unrest in the city of Ferguson, unrest that manifested across many American cities at the end of the 2014 and continues to do so, the Ferguson Municipal Public Library showed itself to be one voice among a collection of voices calling out on social media. Social media played a significant role in the dissemination of information during the protests, and the Ferguson Library focused its Twitter communications on promoting opportunities for learning and reflection. While this is indeed a story about using social media as a tool to engage a community, it is perhaps more so a story about the role of the library as a facilitator for learning. Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown, authors of *A New Culture of Learning*, describe the way in which members of a collective offer opportunities for learning:

“In the new culture of learning, people learn through their interaction and participation with one another in fluid relationships that are the result of shared interests and opportunity. In this environment, the participants all stand on equal ground – no one is assigned to the traditional role of teacher or student. Instead, anyone who has particular knowledge of, or experience with, a given subject may take on the role of mentor at any time” (p. 50).

The Ferguson Municipal Public Library showed itself to be a positive voice in the community collective during a strenuous time marked by violence, distrust, and intense media scrutiny. The Library’s use of Twitter effectively reached members of the community and highlights the Library’s desire and ability to organically collaborate with others to support both formal and informal learning, especially for K-12 students whose schools were closed during the time of the protests.

By using the #Ferguson hashtag, the Library joined millions of voices on Twitter, many of whom were using the same hashtag to raise awareness of police violence, race issues, and news of the protest (Grinberg, 2014). While the Library has received enormous attention and accolades for its work, library director Scott Bonner emphasizes the way in which the Ferguson Municipal Public Library fulfills its mission, just like any other library would by tweeting with the hashtag #whatlibrariesdo (Albanese, 2015).

This brief article serves as a small snapshot of the work done by the Ferguson Municipal Public Library in support of learning. Much more work can be done and should be done to research the wide impact libraries can play in democratizing learning in communities.

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Images courtesy of the Ferguson Public Library website, Engaging Local Government Leaders.Org and Madelynn Dickerson.

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