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# Keeping Up with the Things that Matter: Current Awareness Tools and Strategies for Academic Libraries

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# Keeping Up with the Things that Matter: Current Awareness Tools and Strategies for Academic Libraries

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While access to digital information has continued to increase at an unprecedented rate, staying current is increasingly difficult because it is so hard to filter out critical insight from all of the noise. Of course, new current awareness options and capabilities are emerging every day, but trial and error comes at great cost because time is a precious and finite resource.

Keeping up with the things that matter is difficult for the entire information community—all of the people who are here at the Charleston Conference—but in academic libraries I would say that this challenge is particularly acute and the stakes are high.

First and foremost, it is critical to define what you need to do to cover the bases. I offer regular updates on my blog in four areas—libraries, academia, technology and user trends.  While covering the bases will definitely look different for different librarians depending on types of institutions and roles, this could at least provide a place to start.

As librarians continue to refine and streamline their keeping up efforts, they must be careful not to be hermetically sealed in your own personal "online filter bubble." It makes perfect sense to focus keeping up efforts on the sources, ideas, people and perspectives that are most meaningful and valuable. It is important to remember that beyond user choices, information is being winnowed by customization within social media and other digital tools that now tailor search results, content and updates just for you. The implications of this are explored in depth in a very interesting TED Talk by Eli Parisier. I encourage everyone to take a look at this. Good food for thought in your keeping up efforts.

It is important to continue to add new tools to enhance keeping up efforts. Many excellent tools are available today at no cost.

Evernote is a Swiss Army Knife for managing diverse types of information. It also offers easy recall via robust search capabilities and tagging and diverse options for sharing. It allows users to capture typed notes, voice notes, handwritten notes, photos, websites, business cards, with easy searching and tags for ready recall.

For a better and more seamless way to manage your information gathering and sharing via social channels, Hootsuite is an extremely valuable tool for seamlessly managing your social media presence.  It offers a one-stop shop to access and manage all of your messages and for prescheduling of communications.  It is also a great one-stop hub for managing and sharing information for all of your social media channels.

FeedDemon is the one of the premiere tools for monitoring RSS feeds and social communications across diverse channels. It synchs with Google Reader and offers easy sharing of items via a number of channels. You can build alerts for key words in any feed via 10 different channels including Google News, Twitter Feeds, MSN Search and YouTube. You can also tag items for later recall. Librarians have the opportunity to use this kind of tool to capture RSS Feeds from your own library sources.

Here are some suggestions for staying on track, managing time effectively, and staving off information overload, which were recently highlighted in a presentation by Steven Bell:

- Browse first.
- Organize info via email (note new capabilities of Gmail).
- Use offline browsing.
- Make it a habit (same time each day).
- Create a "keeping up" team.
- Delete when you must.

In his comments, Clifford Lynch emphasized the importance of thinking about what you're trying to accomplish in efforts to keep up. For example, the how closely do you need to be on top of developments—do minutes matter? Hours? Days? Or the value of depth vs. breadth in keeping up efforts. Typically there's a high degree of redundancy among sources tracking a given subject, so as you read more sources the amount of new information gained per additional source tends to be minimal. Seeking diversity of sources is one good strategy; but you may use your time more effectively tracking across a broader range of developments, but not trying to be utterly comprehensive in any one. There's enough redundancy in the system that you're unlikely, over time, to miss much that's really important. You should also think about the role of primary sources and of resources that synthesize many primary sources as you develop strategies here.

He also underscored that while it is important to bring together a range of useful sources, it is also true that certain types of material are expensive to deal with in terms of personal time: It's very hard to scan audio or video recordings, as opposed to text.

He suggested that it's worth thinking carefully about how the ways that you use various kinds of social media systems fit into these strategic parameters.

Karen Downing focuses her keeping up efforts on staying current about what is happening on the University of Michigan library and campus; national, state, and local economy; higher education policy and practice; library profession and practice; and philanthropy and grants. Key issues that are applicable to all these domains are technology trends, diversity issues, assessment/accountability practices and policies, grants/funding, data issues, social and cultural trends, and personnel and leadership issues.

Key sources that Karen relies on for information include professional associations such as ACRL, ALA, AERA, ASHE, and ARL. She volunteers, stays current with RSS Feeds and keeps up with listserves related to these organizations. One of the key association resources highlighted was the ACRL Environmental Scan & Top Ten Trends. These reports, published every ten years, highlight megatrends that relate to

libraries in the areas of technology, demographics, economics, politics and more.

She also taps colleagues sharing expertise; social media sources such as Facebook, Twitter, Google+, and blogs; and web page update monitoring services such as watchthatpage.com for non-RSS enabled websites. She also utilizes her MS Outlook Client to manage and recall a lot of the information that she gathers, including email alerts from sources such as COS and Google Scholar.

Following trends in grant support is critical for the University of Michigan, particularly as state support has been decreasing every year. Faculty in every discipline are now seeking grants and they need to collaborate with central research and central development (advancement) offices that provide grant services. The philanthropic sector is changing too due to tax changes and the fact that endowments are flat to declining in many areas. Critical resources to monitor these changes include COS alerts, SPIN alerts, RSS feeds from the Foundation Center, grants.gov alerts, and watchthatpage.com.

Diversity is an important issue for the library profession since race, gender, age, and ability issues impact libraries' ability to anticipate and meet users' needs. While the percent of minorities is rising in the U.S. the percent of minorities within the library profession has failed to keep pace. Proposition 2 and similar issues in Texas and California are important developments to monitor. Immigration continues to increase the importance of how libraries manage support for a more diverse population. Study abroad, international programs, and professional exchanges also mean that cultural diversity will continue to grow in importance. Key tools to use to keep pace with these issues include Academe Today digest, Chronicle Almanac, ALA Office for Diversity Twitter feed, and the Chronicle Global digest.

John Dupuis talked about the importance for him of really understanding physicists, computer scientists, biologists, university administrators, students and all the other weird and wonderful denizens of higher education. He indicated that he is obsessed with supporting their learning, teaching and research activities.

He emphasized the importance of attending non-library conferences. Examples of conferences that he attends include Science Online NYC, Joint Conference on Digital Libraries, Managing Data for Science, American Society for Engineering Education, Canadian Engineering Education Association, Science Foo Camp, SciBarCamp, BookCampTO, and TEDxYorkU.

He also talked about the importance of reading sources beyond the library literature. For him, this means various ACM & IEEE journals & magazines, ASEE Prism, Communications of the ACM, ScienceBlogs, PLoS, Scientopia, Research Blogging, InsideHigherEd, Chronicle.com Blogs, and University Affairs Blogs. In computer science and engineering, key blogs that he highlighted included Daniel Lemire's Blog, Knowing and Doing, This is what a computer scientist looks like, Shtetl Optimized, and Engineer Blogs.