

# Libraries and Social Media

by **Rochelle Mazar**

I'm all for social media, don't get me wrong. I'm a big fan of and an advocate for things like Twitter and blogs and IM and all the other cool tools that are tumbling out of the 2.0 blitz. I use social media, I recommend social media to others. I am a social media maven. Being one of the first 100,000 people with a Google Wave account is something I'd like to add as a line to my CV. However, I don't really understand the current advice being doled out to librarians about social media. It largely starts with something like: "If your library isn't on Twitter/Facebook/Second Life, you've missed the boat! You're dead in the water! You're a has-been!" In spite of my fully digital-native life (don't let my birth certificate fool you; I am certainly as digitally native as they come), I just haven't seen any compelling reasons why libraries absolutely must use social media networks.

Here's why I don't get it: social media have a pretty broad reach geographically, and allow you to connect to people who use that particular brand of social media. So you can reach, say, lots of people who use Facebook, Twitter, or LinkedIn, but there's no particular reason to presume that those people are your users. Also, does anyone actually like it when companies/institutions use social media for marketing? I certainly don't. The moment I feel like they're trying to sell me something, I stop following them. I like to follow individuals who have particular professional passions, not institutions who have a corporate agenda. I'm not interested in mixing public relations in my authentic social media experiences. If you're interacting with me online because it makes you look good to do so, I smell a rat.

## So why do we want our libraries to be so deeply embedded in social media?

If you can find a way to use social media to narrowcast to your users, even the ones who don't use that brand of social media, then I think you have a winner. Using technology to engage within your physical/community space with your actual patrons, rather than blindly broadcasting to the universe, seems like a better use of time and resources. RSS is good this way – being able to push infor-

mation into other digital spaces that serve your community is invaluable. Having a two-way interaction with your patrons in places other than the digital spaces owned by the library is great too. From an academic library perspective, IM reference inside courseware, or on departmental websites, makes sense. Moving your digital presence around, being flexible enough to constantly update all sorts of spaces, is very useful. This is also where social media meets ubiquitous computing – you shouldn't require your users to find you in their spare time, or be as tech savvy as you are. If you can move that same information and interactivity into the physical spaces where your patrons are, then it will always be worth the time and effort.

The research is tending to show that people over 25 make the best use of social media tools. If your audience is 35-45 with no fixed geographic location, Twitter might be a good tool for you to use in reaching them. As I recall, there's already plenty of evidence to suggest that no one wants to add institutions or libraries to their friends on Facebook, unless they are offering a particularly useful service. (Groups run by senior students directed at incoming students, however, have better luck.) People use Facebook to connect with and keep track of their friends; mostly it's librarians who are interested in libraries on Facebook.

That said, I am beginning to use social media within our library, but not in the usual sense. We're using Twitter to deliver announcements and news of all varieties; we're using it to report on things like traffic inside the library, the status of the printers, construction updates, key dates and deadlines at the university, etc. We want to use Twitter to push "just in time" notes to our users. But we're not going to judge success or failure by how many people follow the Twitter account. In fact, the RSS parser that publishes our Twitter feeds to our website doesn't even indicate that they are coming from Twitter. They are designed to show up on the website, to require no ID, login, or knowledge of Twitter in the slightest. The messages also appear on the library's digital signage, where everyone can see them the moment they walk into the building. While broadcasting our news to the world is fun and can be great PR, it's not a primary or even a secondary goal for us. We will not be RTing, we will not be @replying (though I do make a point of watching to see if

there are any questions or comments directed at the account and responding to them with my personal Twitter account). The real purpose is to narrowcast to the people who actually need to know what we're saying in the simplest possible way, without requiring any participation in that particular application. If our users want to add us and watch our updates from within Twitter, that's great! But it's important that we remember that our user base is beyond Twitter's core audience.

## So why use Twitter at all?

There are some key reasons. First: it's easy to syndicate it. I can update in one place and near-instantly update our two most important communication media. Second: it's easy to use. While our website has some great editing tools, updating Twitter means nothing else on the site is disturbed or accidentally deleted, an archive of our messages is automatically created, and we can share responsibility for the content. Third: it can be updated via SMS. During our last demo to the library staff, one of our Associate Librarians posted to the Twitter account from his BlackBerry, demonstrating how easy it is for us to make quick announcements to the students in our building, even when not in front of a computer. All this means that our library staff will find it easier and easier to provide our students with the information that will make their lives easier, to make them more comfortable in our library.

## This is "social media," but it appears to have all the "social" sucked out of it.

I've been a bit sheepish about expressing how we're using Twitter, mostly because I know that as someone who respects and participates in social media, I'm using the application in ways that remove a lot of its interactivity. I'm conflicted about that. But this is the only way I can see it being genuinely useful, both to us and to our users. I don't want to encourage anyone to use Twitter, Facebook, AIM, Skype, or anything else just because I'm using them and think they're cool; when I introduce a tool, I want it to be the right tool for the right job (and for the right per-

son!). We need to get beyond the locked gardens of particular social networks and particular tools and focus more on the communication needs within our particular libraries.

## It was Friendster yesterday, it's Twitter today; why marry one social medium in a prominent and public way?

As for our broadcast approach: you can't expect to foster good digital communication with your users without first opening up and starting to really, fully communicate yourselves. Libraries are buildings; by communicating digitally in this way, we at least give that building a sort of digital voice and personality. We are attempting to set the tone as a place that is open, communicative, and caring about student needs. We are embracing the fact that as the study hotspot on campus, we have a certain amount of control over the daily activities of students, and thus have things we can and should communicate. New staplers by the printers? Might seem insignificant to us, but that could be a really important bit of information for students! Printers are going to be out between 4 and 5? That's critical to student work and something we need to express! Our library is their second home; we need to make sure they know what's going on inside it so they can feel like one of the family. We are giving them information to help them claim the space.

I don't know that I've seen many social media yet that I think would make sense for institutions like libraries. You can have a Facebook page that everyone (including all the staff) will largely ignore, or you can set up a Twitter account and encourage sharing and conversation with whatever patrons happen to find you (or whatever patrons you happen to have found, unsolicited). But it's generally unsustainable. You can't catch everyone, you can't find everyone. And if everyone found you, would you have the time/staff to respond? This method is often invisible to the real workings of the library, a pet project by one tech-loving, well-meaning librarian. It's usually not fully integrated into the work that goes on. It is rarely an institutional

decision, institutionally supported, institutionally understood. I'm looking for ways to integrate the business of the library into social media in ways that are inclusive, useful, and sustainable.

## Social media's current focus is on individuals with passions communicating with other individuals with passions.

It's great; it's just not always the right answer for libraries as institutions. Librarians are great Twitterers; libraries are more difficult beasts.

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