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# Get @ Us! Using Social Media to Market Libraries, Assist Patrons and Revitalize Outreach Efforts

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# *Get @ Us! Using Social Media to Market Libraries, Assist Patrons and Revitalize Outreach Efforts*

Katy Kelly and Gwen Glazer

The rise of social media created a whole new world for libraries in terms of public relations, marketing, and outreach—and it has created a new world for library staff members as well. Social media, outreach, and marketing are integral parts of our day-to-day work at university libraries.

Our duties include managing our libraries' social media channel, through platforms that can reach thousands of people in an instant. These platforms provide jumping-off points for opportunities and challenges: keeping up with social media's charge to be instantaneous, fresh, and innovative while maintaining libraries' core values of helping users and facilitating knowledge.

We took different paths to similar destinations, and, fortunately, both of those paths ran through Syracuse University's iSchool. We'll start this essay by each describing our backgrounds and current roles at the University of Dayton and Cornell University libraries.

## **Katy Kelly, Communications and Outreach Librarian**

My undergraduate background in social sciences (Communications/Video Production) was quite different from most of my library school classmates. I wasn't sure if my past experiences as a producer on student films would apply to my newfound career path. The job posting for the position that I currently hold listed a preferred qualification for an undergraduate degree in Communications, and the job was back in my home state of Ohio. I had a year-long academic library internship while in graduate school that helped me gain confidence and experience in a library setting. I conducted a collection development analysis, co-taught a semester-long information literacy class, and provided reference services. Now, in my third year as Communications and Outreach Librarian at University of Dayton, I am using my writing, marketing, and event planning skills honed in college every day. I am thankful for my library internship coordinator and mentor, who assigned me tasks that gave me valuable experiences that are sometimes hard for library school students to obtain (reference work and instruction, especially). It is difficult to balance the social media and marketing component of my job with my other responsibilities, which include instruction, reference, collection development, and building a portfolio for tenure. I'm sure this challenge is common to librarians serving in emerging roles.

## **Gwen Glazer, Social Media Coordinator**

Like many people in our field, I'd already embarked on a different career before it dawned on me that I'd like to work in a library. As an undergraduate, I studied liberal arts and spent four years reading great literature. After college, I became a journalist in Washington, DC, working first as a copy editor at a community newspaper and then as a writer and editor for the website of a nonpartisan political magazine. I grew disenchanted with political journalism but never lost my love for writing and books, and I knew I wanted a career that involved both. It wasn't until I met an enthusiastic librarian around my own age that I wondered, "Why didn't I think of this before?"

My current job, as the writer/editor and social media coordinator at Cornell University Library, seemed like the perfect bridge between journalism and libraries. It's all about finding and sharing the stories in Cornell's library in interesting, innovative ways—whether that's through a 2,000-word feature article in a magazine or a photo on Facebook.

Positions like ours, which involve social media and innovative forms of communication, may be libraries' answers to the newfound push for library advocacy in the age of budget cuts and an increasingly competitive higher education market. Social media allows libraries to stay present in constituents' minds and share the same virtual space as their patrons, whether it's by giving away prizes for Foursquare check-ins, liking a comment on Facebook, or responding to complaints via Twitter. Libraries are uniquely positioned to benefit from social media platforms; it takes just one staff member to commit to figuring out how they might work (or not) in a particular library environment.

### **Combining Powers: Outreach Roles and Social Media**

Outreach is generally considered a mainstay of librarianship and acknowledged as a regular part of many academic librarians' jobs, if not necessarily their main focus. Assessing outreach positions can offer valuable information about the academic library's role in serving students' needs (Boff, Singer, & Sterns, 2006) and it is often assumed that librarians will be ambassadors for their institutions.

Current literature reflects this assumption. Much of the writing about librarianship includes outreach in "traditional" responsibilities and notes that the number of positions is growing—at least in the late 2000s (Boff, Singer, & Stearns, 2006, p. 137). Meier (2010) noted, however, that with additional outreach duties come more duties in general: more multitasking, more discrete job tasks, and more knowledge management. Outreach duties vary widely, ranging from creating promotional materials and developing programs to building new collaborations and leading a diverse marketing team. Activities to determine the library's present course and future direction, such as conducting an environmental scan (Gray, 2010) or creating a marketing plan (Villette, 2006), are often the first steps outreach librarians undertake. Many specific outreach positions focus mainly on marketing, public relations and promoting the library to various communities; instituting exhibitions and programs; creating newsletters and print publications; or reaching specific target audiences like biomedical researchers or first-year students (Boff et al., 2006).

Outreach positions in general can even mediate the impact of budget cuts by raising a library's visibility on campus, thereby offering "justification for increased library funding to meet student demands for improved library services, such as real-time online reference service and wireless networking" (Kraemer, Keyse, & Lombardo, 2003, p. 16). Outreach librarians

also build collaborations, actively extending the scope of the library, and can help promote the library's reputation and create new connections for advocacy (Dennis, 2010).

It follows, then, that social media—already skilled in making connections—could also be useful for similar purposes, helping with fundraising campaigns, event promotion, news dissemination, and spreading general goodwill toward the library. However, social media is still a relative newcomer to outreach positions, at least in an official capacity; it shows up relatively infrequently in job descriptions. A study of job advertisements for outreach librarians shows mentions of using Web 2.0 for marketing as responsibilities in only eight job ads between 2000 and 2010 (Okamoto & Polger, 2012, p. 10).

Anecdotally, however, it's clear that social media is quickly becoming a part of many librarians' responsibilities. With the rise of social-networking platforms, many libraries began to see significant potential in them and academic libraries began to proliferate on Facebook, Twitter, Foursquare, Pinterest, Tumblr, and other platforms around the middle of the first decade of the 21st century. Much of the existing literature focuses on Facebook, simply because it is the most established and heavily-used tool; in a 2010 EDUCAUSE study, 96 percent of undergraduates reported that they used Facebook (Smith & Caruso, 2010).

Even the most traditional mainstay of librarianship—reference service—has earned a place on Facebook. Anecdotally, one Pennsylvania State University librarian reported that in 2006, long before Facebook's heyday, he received 126 reference queries via Facebook, out of 441 total. All of those queries were from undergraduates, whom he directly targeted in his promotion of the service, and they were more likely to contact the library through Facebook than any other method—phone, instant message, in person, or email (Mack, Behler, Roberts, & Rimland, 2007).

Whenever social media becomes a serious part of a library's outreach strategy, privacy concerns become part of the discussion because of libraries' long history as guardians of privacy rights. Students, however, often do not share this concern (Mack et al., 2007) and expect libraries—as well as other campus groups, including the university itself—to maintain a Facebook presence.

Mack et al. (2007) suggested that Facebook can ease the burden of traditional librarians' duties by easing communication and allowing librarians to meet students “where they already are” and that, with Facebook, librarians “have the power to be just as significant to today's students as meeting them for coffee or lunch was to previous generations.” The relatively low barriers to entry and communication drive the enthusiasm that libraries have for social media. Critics question whether libraries have a real goal for their Facebook presences and suggest they can be unfocused and over-enthusiastic, “as if simply creating a Facebook account makes the library dynamic, modern, relevant, and vibrant” (Bodnar & Doshi, 2011, p. 103). In a recent, well-publicized critique, Gerolimos (2011) analyzed comments on 20 academic libraries' Facebook pages—including Cornell University Library's—and concluded that that librarians have been romanticizing Facebook's possibilities, users are unwilling to interact with libraries through Facebook, and that most students do not want to connect with their libraries using the tool.

Castonguay (2011) gave suggestions for implementation and uses of Facebook and Twitter. Castonguay's article suggested that “this system ensures a constant stream of information that is pushed to your users/followers/friends” (p. 413). However, with the recent added cost to have your library's Facebook status seen, this could be a thing of the past. Social media companies are looking for ways to earn a profit from businesses and non-profits that are reaping the benefits of having free social media channels.

Despite its detractors, social media is gaining popularity in libraries, paralleling its mete-



oric rise in popularity for nonprofit organizations in general—and as it becomes even more prominent in libraries in the coming years, more analysis will likely be done on other social media tools. Facebook is, after all, simply one tool of many others, some of which have just as much promise. Bodnar and Doshi (2011) ultimately encouraged more experimentation with all social media tools, and more scholarship on the topic, to further understanding of how libraries can best use them.

### Our Best Practices

Because social media evolves so rapidly and touches on the cultural zeitgeist, which is nearly impossible to capture in academic scholarship, it is difficult for the literature to reflect the actual daily experience of using social media in libraries.

**Talk only when you have something to say:** One common misunderstanding arises over what and how often content is useful to people who choose social media as their mode of information retrieval. Castonguay (2011) suggests to “say it loud, say it louder, scream if you will, repeat it many times, repeat it again, and then repeat it ... again” (p. 412). But by using a Facebook page or Twitter account to assault followers with a constant stream of messages, organizations are yelling at their audiences, and what’s social about that? In our experience, quality is much more important than quantity. People may stumble upon an account and will follow, mention, or post about it only when they see that the account is reasonably active and doesn’t “spam” its followers, so libraries should find something original, important, and interesting to say or say nothing at all.

**Avoid overscheduling:** Castonguay (2011) also asserts that “the more you post, the more people find you and follow you” (p. 415)—however, the quality-over-quantity rule holds true. For the University of Dayton Libraries, the more Twitter is used to address comments, complaints, and compliments, the more followers Roesch Library’s account receives. Much of this traffic comes not from posting single messages, but responding directly and thoughtfully (and quickly) to messages directed at the library. Keeping an account active means providing content that is interesting and relevant—not necessarily providing it on a set schedule of a certain number of times a day. One of the inherent challenges is this charge, of course, is appealing to a diverse range of users, from a 16-year-old prospective student to a 90-year-old alumnus.

**Consider the target audience:** Social-media users are incredibly diverse, and a quick scan of our libraries’ demographics on Facebook and Twitter shows followers and fans in dozens of countries and all age groups. Students, staff, faculty, alumni, parents, community members, international scholars, members of peer institutions—all of these people and more are likely to follow libraries on social media. That translates into a big target audience, and administrators taking care of pages that don’t have a clear niche audience should avoid anything too specific, like the status of a single broken printer, in favor of something more universally appealing, like photos of a long-term construction project or an event that would interest anyone who couldn’t visit the library in person. Library staff at a subject-specific unit library or curators of a single collection, on the other hand, might want to tweet about a new reference book they’ve just gotten or update Facebook with holiday hours. Thinking about who exactly would care about a particular post makes a social media presence relevant and useful.

**Don’t obsess over assessment:** Another tension arises when libraries try to measure the impact of social media, which connects with people via “casual observation” (Qualman, 2009, p. 4) and not necessarily constant interaction. Interaction is one goal, certainly, but a tally

of comments and likes is not an accurate measure of success. For example, if a student saw a Facebook update announcing the library's 24/7 access during finals week and knew he had a safe place to study at 3 A.M., that affected his experience of the library, regardless of whether he clicked the "like" button. If an alumna clicked through a dozen images of a new exhibition and felt connected to her alma mater from halfway across the globe, that changed her experience of the library, even if she didn't comment on it. It's impossible to measure how private experiences with Facebook or any other social-media tool impact future behavior. The kind of usefulness and goodwill that viewing a Facebook page can generate is often quiet and unrecorded, much like the experience of a "lurker" on any website. That doesn't mean those reactions are unimportant or unworthy of note—or that the tool isn't providing value to the library.

**Find substantive content that speaks to a larger goal:** A positive example from a social media presence outside a library: Ohio University's Alumni Association page on Facebook posts a photo of campus or a beloved local business (photos of favorite lunch foods are a hit) every day. The page has more than 27,000 followers, at least in part because this substantive daily content is appealing to the target audience and consistent with the organization's goals to connect alumni with campus. Libraries can take a lesson from this and other non-library organizations: consider how each update fits into a fan's News Feed, and how it serves the mission of the library even in a small way.

### Experiences with Specific Tools

Now that we've reviewed the literature and described the lessons we've learned, we'll discuss the three major platforms that host our daily activities representing the library on social media. Gwen will address Facebook, and Katy will address Twitter and Foursquare.

**Facebook:** Facebook is a truly ubiquitous social network. It's growing so rapidly that any statistic we cite in this essay will already be outdated by the time it's published, but when the company first went public in May 2012, Sheridan et al. noted that more than a billion people—one in seven worldwide—had a Facebook profile. Based purely on size alone, any organization would be giving up something tremendously valuable if it chose not to be in that space. It follows, then, that libraries couldn't and shouldn't ignore Facebook, simply because so many of our patrons are already there. I started Cornell University Library's Facebook page in 2009, with zero members; now, it has over 1,400, with a few more people joining every day. Many of our unit libraries, divisions and special collections have Facebook pages as well.

These individual pages work together well. They are administered by one or more library staff members, often but not always people who are already dedicated social-media users. Their pages retain the unique character of their units, with photos and updates that can be much more granular and targeted than the updates I post on the general page. For example, the librarian who posts for the Nestlé Hotel Library posts about specific classes, the curator of the Human Sexuality Collection describes conference proceedings in great detail, and the administrator of the Hip Hop Collection's page writes about milestones in music history.

Facebook's "like" function allows each page to curate a list of favorite pages, so a glance at the activity from Cornell's other library units allows readers to scroll down a list of all our libraries' connected pages—and allows an administrator to find content that's broadly relevant to readers of a general main page and link back to it. Even when their posts are too specific to reach my general target audience, other units' Facebook pages help me develop a deeper understanding of all the disparate parts of our library system.



Facebook also serves as an excellent way to extend the reach of traditional outreach efforts. We haven't given up writing press releases, blog posts, and feature articles about the library, for instance, but posting them on Facebook and Twitter gets more mileage out of our original content. Others' content, such as mentions in the mainstream media, finds a place on Facebook in addition to our regular library website.

Because of its visual layout, photographs play a particularly key role on Facebook. Users following our library can see images of the major real-life exhibitions our library stages several times a year. For example, in June 2012, we posted several shots of our "Collecting Imagination: Treasures from the Walker Library of Human Imagination" exhibition, which included photos of the items on display (like fossilized dinosaur eggs and an original Sputnik satellite) and also featured behind-the-scenes photos of the artifacts being unpacked and placed in the exhibition. This allowed people from around the world to "see" the exhibition even when they live thousands of miles away, fostering the connection between themselves and the library.

Currently, our library doesn't perform too many virtual services over Facebook. Students are not yet using it for reference questions, and some express serious reservations about privacy when asked whether they want Facebook to link to the library catalog. That supports our contention that connecting with users is intrinsically valuable, regardless of whether they are getting something concrete and measurable out of the interaction. In the age of social media, "we no longer search for the news; rather, the news finds us" (Qualman, 2009, p. 9)—and when people choose to connect to the library with Facebook, our news finds them.

**Twitter:** Knowledge is power, especially when you know what people are saying about you. Twitter's search feature allows me to observe what students tweet about the library and engage with them on a daily basis. I track and save tweets that refer to the library (either by the name "Roesch Library"; a nickname; or the Twitter handle "@roeschlibrary"). I organize them in a spreadsheet, and a student worker and I group the tweets into general categories, such as positive, negative, funny, etc. Monitoring chatter on Twitter provides an opportunity to improve services by knowing what students criticize, such as slow wireless connections, loud students on the quiet floors, and annoying loudspeaker announcements. Twitter also gives some insight into intangible feelings—thanks to Twitter, we know students are not ashamed of their late-night study sessions at the library. Sharing anecdotes about being at the library with friends is common on Twitter, which makes me feel like it's a popular spot for shared experiences.

I track tweets by searching for a hashtag and commonly used nickname, "#clubroesch." Club Roesch is a student-created nickname, once used to describe a study group, that later became a hashtag. Students now use it to refer to the library itself, and it frequently appears in tweets. The discovery of #clubroesch was exciting; not only was it used frequently, it was the product of a student-created community. Club Roesch shows what students want their peers to see, not necessarily what they want the library (or librarian) to see. Using that hashtag allows students to converse with each other, trade Club Roesch anecdotes, and comment on their experiences in the library. The tweets I track are uncensored, funny, and informative.

At first, I did not respond as the library to Club Roesch tweets. I was concerned about the "coolness" of it going away or students thinking it was weird that the library was tweeting at them, when they were using their own term to address us. But once I did, we got a very positive reaction, and students would often tweet about how the library tweeting at them and paying attention to them made their day. Typically the Club Roesch tweets are humorous and deserve a retweet. On the other hand, some tweets that don't mention our formal library

Twitter account are clearly not meant for a university staff person to see. We are still working out policy and procedure for those types of tweets.

I also use Twitter in conjunction with library programming. We hosted a midnight dance party the Sunday before finals week, complete with free glowsticks that played off of the Club Roesch nickname. We invited students to submit song requests via Twitter, and up until the day of the dance party, I tracked and responded to song requests. This gave students ownership of the dance party, which was intended to relieve finals week stress with a quick 10-minute dance break. Over 100 students attended, and I plan to make this an annual event.

Another annual event is the Club Roesch V.I.P. contest, which entitles one lucky student to have his or her own individual study room during finals week, complete with free food and beverages. We started this contest by using only Foursquare (described below), but its most successful iteration came when we included Twitter and Facebook as ways to enter the drawing. When we announced the contest, students could “like” the announcement on Facebook, retweet it on Twitter, or check in on Foursquare. I tracked the entries and picked one winner out of a bucket full of names. This was a very popular contest: We received 80 retweets, 202 “likes” on Facebook, and 13 check-ins on Foursquare.

The number of students tweeting about and engaging with the library shows that once you build a reputation for being responsive, tweets will continue to flow. Recently, students have begun asking questions on Twitter such as, “do you have an ATM?” “where are the copy machines?” and “can you help me access this ebook title off campus?” These are questions normally answered at our information desk, but it suggests that students deem Twitter an appropriate venue to ask questions, particularly simple directional ones. Paying attention to Twitter takes time and a good amount of understanding of daily occurrences within the library.

**Foursquare:** Foursquare is a location-based social networking website and mobile phone application. With their mobile devices, users check in to different locations, sharing their whereabouts with friends and unlocking special offers set up by businesses. After using Foursquare on my own, I thought it would be great if the library had a presence with this application. People visiting the library were already checking in, but to provide incentives or prizes, I had to go through the process of claiming the library and setting up offers. Once I verified with Foursquare that I worked at the library, I was given access to “manager tools” that gave me the ability to set up giveaways and track how many people claimed prizes.

The first contest I launched was a semester-long contest for a chance to win a highly coveted individual study room in the library during finals week. Our student government association came up with the idea, and I decided to use Foursquare to run the contest. This not only promoted our use of Foursquare, but also gave students the chance to win something that was truly valuable to them. I set up a LibGuide that explained how to sign up for Foursquare and how the contest would work. This information was also included in the marketing materials which included fliers and table tents.

After launching the “V.I.P. Room” deal, check-ins at the library on Foursquare increased 992 percent. We announced our V.I.P before finals on Facebook and Twitter and gave the student the key to the study room plus gift certificates to local businesses. By congratulating the winner on social media, we further promoted our use of Foursquare. We ran the V.I.P. contest the following semester and incorporated Twitter and Facebook as ways to enter in addition to Foursquare. This method was much more successful, increasing participation and the number of chances of winning for each student.

Foursquare provides graphic representation of visitors, including data for each promo-



tion. This information, combined with anecdotal feedback collected in person and via Twitter, showed that students liked the V.I.P. initiative. Although that contest was the most popular, a venue can host up to two offers at a time, and I wrote several others. We gave away highlighters with the #clubroesch hashtag to every person who checked in at the library, and for one day, we gave away small USB drives. Our student-run coffee shop in the basement runs deals in which people who check in can get a percentage off their drinks. I am pleased to see the library meet one of our main user bases—students—where they are. Library contests and giveaways are fun to host, and Foursquare is a great venue.

### Looking to the Future

Librarians' social media responsibilities will grow and evolve along with the technology that drives the platforms. These changes might be simple, like adjusting to Facebook's new fees to promote particular posts or new tools to track Twitter mentions. But it's also possible that our roles will completely transform, thanks to new trends in website design, widespread adoption of mobile-friendly library services, or a sea-change in the way social media platforms work. At the very least, new platforms will arise to challenge and eventually supersede the three giants we addressed in this essay.

Undoubtedly, libraries' organizational structures will change as well. As social media becomes an increasingly pervasive method of communication, will social media find its way into nearly every job in the library, rather than continue on as the official duty for a select handful of staff members? Instead of (or in addition to) a few official administrators who act on behalf of a library, what would happen if each librarian had his or her own social media presence and communicated directly with users? Subsequent studies of communication and information-sharing in and by libraries will show new uses and trends of social media.

Users will drive all of these shifts, just as they are driving the shifts in collections, services, and other functions of academic libraries—and libraries' willingness to meet users' needs will determine their success. For example, will prospective students come to expect a social media presence from the library, much like their favorite businesses, and judge a school accordingly? Will students seek out research assistance from Twitter or Facebook? Will faculty members begin using viral videos as part of required curricula? Will alumni re-engage with their institutions through photo-sharing sites? Only libraries that experiment with these tools will know the answers.

### Conclusion

In the future, libraries' social media activities will doubtlessly expand to other platforms as they develop. Most widely used social-media platforms are worth investigating for possible use in a library setting—but it's important to think about target audiences and specific, practical library applications and make smart choices about which ones work best for patrons before making a commitment. Both of us are exploring additional tools; the University of Dayton is also using Pinterest to promote its special collections database, and Cornell is planning to start a Goodreads account to try some online readers' advisory. Instagram is a popular photo-editing application that might be used for a photo contest or to simply share photos taken around the library.

More broadly, though, the impulse behind the use of social media in libraries—connecting with users—will likely be around for a long time, no matter what form it takes. Like all technology, social media will continue to transform our daily lives, and library staff assigned

to social media management will continue to assume a unique responsibility to be in the social media realm as both as individuals as well as representatives of their institutions, assimilating into new virtual spaces. Through a new medium, libraries are still trying to achieve a goal we've always strived for: meeting and assisting users where they are, at their point and place of need.

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