

# Navigating the Changing Landscape of Social Media within Public and Academic Libraries

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July 3, 2011

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**Introduction:**

The phenomenon of social media has exploded over the last several years. People are rarely found without a smartphone, a laptop or an iPad. They constantly utilize applications such as Facebook, Twitter, Four Square and Yelp. In mere seconds, people can share their thoughts, locations and pictures with the world. Libraries have only recently started using social media to connect with their patrons.

We will review how current research reflects the changing social media landscape, focusing on changing attitudes and changing strategies, which may help libraries and librarians better adapt and integrate new tools as they appear, such as location-based services like Foursquare.

**Research Problem:**

Although there is abundant research on social media in general there is not very much about location-based social media tools. The goal of this study is to discover how libraries use location-based media and whether or not there is a difference in how public and academic libraries use these technologies. This study uses a qualitative framework because location-based social media is a relatively new service that has not been broadly accepted. Qualitative research allows us to ask open-ended questions and thus gather more data on these relatively new tools. We hope by gathering and analyzing this data, we will help add to the body of knowledge in this rapidly changing topic.

**Review of Relevant Literature:**

It is difficult to say how many libraries utilize the features social media offers and how much they benefit from it, in part because many articles on the subject detail a library's individual experiences and their best practices (Jacobson 2011).

The subject itself is something of a moving target; social media and social networking are subject to rapid change, with new services and sites emerging each year (Twitter, Tumblr, Foursquare) and the popularity of some older ones eroding seemingly overnight (MySpace), while some never seem to get off the ground at all (Google Buzz).

Nevertheless, some general principles can be discovered. Hanna, Rohm, and Crittenden (2011) offer a marketing-oriented overview of the current state of this shifting landscape, focusing on the concepts of influences, experiences and conversations:

The dynamics of marketing interchange and interactions between companies and consumers are far different today than they were 20, or even 10, years ago. Today, consumers actively influence brand messages and meaning, consumer opinions help dictate product and service assortment, mobile devices represent communication lifelines, and online 'chatter' serves as a crystal ball that helps companies determine future product or service initiatives. (Hanna et al, 2011, p. 268)

The authors offer the model of a social media ecosystem, in which many different sites, tools and services are used by many different players in different roles to co-create experiences—experiences which are made more effective, from a marketing perspective, “when marketers are able to incorporate reach, intimacy, and engagement into the company’s overall integrated marketing communications strategy through the interconnectedness of online social media combined with traditional media.”

Those principles here can be applied to both academic and public libraries, but literature specific to the field of library science on the topic of social media and social networking tends to focus specifically on either academic libraries or public libraries.

## Academic Libraries

### Facebook

A study of first-year students published in 2009 asked an important question: “whether college students want librarians to interact with them via Facebook” (Connell, p. 25). It focused on the best way for librarians to interact with students on Facebook at the time: “friending” them. Connell found that the majority of students surveyed would be willing to “friend” a library or librarian (a total of 74.9 percent). 42.6 percent of respondents said they would be receptive to communications from the library or librarian via Facebook, while 36.6 said “I would not pay attention but not mind this communication,” and 12.3 percent would view attempts at communication via Facebook negatively. 8.2 percent chose “other,” with many of those saying in the comments that it would depend on the “quantity and quality of communiqués” (Connell 2009, p. 31).

One change in the Facebook landscape since that study was conducted is the creation and increased popularity of Facebook pages, which function similarly to individual accounts but are intended to represent organizations, causes or businesses on Facebook. A follow-up study focusing on student attitudes toward these pages would be a useful addition to the body of research.

A year later in 2010, there were signs that college students were becoming even more open to using Facebook for academic purposes, but faculty lagged behind them. M. D. Roblyer et al reviewed the current role and trends of using social networking sites, particularly Facebook, in academic settings, then asked, “How does college faculty adoption and use of [social networking sites] compare to that of college students?” After surveying groups of faculty and students about their use of and attitudes toward Facebook, the authors concluded that there is a “significant difference between the perceived role of this tool as social, rather than educational. Students seem much more open to the idea of using Facebook instructionally than do faculty” (Roblyer, 2010, p. 138).

Academic libraries and librarians have perhaps been more open to using Facebook to connect with students than teaching faculty, but there is no clear consensus about the utility and impact of those efforts.

Librarians now acknowledge the tremendous reach and ubiquity on campus of these sites in studies such as “Perceptions of Libraries, 2010: Context and Community” from OCLC, which reports that in 2010, fully 92% of college students use social networking sites like Facebook, and two-thirds of all Americans use them (de Rosa, 2010, p. 92).

However, doubts remain about how and whether libraries and librarians should use Facebook. Hilary Davis describes a “revolt against Facebook” inspired by a desire for greater and more consistent control over private information, and a need for better ways to keep separate “personal and professional spheres” (Davis, 2011, p. 1). Davis outlines the benefits and drawbacks of “dropping out” of Facebook, with the benefits relating mostly to preserving privacy and ownership of your own content. The drawbacks of doing so mostly concern turning your back on a large, real-time conversation in which most of your patrons (and for college students, the vast majority) are participating (pp. 2-3). Davis concludes that participating in that conversation and meeting patrons where they are spending their time (online) are opportunities too good to pass up (p. 9).

### **Twitter: Academic v Public Libraries**

A relative newcomer among social networking sites, Twitter has made a big splash in recent years; *Library Journal* listed it as the number one trend to watch last year, citing Twitter’s power to give the public a voice in current events:

During Ohio’s recent budget debacle that slashed state funding for libraries, Twitter functioned as the engine driving the public to voice outrage and opposition. Word on the budget hit the Twitter world even before libraries had a chance to formulate a coordinated response. (Circle, 2010, p.26)

Significantly, two other trends that made the *Library Journal* list are mobile marketing at #6 and speed at #12 (pp, 27, 29), both indicators that Twitter’s role in the social networking landscape will continue to grow, since users can post and follow others on Twitter using SMS on their phones (as well as using specialized apps on their smartphones), and Twitter epitomizes speedy communications with its short bursts of 140 characters each, known as “tweets.”

One article explicitly compared the types of tweets posted by academic as opposed to public libraries (Aharony, 2010). The author didn’t find huge differences in content, but did find a difference in emphasis, with public libraries tending to post more about library events, and academic libraries posting more often about collections and services. The author also noted that

most of the tweets posted by academic libraries used formal language (11 of 15). In contrast, only three public libraries used formal language. Moreover, two public libraries’ tweets used informal language, while academic libraries did not use informal language at all. (Aharony, 2011, p. 340)

One opportunity for further research is in the level of engagement libraries achieve in their communications via Twitter. While Aharony distinguishes between different types of information provided in the tweets analyzed, he doesn't distinguish between tweets that are part of a conversation with others and tweets that are standalone announcements, an important distinction given the value of interaction and engagement as outlined by Hanna et al.

## **Public Libraries**

As one would expect, academic libraries are not the only libraries utilizing social media tools. Public libraries also use social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, to connect with patrons and colleagues, answer and ask questions, publicize services and events, and for a whole host of other purposes.

### **Facebook**

Social media tools may serve similar purposes, but they all work differently and change frequently. Facebook for example, opened its services to anyone over 13 in 2006 and libraries soon signed up creating profiles (Spomer 2008). In 2007, Facebook's policies changed and only people were allowed to have profiles; organizations were to use groups or pages (Spomer 2008). At first this change was frustrating but now works to the benefit of an organization. Not only do updates display in a fan's news feed, organizations can target their audience and publicize services through purchasing ads & flyers on Facebook (Spomer 2008).

### **Advocacy**

Porter and King in their article, "What are you doing now? And do your patrons care?," suggest that libraries use social media to "hear what [their] community says about the library" (2009). Public libraries are using social media to reach their community through the ever popular online portal not only to hear what they say but to get them talking. Advocacy campaigns are increasing their results through an online presence. In "Social media brings in the money" edited by Price, the New York Public Library used their social media tools to launch a successful campaign called Don't Close the Book (2011). This campaign not only raised awareness for the library's budget cuts but also raised enough money to keep the library branches open.

### **Community**

Use of social media tools also build community. Colleen Dilenschneider emphasizes that social media outlets are "important channels for fundraising because they serve as portals to engage audiences while at the same time driving [them] to the organization's website" (Price 2011). Not only do they direct users to an organization's website, they direct them to the organization itself. In the same article, Susan Halligan of NYPL, describes a situation in which the children's programming staff created a Twitter account and gathered 500 followers, who then began attending programming (Price 2011). Porter and King include a Twitter response from one of their own followers reporting that a lack of responses to a status update or tweet indicated a failed post (Porter & King 2009). This emphasizes how this social media tool creates community and conversation.

**Reference and Research**

Social media has transitioned from simply a way to build community and publicize. Libraries can now equip their Facebook pages with tools for their fans such as JSTOR search, Meebo Me, My HTML, My RSS, and many more (Spomer 2008). Librarians can use instant chat features for reference questions and use status updates for readers advisory (Porter & King 2009).

**Conclusions**

As discussed, there are multiple options for use of social media. Do libraries really use these features? According to a study by Jacobson, they do. Twelve libraries were selected and then their Facebook pages were tracked. Jacobson monitored the maintenance and use of the page including wall messages, photos, discussions, and added applications (2011). He discovered that 4 of the 12 libraries used reference applications, 5 used discussion forums, and 6 used favorite pages (Jacobson 2011). With positive correlation of .478, the more often a library updated their Facebook, the more fans they had (Jacobson 2011).

Many quantitative studies that are conducted are done so with academic libraries, and as research generally takes place in academic settings, this makes academic libraries optimal test subjects. Despite the fact that most research on social media use in libraries, Jacobson's article included, focuses on academic libraries and their usage of social media tools, public libraries use these tools for much the same reasons and the same conclusions can be drawn.

These conclusions are that the more often a library uses a specific social media tool, no matter which tool, the more responses from users it will generate (Jacobson 2011). For example, a library that posts to Twitter multiple times a day will have more followers than one that rarely uses their Twitter account. A library that updates their Facebook page with photos, links, and applications daily will have more fans than a library that only updates once a month. The more fans and followers a library has, the better chance they have at reaching and impacting their community.

**Research Questions:**

How are public and academic libraries using location-based social media services like Foursquare to engage with patrons?

Is there a difference in the way that public and academic libraries use these social media services?

**Research Assumptions:**

Lin & Lu studied why people use social networking sites, and what motivates them to keep using those sites. They found that the top reasons were enjoyment, the number of their peers who use that site, and usefulness – in that order (2011).

Based on their research, we think Foursquare could become a very popular service because it enables users to compete with their peers for “badges” and bragging rights (for instance, the person with the greatest number of check-ins at a given place becomes the “mayor” of that venue), to join their friends and meet new people (since users can see which of their friends are checked in at a given location), and get discounts/deals at the locations they visit. Those features map directly to enjoyment, peer use (potentially), and usefulness.

We hope that libraries are using location-based social media services to engage with their patrons along with their other social media tools. We believe libraries are using or will use location-based social media to encourage patrons to visit the library’s physical location and build a community.

Based on the fact that college students tend to be more comfortable with technology (or at least more willing to try new technologies) than the general population, we believe that academic libraries will be quicker to adopt these social media services.

We think one of the differences between academic and public libraries would be that academic libraries would tend to be a part of larger, campus-wide initiatives to engage students via location-based social media, whereas public libraries would tend to be on their own.

### **Definitions:**

For the purposes of this study, social media will refer to sites and services that people use to build networks of people (classmates, friends, coworkers, etc.) and interact with them, such as Facebook and Twitter.

Location-based social media will be defined as an application that can record the location of the user, usually through GPS enabled smartphones. It is a subset of social media and as such allows users to participate with a network of their peers.

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