

Chapter 17

Libraries at the Crossroads: Challenges of Serving Library Users in a Social Media Environment – Ethical Considerations

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the various ethical challenges librarians face as they provide library services through the use of social networking technologies. Specifically, the chapter identifies the major ethical issues being encountered by librarians in the use of social media, the implications to professional practice, and the mitigation strategies that can be used to address these issues. The first section is a brief introduction to social networking tools and their uses in the provision of library services. It also discusses the benefits of adoption of social media in libraries. The second section discusses the major ethical challenges being faced by libraries as they integrate social media in their outreach programmes. The third section discusses implications of use of social media in the provision of library services and attempts to recommend measures and practices librarians should undertake to ensure ethical use of social media in their operations. The fourth section is a conclusion to the chapter.

INTRODUCTION

Cottrell (1999: 107) contends that “rapid advances in computing and networking technologies have changed the library profession dramatically in recent years”. She further observes that powerful new tools and techniques, extensive online access, and a rapid rate of change all make the information professions an exciting and challenging arena in which to work.

The term “social media” refers to a wide range of Internet-based and mobile services that allow users to participate in online exchanges, contribute user-created content, or join online communities. Social media or Web 2.0 was reportedly first conceptualized and made popular by Tim O’Reilly and Dale Dougherty of O’Reilly Media in 2004 to describe the trends and business models that survived the technology sector market crash of the 1990s (O’Reilly, 2005). They argue that all the companies,

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services and technologies that survived had certain characteristics in common: they were collaborative in nature, interactive, dynamic, and the line between the creation and consumption of content in these environments was blurred (users created the content in these sites as much as they consumed it).

The kinds of Internet-based services commonly associated with social media include the following (Dewing, 2012):

1. **Blogs:** A blog is an online journal in which pages are usually displayed in reverse chronological order. Blogs can be hosted for free on websites such as WordPress, Tumblr and Blogger.
2. **Wikis:** A wiki is “a collective website where any participant is allowed to modify a page or create a new page using his or her Web browser.” One example is Wikipedia, a free online encyclopedia that makes use of wiki technology.
3. **Social Bookmarking:** These are sites which allow users to organize and share links to websites, e.g. Reddit, StumbleUpon and Digg.
4. **Social Network Sites:** These have been defined as web-based services that allow individuals to 1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, 2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and 3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system”. Examples are Facebook and LinkedIn.
5. **Status-Update Services:** Also known as microblogging services, status-update services such as Twitter allow people to share short updates about people or events and to see updates created by others.
6. **Virtual World Content:** These sites offer game-like virtual environments in which users interact. One example is the imaginary world constructed in Second Life, in which users create avatars (a virtual representation of the user) that interact with others.
7. **Media-Sharing Sites:** These sites allow users to post videos or photographs. The most popular examples are YouTube, Pinterest and Instagram.

These categories overlap to some degree. Twitter, for example, is a social network site as well as a status-update service. Likewise, users of the social network site Facebook can share photographs and users of the media-sharing site Pinterest can follow other people (Dewing, 2012).

Social media evolved in the late 1990s when broadband Internet became more popular, and websites allowed users to create and upload their own content. By 2000s social media had gained widespread acceptance and gained huge numbers of users. A number of factors have contributed to this rapid growth in social media participation; among which are: 1) technological factors such as increased broadband availability, improvement of software tools, and the development of more powerful computers and mobile services, 2) socioeconomic factors such as the increasing affordability of computers and software, and growing number of the rapid uptake of social media by younger age groups; and growing commercial interest in social media sites. Other factors include availability of message boards on the social network sites; increased use of the Internet: - a great number of households have at least one personal computer, a laptop, or a cell phone with Internet access.

The application of Web 2.0 technologies to library services has been widely framed as “Library 2.0” (Miller 2005a; 2005b; 2006a; 2006b; Notess, 2006; Zimmer, 2013). Zimmer (2013) observes that the term is generally attributed to Casey (2005). Citing Casey and Savastinuk (2006; 2007) and Courtney (2007), Zimmer (2013) further observes that there is general agreement among library and information professionals that implementing Library 2.0 technologies and services means bringing interactive, collaborative, and user-centered web-based technologies to library services and collections. Examples include:

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