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Social Media Use in Academic Libraries: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

Academic libraries are increasingly engaged on social media in order to connect with diverse community groups and move beyond the traditional bounds of the library. This research uses a phenomenological approach and Institutional Theory to explore social media postings at six different public and private university libraries in two Midwest states. The research addresses what themes emerge among the university library's social media pages and what, if any, differences in themes emerge based on the status of the library in question. Social media postings included ten different codes: archives; collections; events; exhibits; facility; library community; sentiments; services; site management; and university community. These codes were tied to three different themes: libraries create a sense of outreach and advocacy with the goal of establishing community connection, providing an inviting environment, and access to content as needed or desired. Ultimately, while libraries at universities with an ARL library or an MLS granting degree program showed a similar breakdown between these three themes, libraries at other master's degree institutions spent less time on making community connections in lieu of posting content and information about the library's environment.

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INTRODUCTION

In less than a decade social media has gone from a fringe activity for libraries to one that is seen as central to libraries' outreach and promotion efforts. A survey of academic librarians conducted in 2006 found that a "majority of those surveyed appeared to consider Facebook outside the purview of professional librarianship" (Charnigo & Barnett-Ellis, 2013, p.1). Just 3% of the libraries surveyed had a Facebook account, and 19% of the librarians surveyed had never heard of Facebook. A survey of library directors by the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC, 2007) found similar results: just 14% of library directors saw a role for their library in building social media pages.

Today, librarians' attitudes toward social media have reversed. In 2013, 86% of libraries were using social media and 30% were posting daily (Dowd, 2013; Taylor & Francis Group, 2014). Because an overwhelming majority of today's college students use social media, having a presence on social media is especially important for academic libraries (Garofalo, 2013). Recent research has explored whether or not libraries are using social media, and many guides to best practice have been put forth (Burkhardt, 2010; Fiander, 2012; Garofalo, 2013). However, less research has been conducted examining the content of what libraries choose to post on social media and how institutional factors, such as

library size or the presence of a library school, impact academic libraries' social media usage.

As colleges and universities themselves are challenged and changing, the role of the academic library is shifting as well. Once merely repositories of information unavailable elsewhere, the mission of academic libraries has now spread into areas as diffuse as information literacy instruction, outreach and engagement, scholarly publishing, and campus and institutional leadership (ACRL, 2015). Social media, which empowers libraries to connect with and engage its diverse stakeholder groups, has a vital role to play in moving academic libraries beyond their traditional borders and helping them engage new stakeholder groups. Institutions will be better able to adapt to coming challenges with a better understanding of how academic libraries use social media and how their usage impacts outcomes.

The present study uses phenomenological methods and Institutional Theory to explore social media postings at six different academic libraries. Content posted on seven different social media channels—including Facebook, Flickr, Google+, Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter, and Youtube—by each library are studied to determine what libraries choose to post about, and if rather than tailoring social media content to their unique situations, academic libraries have adopted isomorphic practices (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: INSTITUTIONAL THEORY

Institutional Theory provides useful insights—especially during times of innovation and change—into the conflicting social mechanisms located in the complex, bureaucratic structure of academic libraries

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(Jantz, 2012). Since the 1970s, Institutional Theory in the field of sociology, frequently referred to as *new institutionalism* and *neo-institutionalism*, has concentrated on how and why institutions, like libraries, develop homogeneously (Beckert, 2010).

INSTITUTIONAL ISOMORPHISM

In their seminal article, which laid the foundation for new Institutional Theory, Meyer and Rowan (1977) assert the formal structures of many institutions are manifestations of institutional myths, “prevaling, rationalized concepts” held by institutions, rather than the requirements of work activities (Tolbert & Zucker, 1996; p. 340). Regardless of efficiency or evidence of potential efficiency, organizations will adopt formal structures that align with institutional myths in order to gain legitimacy, resources, stability, and enhanced survival. To minimize loss of efficiency, organizations will decouple formal structures from day-to-day activities; formal elements such as hierarchies and rules are facades as formal decisions and stated expectations are ignored. Because formal structures conform to institutional norms rather than technical needs, organizations within an institutional environment become isomorphic.

Like Meyer and Rowan (1977), DiMaggio and Powell (1983) maintain institutions will adopt structures and practices for reasons other than efficiency, such as legitimacy. They identify three mechanisms through which isomorphic change occurs. Coercive isomorphism derives from political forces, legal forces, and pressures of legitimacy. Mimetic isomorphism originates in times of uncertainty as organizations search for stability and success, and normative isomorphism is founded in the standardization of professions. To effectively study the triad of pressures, they propose organizational fields as the proper object of study rather than single institutions. Organizational fields include “the totality of relevant actors” (p. 148). When applied to academic libraries, for instance, organizational fields include other organizations within universities, decision-making bodies within and without of universities, professional organizations, other academic libraries, and non-library members of the bibliographic sector (Rubin, 2010).

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL MEDIA USE IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

The normative mechanism is pressuring academic libraries to have a presence on social media. From the beginning of the Library 2.0 movement (Fernandez, 2009), which coincided with the Web 2.0 movement following the dot-com bubble burst (O'Reilly, 2005), the message perpetuated by the professional has been the same, “Libraries must use social media” (Crawford, 2014). Social media use has become a myth in the institution. Despite “vaguely defined ideas” (Solomon, 2013, p. vi), and little consideration for how and why social media is important to the organization, libraries have adopted the technology (Johnson & Burclaff, 2013). In the midst of uncertainty about how to utilize the innovation, the mimetic mechanism is influential (Solomon, 2013). Libraries observe other libraries for guidance in implementation (Crawford, 2014). Both the normative and mimetic mechanisms promote the institutional homogenization of social media use rather than case-by-case adoption instigated by technical need (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

LITERATURE REVIEW

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media, commonly defined by exemplars rather than definitions (Carr & Hayes, 2015), are diverse in forms and functions (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). Universal characteristics of social media include the creation and exchange of user-generated content through Internet-based channels (Carr & Hayes, 2015; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). King (2015) identifies Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google +, YouTube, Flickr, Instagram, Vine, and Pinterest as

major social media channels currently being utilized by libraries. LinkedIn, a professional networking channel, and Vine, a micro-video sharing channel, were not used by any of the libraries in this study.

Each of the seven researched social media channels occupies a unique niche. Although slowing in growth, Facebook continues to be the largest social networking site (SNS) (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015). Its features include status updating, uploading photos and videos, commenting, liking, event creation, groups, pages, and the capability to link to other Internet-based media (King, 2015). Google + is also an SNS. “Circles,” which are unique to Google + allow account holders to divide their contacts into groups (or circles). Communications can then be targeted to the specific groups rather than sharing with all of their contacts (Google +, n.d.). Google + differs from Facebook in that users may be added to other users' circles without obtaining permission (Anderson & Still, 2011). Twitter is a microblogging application that limits posts to 140 characters. Because of the brief messages, and the speed at which posts multiply, account holders and followers are less likely to have personal relationships than members on Facebook or Google + (Del Bosque, Leif, & Skarl, 2012). The other four social media channels are primarily content sharing applications. YouTube, which is owned by Google and is the second largest social media site, is dedicated to user created videos (Anderson, 2015). YouTube claims 100 h of video are uploaded every minute, underscoring the mass use of the platform. Instagram, a photo-sharing site owned by Facebook, includes filters that allow users to give their photos a professional or unique looking finish. The enhanced images can be distributed on other social media channels by linking accounts such as Twitter, Facebook, or Flickr (Salomon, 2013). Flickr, owned by Yahoo, is another photo sharing site. Whereas a strength of Instagram is quick sharing, a strength of Flickr is controlled sharing. The process is more cumbersome than Instagram, but members control which photos are shared and with whom, allowing personal albums to be shared with family, friends, or organizational members. Pinterest, a content sharing site, is a means for members to share information found on the Internet as well as photos. Members “pin” the content to a “pinboard,” which can be set up with themes for easy sharing among members with similar interests. Often, this site is used for ideas on crafts and do-it-yourself (DIY) projects. Although each of these social media channels varies in form and use, the primary, and most successful, function they have served for libraries is marketing (Young & Rossmann, 2015).

SOCIAL MEDIA FOR MARKETING

There is a trend in society for businesses to use social media marketing (SMM) to communicate with patrons. According to Taneja and Toombs (2014), social media is transforming how organizations respond and interact with society. Marketing has evolved from one-way direct messages (commercials, mass mailings) toward more interactive dialogues. The use of social media websites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube allows for companies to have two-way conversations with their consumers (Clark & Melancon, 2013).

Companies are now using SMM to promote their products and advertise their services. SMM is a zero-cost marketing machine that allows companies to brand them online (Taneja & Toombs, 2014). Whiting and Deshpande (2014) point out that SMM allows businesses to share special deals and coupons through targeted channels, which expands exposure of the business and increases not only awareness, but also foot traffic into businesses. Businesses can also engage consumers in contests and polls, which also creates interest in products or services. These contests and coupons also attract more activity on social media, bringing more customers to business social media sites expanding their exposure.

To encourage the use of social media sites, products have been developed to assist institutions in SMM. Geho and Dangelo (2012), point out that there are now tools available that help businesses calculate

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