



The Search for Elusive Social Media Data: An Evolving Librarian–Faculty Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

In the rapidly changing information environment, it is advantageous for librarians and researchers to collaborate. This manuscript describes a collaborative writing project between Communication faculty and a reference librarian at the University of Louisville. The primary project on collaboration among teaching faculty and librarians is discussed. The article delves into the literature, the data gathering process, the unexpected findings, the benefits of librarian and teaching faculty partnerships, and implications for future collaborations.

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INTRODUCTION

Pursuing excellence in research through collaborative processes takes many forms. Given the rapid changes in the information environment, it is productive for librarians and researchers engaged in data gathering to collaborate. This manuscript explores a collaborative writing project between a reference librarian and Communication faculty members at the University of Louisville. The research has two streams of focus: the primary project on social media and social movements, and the related topic of collaboration among librarians and teaching faculty. After a background discussion of the collaboration literature, this paper addresses the primary research project, the data gathering process, findings, the evolving collaboration and the benefits of librarian and teaching faculty partnerships.

At the University of Louisville, collaboration on project teams and in research is fairly common among librarians, teaching faculty, staff, and sometimes students. At Ekstrom Library, the Arts and Sciences library at the University, most of the departments or schools are assigned a subject librarian, who generally assists faculty and their students by teaching library skills classes, finding information, developing relevant library collections, and performing other supporting activities.

Two communication faculty members contacted the reference librarian when they encountered problems researching social media's impact on social movements, particularly in Tunisia and Egypt. They had been stymied in their efforts to find an adequate sampling of news articles from international sources written during the protests

(either from websites or news databases). The librarian assisted with several related questions, and the collaboration between the librarian and the faculty members evolved from the continual meetings. The collaboration also resulted in this co-authored manuscript.¹ In order to expound on the social media search and the evolving collaboration process, a brief overview of the literature on interdisciplinary collaboration is offered.

LITERATURE REVIEW: THE NATURE OF COLLABORATION

Definitions of *collaboration* vary, but they usually involve people or groups working together. Bordons, Zulueta, Romero, and Barrigón (1999) use the term *interdisciplinarity* to describe “collaboration between researchers from different fields” (p. 383). It is also explained in terms of interdisciplinary research, “where different disciplines come together to engage in research of common interest...” (Lorenzetti & Rutherford, 2012, p. 275). We use the terms *discipline* and *interdisciplinary* broadly in the manuscript to describe the process of partnering with individuals from various areas or fields. Although there may be differences of opinion in the library field as to the categorization of librarianship as a discipline, in our situation and research context, we feel that the literature on interdisciplinary collaboration appropriately lends itself to the characterization of our collaboration.

Collaboration across disciplines has been discussed at length in the literature. Researchers have focused on determining the attributes of effective collaboration, explaining its configurations,

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¹ The initial research project discussed here led to a conference paper and presentation: Reynolds, L. M., Smith, S. E., & D'Silva, M. U. (2011, September).

exploring case studies, and presenting means to assess its benefits and drawbacks (Derry, Schunn, & Gernsbacher, 2005; Gunawardena, Weber, & Agosto, 2010; Reich, & Reich, 2006). Interdisciplinary collaboration among faculty members at colleges and universities is quite common. There seem to be many examples in academia, particularly in the health and social sciences disciplines. Clark and Jones (2011) comment on a nursing and health system partnership that created a program to support employees seeking RN and BSN degrees. Sá and Oleksiyenko (2011) describe university research centers also called “Organized Research Units (ORUs)” (p. 368) and how they operate to support international collaboration in health.

In addition to academic disciplines, collaboration is prevalent in government institutions, and in both non-profit and for-profit businesses and organizations. Klein (2005) explores types of interdisciplinarity, particularly in industry, government, science, teaching, and research both in developed and within developing countries. Klein also delves into some of the problems associated with collaboration, including territorial, psychological, and social difficulties. She elaborates on some examples of psychosocial issues such as, “resistance to innovation, mistrust, insecurity, and marginality” (Klein, 2005, p. 31). Differences in skills (e.g., integrative, interdisciplinary, and systems) are also mentioned as possible issues or barriers to interdisciplinarity (Klein, 2005). To counter these complications, Epstein (2005) lays out a plan for successful collaboration, discussing several key elements, such as “attitude, communication, time, proximity, institutional climate, funding, roles, appropriate topics, and publication” (p. 247).

Teaching faculty and librarian partnerships are also fairly common. Collaborative projects may include collection development, website and subject guide development as well as writing groups, and teaching/information literacy. Information literacy instruction is by far the most widespread practice of collaboration between teaching faculty and librarians. For example, business faculty and librarians partnered on a project with the goal of improving the information literacy skills of business students (McInnis Bowers et al., 2009). Gaspar and Wetzel (2009) describe a case study on assessment of library and faculty collaboration and its influence on student learning.

Wijayasundara (2008) discusses examples of library collaboration and comments on the current state of collaboration between librarians and teaching faculty. She states:

In traditional universities, the faculty–library collaboration is an emerging phenomenon as these two entities are driven by separate agendas: teaching and providing services respectively. Rapid development in information and communication technologies has built a platform for these two institutions to work collaboratively and to create synergies. (p.188)

Furthermore, Gallegos and Wright (2000) found that 60% of collaboration projects between teaching faculty and librarians are centered on instruction. The other 40% is divided among areas of building collections and web pages, grant writing, curricular revision, employee development, publishing, and presenting.

It is possible that there have been some changes since these surveys were conducted, but the literature searches in several library databases show that much of the collaboration between librarians and faculty is focused on just a few areas, with instruction being the most common. It seems logical that information literacy instruction is the primary focus of collaboration efforts, but this fact also illustrates that there is room for growth, especially in the area of collaborative research. Collaborative research can also benefit student learning, other university initiatives, and faculty writing goals.

One way collaborative research occurs is through the use of embedded librarianship in which a librarian moves from the traditional library environment to “an ‘on-site’ setting or situation that enables close coordination and collaboration with researchers or teaching

faculty” (Carlson & Kneale, 2011, p. 167). The premise of the embedded librarianship model is to allow librarians to show their expertise, and “the impact that librarians can and do have beyond the traditional functions of the library” (Carlson & Kneale, 2011, p. 170). Embedded librarianship can occur within the context of a class to teach information literacy skills or in the research context with librarians being embedded on research teams or in academic departments. The librarians may work with the researchers as the research is being produced on the front end, not only with the resources at the end of the cycle of research. There are variations in the collaboration and the embeddedness-based projects and needs, but library science practices and processes are usually incorporated into the research (Carlson & Kneale, 2011).

In addition to the previously mentioned collaboration contexts, some studies have examined librarian and teaching faculty collaborations on research and writing projects. However, in contrast to the research exploring collaboration in information literacy instruction, there is a smaller concentration of articles dealing with collaboration in research and publishing. One example details the interactions of an interdisciplinary writing group at the University of Salford, England. Grant, Munro, McIsaac, and Hill (2010) surveyed group members, including a librarian, about how they contributed to and benefited from the group, and how this collaboration informed their writing projects. In another example, Whelan and Dvorkin (2003) discuss the research and development of the HolisticKids.org website that was created as a teaching tool for residents in pediatrics. The team that developed the site included librarians, pediatricians, dieticians, nurses, and an anthropologist. Members also co-authored the article detailing the collaboration. Further, Purdue University Libraries have been involved in technology-related interdisciplinary research with faculty in science, technology, and engineering areas since 2004. One outcome of this collaboration was development of a distributed institutional repository (DIR) mechanism to facilitate access and exploration of digital research. More specifically, the Purdue e-Scholar DIR provides access to several electronic storehouses for documents, special collections, and other collections of data (Brandt, 2007). The DIR is only one of several of their collaboration examples. Purdue’s endeavors represent examples of collaboration and embeddedness where the librarians actively investigate partnership opportunities, propose appropriate collaborations that focus on the needs of the faculty, and seek funding to support the projects (Carlson & Kneale, 2011).

These examples illustrate successful interdisciplinary collaborations that move beyond traditional librarian/teaching faculty interactions and focus on research and/or writing endeavors.

To accomplish their primary social media research project, the University of Louisville Communication faculty members needed assistance in obtaining information. That led to the current collaborative study which will be discussed beginning with a description of the primary social media research project. The social media project is the context of the collaboration; hence we describe it briefly.

THE COLLABORATION CONTEXT

In late 2010 and early 2011, dramatic political changes in countries of the Middle East and North Africa became topics of conversations on university campuses and in people’s homes. The media coverage on the unfolding of these events, particularly in Tunisia and Egypt, was the impetus for the two Communication faculty members to embark on this research project. Given the faculty members’ scholarly work on media influences, they were especially intrigued by the role of social media in fomenting and shaping the change in these North African countries.

The Communication faculty members’ goal was to find archives from English-language newspapers published in either Tunisia or Egypt and then use search terms such as “social change” and “social media” to generate a representative sampling of articles for analysis.

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