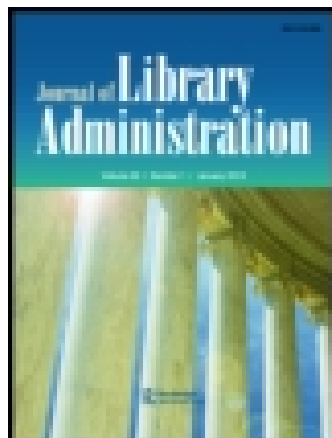


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Using Microblogging Tools for Library Services

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ABSTRACT. *Microblogs are ubiquitous participant Web technologies that enable users to share information, interact with content, and generate resources. Librarians can use these applications for library services, instructional activities, and event promotion. For librarians and patrons, these technologies can be combined with other social media to develop personal learning networks (PLNs) for teaching, learning, and research. As PLN tools, microblogs can provide librarians with many opportunities to build cohorts of professional support and gain access to materials not readily accessible in traditional formats. This article provides an overview of issues to consider when using microblogs as library tools.*

KEYWORDS *microblogs, participant Web, social media*

INTRODUCTION

Microblogs are ubiquitous participant Web technologies that enable users to interact, message, and share information. Among the most notable services are Twitter, Tumblr, Plurk, Emote.in, Jaiku, and identi.ca. Unlike social-networking applications, microblogs seem to be used for quick information feeds. Most microblogging services combine the mobility of text messaging and push technologies to give users ease of accessing and generating information. As microblogging evolves, various applications are beginning to offer extensive add-ons and features to enable media-rich user-generated content. Several microblogging tools allow file sharing, video/audio/music sharing, and multiple streams for sending content to targeted user groups. Users can add tools that extend the characters for posts, synchronize content with other social networking applications, and expand interactivity with other Web services.

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In most microblogging applications, users create an account that immediately enables them to begin posting simple notes or messages in a text box. Unlike blogs which allot no limit on text, microblog postings are limited by the number of characters (e.g., Twitter allows 140 characters in a traditional post). For most users, posts serve as updates of what is happening at a given moment. Some users post feeds of links, announcements, events, and news information. All microblogs have timelines and, in some cases, archives of the posts are stored in reverse chronological order much in the same manner that a blog application functions. Account holders can modify their account settings to determine accessibility to the postings. For example, if the account holder allows for public view of the information, all of the members associated with the microblog community can view the post. If an account holder wants to restrict access to postings, then only designated members of the users "select" community can have access to the posts. Many libraries using microblogs have created both public and private accounts to send different types of information to different user sets. In some microblogging applications, posts can be exported to another source for future reference.

COMMON FEATURES

The basic platform of a microblogging tool consists of a text box and a window that streams postings (public and private) in real time. Account holders can use the tool for their own postings, but in most cases, these tools are designed to build networks and relationships with other individuals to gather and share information. Each microblog application has a different method in which account holders can find people to share information and establish a connection. In Twitter (<http://www.twitter.com>), account holders can "follow" individuals whose posts interest them or seek out specific individuals who may have a Twitter account and then select to follow them. In Jaiku (<http://www.jaiku.com>), users can search for channels on a wide range of topic areas. In Tumblr (<http://www.tumblr.com>), users can locate groups that they may wish to join. Almost all of the microblogs enable account users to add contacts through other social messaging services clients. Most of the tools offer extensions that enable the sharing of a various media (photos, audio, video, etc.). Postings are streamed in a continuous manner. Most applications are limited to one stream, but some applications allot for multiple streams of postings. In Tumblr, one can set up multiple blogs that stream information from different sources. This type of microblog is most useful if the account holder wants to distribute certain types of information to specific user groups.

SPECIALIZED FEATURES

Microblogs offer a wide range of features targeted to certain user groups. For example, Edmodo is a microblog targeted toward K–12 educators who wish to set up private and secure networks for their courses. Edmodo offers file sharing, archiving, data storage, and streaming information in a private and secure network. Educators can set up multiple course sites within an account. Students assigned to a site can, in turn, set up their own microblogs within the course itself. Hence, students can safely explore the features of a microblog within the secure network established by their instructor. In many ways, Edmodo resembles a course management tool that gives students the opportunity to safely and securely engage in microblogging.

Microblogs such as Twitter and Tumblr have several extension apps that can be used to enhance the use of the microblog. For example, if someone wants to post longer than the 140 character limit, Twitter has an application called TwitPho that allows a longer blog post to be linked to an initial post (usually called a “tweet” in twitter). Twit-Pho allows Twitter users to send pictures, surveys, and RSS feeds through the initial account. Tumblr has a built-in blogging tool for longer posts. Shorter postings can be linked directly to the blog entry.

Some microblogs have features that help organize content. In Twitter, many people use Tweetdeck to manage updates, user profiles, content, and information accessed. In Tumblr, one has a dashboard to organize blogs, postings, and groups. To manage different accounts, Tumblr actually enables one to set up multiple blogs within the account. Most tools also offer users the ability to organize favorite postings. In Twitter, there is a feature that allows “favorite” posts to be bookmarked. Tumblr also allows book marklets and archiving. These features are especially useful to store useful links and resources for quick access. Squeelr adds geolocation and pictures to the microblog, while eliminating user accounts, making it an anonymous microblogging service. Plurk has a timeline view which integrates video and picture sharing. Emote.in has a concept of sharing emotions, built over microblogging, with a timeline.

LIBRARY APPLICATION OF MICROBLOGGING TOOLS

There are several articles in the library literature that identify ways in which libraries are using microblog applications for services, operations, and outreach. The majority of these articles, however, focus on using Twitter. Joe Murphy (2008) discusses how libraries can use Twitter for sending information and announcements to patrons, while Ellyssa Kroski (2008) discusses why medical libraries are using Twitter for research. Lindy Brown (2008)

provides a detailed overview and case studies of libraries using Twitter in her article entitled "Twittering Libraries." Brown's article lists libraries that use Twitter for various functions and serves as an excellent resource to begin review of what libraries have done. It is important that librarians take the time to read reviews on the lesser known microblogs simply because these tools may offer better features to suit the purpose of setting up an account. For example, if library staff determine that they may use a microblog for teaching, it might be better to use a tool such as Edmodo because it is designed specifically for teaching with its level of file sharing and privacy features.

Many librarians are also using microblogs as personal-learning environments for their own teaching, learning, and research. Librarians who need more of a blogging type of tool may prefer to use tools such as Jaiku and Tumblr, which has several targeted research communities. However, most places are still not certain how microblogs can differ from traditional e-mail services. The following discussion gives a more detailed overview of how libraries are using microblogs.

LIBRARY OPERATIONS

Many libraries are using microblogs instead of interoffice e-mail to provide immediate access to information to multiple users. In many cases, microblogs are useful for providing emergency services information, announcements, and updates or status reports. Library staff subscribed to the microblog can receive feeds in a ubiquitous manner. Some librarians use microblog tools for committee work. Being able to engage in the group work of a project through the use of a microblog tool can be important if participants at several locations must work together to complete a deadline. If librarians use a microblogging tool that allows for document sharing, files can be sent for review and revisions. It is often easier for someone to access a microblog message than it is an email from a closed system.

Libraries can also use microblogging tools for updates on security and safety issues as well as status reports regarding certain events, projects, or programs. Murphy (2008, p. 1) suggests that "a micro-blog can be used as a dynamic FAQ by posting policies" and tagging #FAQ to postings. Murphy also suggests that libraries can post "news, special events, hours, exhibits, new book arrivals, reminders, and new references services" (p. 1) to patrons.

Announcements regarding new holdings, specialized training, and new services can also be directed through the blog. Departments within the library can disseminate information more quickly through the microblog by posting information through different streams. Microblogs that enable account holders to develop multiple streams can offer librarians the ability to

develop unique content streams for unique patron populations. For example, a children's department in the library may want to update parents about reading programs and activities, whereas a foundations team may want to update donors of fundraising events. The flexibility in creating information streams is often the appeal of microblogging.

REFERENCE SERVICES

Since microblogs can connect users to one another very easily, it is possible to see how these tools can be used in online chat reference to help patrons locate additional and current information on a given topic. Patrons can be asked to post questions which in turn can be shared on the microblog network. Answers generated from the librarian's community can then be used to assist in the information gathering on the topic.

The level of peer to peer interaction in some of the microblogs generates rich conversations and builds research communities. Two individuals doing the same research on a given topic may respond to a posting that they find and, in turn, become connected just because they shared commentary on one post. Subject streams are easy to create in microblogging applications, which aids in finding the most current content on a given research topic. The archives in most microblogging tools offer a rich database of resource to keyword search. These scenarios can help link patrons to each other. Hence, librarians can create a tag such as Genealogy Research for patrons interested in genealogy. Reading groups for the library can also be sustained through microblogs and be more inclusive of patrons who are unable to travel to the library. In turn, microblogs extend services to patrons that are placebound.

Likewise, many microblogs have connected community lists that identify expert users of the tool. There are many sites dedicated to creating directories of microblog users by categories. For example, a site such as "Twitter for Teachers" can provide a list of content areas for educators. Users can search most microblogs for specific subject area groups. This feature proves useful for references services because it enables patrons the ability to seek specific information and locate other researchers who may be doing similar work.

LIBRARY INSTRUCTION

By setting up an account in a microblog, such as Edmodo, a librarian can create a course site for instructional purposes and provide access to subject specific handouts for workshops, library seminars, and instructional activities. Students or participants in a workshop can access the course/workshop materials through the blog and interact with the content and other individuals

in the course without having to come to a physical site. By using microblogs, librarians can create learning environments for e-learning students who do not wish to come to the physical library. Links to the online catalog and other e-learning services for remote access users can be provided through the microblog and the library instructor can interact with students in a controlled environment. Such services can better connect libraries to K–12 institutions and library media specialists can have extra assistance in working with public, academic, and special librarians on a wide range of instructional topics and projects. Setting up accounts with local archivists can give students access to community historical information that they may not otherwise have the opportunity to use.

In addition to providing library instruction to remote access patrons, microblogs can be used to teach information literacy skills. For example, a class can be asked to search a keyword on a subject specific topic and evaluate the content they retrieve using information literacy standards. It is easy to demonstrate the importance of sources and authorship by noting who is posting which information. Students can also learn about online plagiarism in the manner that information is presented in these forums. Research practices that help students learn how to integrate the content from social media sites is very important because these are the tools that students most often use to locate information. The more librarians teach with these tools to improve information and social media literacy skills, the more likely students will understand best practices in using these tools. By having students follow certain content, experts in the field can show how information is shared and disseminated. Discussions about copyright, currency, and social media literacy, are best presented by tools that thrive on user-generated content. Librarians can find numerous examples of research practices to demonstrate to students the best practices of engaging in the processes of information literacy.

PERSONAL LEARNING NETWORKS

In many cases, librarians are using microblogs to connect to colleagues and other information professionals to share information, resources, and other useful materials. Several library organizations have accounts in some of the more popular microblogging applications so librarians can follow the updates of these groups. Almost all academic conferences have begun to include microblog access to the conference so individuals unable to attend the conference can interact with some of the presentations and presenters. Participants in the session itself can interact with the content that the presenter is sharing without disrupting the actual presentation. In many cases, Twitter feeds update conference attendees of discussions, upcoming events, and further resources regarding a given session. Since so many conferences are

now including access to microblogging accounts to get information, individuals can actually attend two sessions at once. While sitting in one session, conference participants can microblog in another. In addition, conference attendees can share information with colleagues who could not attend the session. Individuals unable to attend the conference can at the very least find out the topics of presentations and potential contacts for further inquiry. Even if one cannot attend the conference, one can keep abreast of presentations in a given research area.

Microblogs are used for teaching, learning, and research on several levels. In Twitter, every Tuesday, the hashtag #edchat connects individuals from all over the world to spend some time to interact on discussion topics on education technology proposed by the group organizers the night before. Even if one does not participate in the discussion, the lively debate one sees while following the #edchat tag offers insight, resources, and a vast array of material that would not get in a face to face workshop on the same topic. Furthermore, the archives enable users to go back through the posts to see what issues were discussed.

In Jaiku, individuals working on a given research project can set up a channel to recruit others interested in the research to collaborate. Similar to Facebook groups, such work enables people to create collaborations that might not have existed. Many microblogs are often linked to library social networks forum in Facebook, Ning, and Linked-In. The ability to integrate these tools with one another can allow librarians to send one update to all the sites and extend group related activities in several venues.

By using some of the search features in microblogs, one can type in a keyword to obtain links, latest reactions, and, many times, useful information related to the topic. Seeing who has posted on the topic helps one find out who might be an expert on the subject. Such information is invaluable because one can link to resources that offer the most current information. Microblogs help build community around a given topic. If a librarian is doing research on Web accessibility, posting queries on the topic can yield the “wisdom of crowds” and instead of getting flat references for the literature review; one can obtain an array of interactive musings from a global perspective. Posting queries on research topics can help one find others who may be involved with similar projects. All microblogs help build collaborative projects for presentations, articles, and even book projects.

Individuals working on collaborative writing projects or presentations can use these tools to update each other on the progress of the project. It is easier than email because of the greater accessibility one has. Since many microblogs allow connection to mobile phones, users can access material without even logging in to their email account.

CHALLENGES

As with any technology, microblogs can pose potential challenges. For example, since many microblog applications are open source technologies, they can easily disappear. For example, Pownce, a very popular microblog ceased to exist after only 1 year of operation. Microblogs are often the targets of spam and other problematic Web information. User accounts can attract a wide range of unwanted connections and inappropriate material. Although one can set up filters to block certain users or content, microblogs require careful monitoring. If an account is not managed well, users associated with the account can begin posting information that the libraries do not want associated with their public microblog.

The account itself must be established with parameters in place. If the account is set up for an organization, access to the administrative rights to the account must be determined. Updates posted by one person may be a burden; updates posted by several people could be chaos. If a group is assigned to manage the microblog, departments may determine how they will handle updates and news feeds. Some libraries have units within the library post to an internal account and then once the materials are approved, they are submitted to the public account for patrons to review. The challenge is to keep the posts interesting, useful, and informative. All too often, individuals may not post material that is meaningful to users. Furthermore, new policies regarding social media content may have to be developed to ensure consistency in information delivery.

Not all microblogs are free. Jaiku requires monies for additional space. For libraries wishing to archive postings for a digital record, this limitation may be problematic if there are no monies budgeted for this purpose. Applications to extend services may cost additional monies. Also, libraries may not want to set up microblog accounts on the library desktops. Additional equipment may be necessary if the library wants to keep the access to microblogs separate from the central computing system of the library.

Security and privacy parameters are also very important. Some libraries may not want their microblogs to have options that allow followers to reply to the content. Twitter for instance, cannot restrict the “reply” feature on the tool. While someone could delete a reply that was inappropriate, it would be difficult to remove the “reply” from the community base. Hence, a patron complaint could remain within the system even if the library deleted the statement from their site. Although libraries could restrict who had access to post, such filtering may not be popular with patrons. Libraries could set up different accounts, but not have the ability to filter these accounts.

Special policies will have to be created regarding how a library will use microblogs. If the tool is going to be used for marketing, specific guidelines will need to be created to delineate the type of content distributed to patron

groups. Oversight of this content may require libraries to delegate monitoring and management duties to a staff member that really does not have the time to do this work. Outsourcing such work to someone may not be practical either. While some librarians may not think that managing public postings through a blog service would be difficult, it will take time from other responsibilities to edit, respond, and monitor postings from patrons. Since microblogging is ubiquitous, postings will continue well after the library is closed for business.

CONCLUSION

Libraries should investigate ways in which microblogs can expand interaction within the workplace and with patrons. Guidelines to manage content generation and delivery need to be established to make management of such tools less burdensome for library staff. An investigation of the various microblogging tools is important to determine which tool would best suit the purpose that the library intends for the use of the microblog. While some services are more popular than others, these services may not be the best microblog application for the library. It is recommended that libraries use a combination of microblog applications to serve both public and private functions. It is also recommended that libraries target the patron groups that might be best served through the integration of this technology in library services. Some patrons may not be willing to use this technology for their information needs.

Overall, microblogs offer a rich media for libraries to explore in expanding access and delivery of information services. The potential of these tools to build information learning communities will impact library services, particularly in terms of outreach and instruction. Expanding library services to place-bound users through the use of microblogging tools increases additional access points to the library.

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