The "Social" Side of Law Libraries

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How are libraries using and managing social media?

By Ashley Ahlbrand

Social media is an odd phenomenon, having taken the digital world by storm in a little more than a decade. What began with basic networking platforms (MySpace, Facebook) has become increasingly diversified, with networking for specific purposes (LinkedIn, Mendeley.com) and socializing in different forms (Twitter, Pinterest, Reddit). These days it seems that everyone has joined the social media frenzy.

Initially the realm of college students and teenagers, today it’s almost rare to find a business or organization that is not asking you to “like” them on Facebook or “follow” them on Twitter. However, the question of whether libraries should engage with social media commonly produces mixed reactions.

Social media can be an excellent means of advertising and outreach, blending the formal and informal. It has become such a commonplace activity that many patrons spend routine parts of their days immersed in their social media accounts—and if that’s where they spend their time, why not try and integrate the library into these routines as well?

This is not to say that social media is without flaws—we all certainly know that person who tweets 20 times a day, to the point that the tweets lose any informative value, or that blogger whose level of informality is so extreme as to seem immature and utterly unprofessional. To be certain, if a library is going to invest time and efforts in social media, a balance must be found that achieves the approachability of social media without losing the professionalism expected from a library.

In a survey conducted for the purposes of this article, AALL members were invited to tell us about their libraries’ interaction with social media. In all, 183 members responded, representing everything from academic to corporate law libraries, and their responses showed some interesting results.

**Survey Results**

In answer to the question of what type of social media tools their libraries use, nearly half of respondents indicated Facebook (45.9 percent) and blogs (43.7 percent), one-third indicated Twitter (33.9 percent), and nearly 40 percent (39.9 percent) indicated the use of no social media. Google+ and Pinterest were also included in the question, but each is only used by about 3 percent (2.7 percent and 3.3 percent, respectively) of respondents. We offered an “other” category, in which respondents were asked to indicate other social media tools they utilize; these responses identified several additional tools, most notably YouTube, but also Flickr, LinkedIn, Paper.li, Scoopit, FourSquare, and HistoryPin. Nonspecific tools, such as instant messaging and wikis, were also noted. (See Figure 1.)

In addition to the types of social media used, I was interested to know what levels of resources libraries are dedicating to social media use. Nearly two-thirds of respondents indicated that a specific person, position, or team is responsible for coordinating their library’s social media. More than 75 percent of respondents indicated that the person or persons responsible spend less than five hours per week devoted to social media (though 3 percent indicated this position requires more than 20 hours per week). Yet nearly all respondents (98.4 percent) indicated that no library services or offerings were eliminated to make time for social media responsibilities, and nearly the same percentage (97.4 percent) indicated no immediate plans to assign a social media coordinator. Thus, it appears that many member libraries are devoting time and resources to social media interaction while maintaining the same levels of staffing and services. (See Figure 2.)

Although the majority of respondents did indicate the use of social media in their libraries, as noted, nearly 40 percent indicated no social media use. This reflects the mixed reaction the general population has toward social media. Anticipating some sort of divide on the question of social media use, the survey’s final question simply asked for any additional comments. As expected, we received a mixture of positive and negative comments.

On the negative side, many comments related to lack of time to fully commit to social media efforts and lack of investment by the entire library staff. One respondent questioned the usefulness of social media in libraries: “I believe ‘social media’ to be just that . . . social. Use of these outlets for work or to promote work simply reflects the further ‘dumbing down’ of America and its populace. Libraries (and other businesses) should stay as far from social media as possible.” In contrast, one of the more positive comments offered the following advice: “I think that social media is great, but only when it is used well. I follow so many law library Twitter feeds and Facebook pages that are not updated regularly. Social media needs to be dynamic in order to work. That being said, there are some very impressive users as well.”

This range of comments seems to quite accurately reflect the overall sentiment about social media—there is a proper way to use it, but there are certainly many wrong ways to approach it, as well.

**My Experience**

Consider my personal tale: I began work as the educational technology librarian, a new position at Indiana University Maurer School of Law, in July 2012.

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My position is flexible, going beyond library technology projects to helping faculty integrate technology into their courses. Like many of the respondents' libraries, my position did not eliminate any other library services, nor was I an addition to an already full staff. I cannot even claim to be the sole user of social media in our library; prior to my position’s creation, our outreach librarian created a YouTube channel for our library, and she continues to create videos highlighting our services and collection. Additionally, all public services librarians are encouraged to contribute posts to our blog. However, as the need arose for greater attention to be paid to technology in the library, so did my position. One of my first missions: to establish our library's presence on Facebook and Twitter. This I accomplished in my first week. Setting up our accounts on Facebook and Twitter was simple. With little more than an email address, I was able to create a user name, fill in basic information about our library, and we were set. I was familiar with the layout and capability of these social media through personal use, so I started posting and tweeting right away.

However, I quickly learned that one's expectations will not always be one’s reality. Just for fun, we decided to hold a contest to help us reach 100 “likes” on Facebook. Advertising this contest through Twitter, our blog, our digital sign, and, of course, our Facebook page, we still hadn’t met this goal after a full semester. Rather than pouring in, our likes came in at a steady trickle. Initially downhearted about this, I realized that most of these likes were first-year students, the group to whom we most heavily advertised. The irony is that when your advertisements about social media are primarily made through other social media, you are dependent on patrons paying attention to your social media, you are dependent on patrons paying attention to your social media, you are dependent on patrons paying attention to your social media, you are dependent on patrons paying attention to your social media, you are dependent on patrons paying attention to your social media, you are dependent on patrons paying attention to your social media, you are dependent on patrons paying attention to your social media, you are dependent on patrons paying attention to your social media, you are dependent on patrons paying attention to your social media, you are dependent on patrons paying attention to your social media, you are dependent on patrons paying attention to your social media, you are dependent on patrons paying attention to your social media, you are dependent on patrons paying attention to your social media, you are dependent on patrons paying attention to your social media, you are dependent on patrons paying attention to your social media, you are dependent on patrons paying attention to your social media, you are dependent on patrons paying attention to your social media, you are dependent on patrons paying attention to your social media, you are dependent on patrons paying attention to your social media, you are dependent on patrons paying attention to your social media, you are dependent on patrons paying attention to your social media. It is constant. It is changing. It requires regular attention. Do you need to tweet 10 times a day? Probably not, but it is important to have a plan. For our accounts, I make it a rule to produce at least one original tweet (as opposed to re-tweeting someone else’s tweet) per day. This is not always easy. The library does not always have announcements to make, for example; however, I find I can always locate an interesting news story, digital exhibit, or court case that might interest our followers. Likewise, whenever a colleague or I publish a new post on our blog, I make it a point to advertise it through Twitter and Facebook. Coupling my original tweets with any re-tweets throughout the day, I find that our Twitter feed remains consistently active.

Tips
This brings me to my words of advice. When starting out (or starting over) with social media, here are some tips to consider:

• Have a plan, but only if you have the time and willingness to commit to it. This doesn’t necessarily mean you need one person whose sole responsibility is maintaining social media, but it does mean you need a plan in place for what to post, how often to post, and who will post on each platform you

It is painfully obvious when a business has a social media account of any kind just because they think they have to have one. No updates, no posts, no tweets—no point! Social media is just that—social. It is constant. It is changing. It requires regular attention. Do you need to tweet 10 times a day? Probably not, but it is important to have a plan. For our accounts, I make it a rule to produce at least one original tweet (as opposed to re-tweeting someone else’s tweet) per day. This is not always easy. The library does not always have announcements to make, for example; however, I find I can always locate an interesting news story, digital exhibit, or court case that might interest our followers. Likewise, whenever a colleague or I publish a new post on our blog, I make it a point to advertise it through Twitter and Facebook. Coupling my original tweets with any re-tweets throughout the day, I find that our Twitter feed remains consistently active.

Establishing a Social Media Presence
Although setting up and connecting our social media accounts was relatively easy, setting up social media accounts, I have found, is not the same as maintaining a social media presence. It is painfully obvious when a business has established a social media account of any kind just because they think they have to have one. No updates, no posts, no tweets—no point! Social media is just that—social. It is constant. It is changing. It requires regular attention. Do you need to tweet 10 times a day? Probably not, but it is important to have a plan. For our accounts, I make it a rule to produce at least one original tweet (as opposed to re-tweeting someone else’s tweet) per day. This is not always easy. The library does not always have announcements to make, for example; however, I find I can always locate an interesting news story, digital exhibit, or court case that might interest our followers. Likewise, whenever a colleague or I publish a new post on our blog, I make it a point to advertise it through Twitter and Facebook. Coupling my original tweets with any re-tweets throughout the day, I find that our Twitter feed remains consistently active.

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We next discussed advocacy, which continues to be an important direction for AALL. As legal information professionals, members are focused on the quality and availability of legal information resources and understand the importance of expanding our relationships with stakeholders. We are deeply involved in advocating for passage of the Uniform Electronic Legal Material Act in all the states and in ensuring the continued viability of public law libraries as a prong of access to justice.

Based on the 2011 survey, education is one of the main reasons members join AALL or renew their membership. Recognizing the value of this benefit, the Executive Board sought to develop objectives that would expand our educational opportunities for members and establish our preeminence among information and allied professionals.

**What’s ahead?**
You will hear much more about the new strategic directions in the months and years ahead. The work of the Association is closely aligned with our strategic directions. As AALL’s governing body, the Executive Board will work to move the priorities of the Association forward. This year, we “Rethink Our Value” and rethink our future as a member-driven association.

**Jean M. Wenger** (jean.wenger@cookcountyil.gov) is president of AALL and government documents/foreign and international law librarian at Cook County Law Library in Chicago.

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Social media has expanded from the social side to bridge formality and informality when reaching out to patrons.

**Social media** has become a platform that can connect friends, colleagues, and customers. Blending the formal with the informal, it allows for a different kind of interaction than one might typically see behind a circulation or reference desk. Yet as with any library service, a social media presence should not be established half-heartedly; it takes time and effort to maintain these accounts. Depending on the type of library in which you work, you may find you have no need for a social media presence. If you have the time and interest and you are willing to put in the work, however, you are likely to find the efforts are well worth your while.

**Ashley Ahlbrand** (aaahlbra@indiana.edu) is educational technology and reference librarian at Indiana University Maurer School of Law in Bloomington.

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**Financial Assistance Available**

Every year AALL awards thousands of dollars in scholarships to law school and library school students and AALL members. The following scholarships are awarded annually:

- Library school scholarships (for those with and without JDs)
- Law school scholarships (for those with MLS/MLIS and those seeking dual JD/MLIS)
- Scholarships for library school graduates seeking a nonlaw degree
- Scholarships for continuing education courses
- LexisNexis John R. Johnson Memorial Scholarship
- AALL and West George A. Strait Minority Scholarship
- Marcia J. Koslov Scholarship

**The application deadline is April 1.** Visit AALLNET for complete information, instructions, and applications at www.aallnet.org/main-menu/Member-Resources/scholarships, and spread the word to anyone who might be eligible!

For further information, contact AALL Scholarships Committee Chair **Jennifer Duperon** at jenniferduperon@gmail.com or AALL Headquarters at 312/205-8022 or membership@aall.org.