Social Media, Academic Research and the Role of University Libraries

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Introduction

The CIBER research group are currently researching academics' use of social media for research and the early findings of this work have been presented at the Charleston Conference [1] published in a number of journals [2-3], and covered by the US media [4]. The most important message emerging from the study was that the social media are beginning to have a significant impact on scholarly communication and, in particular, on many aspects of the research process. Of course, if it is impacting on the academic researcher then, logically, it must be impacting on university libraries too, or so one would have thought. That was certainly the thinking of this journal's editor when he asked us whether in the light of our findings we had "some wisdom for academic librarians as they continue to struggle to re-think and re-structure academic libraries and services to deal with the continually evolving realities of the digital world". It was also our thinking and we had in fact already started finding out with the financial support of the Research Information Network [5].

To this end four focus groups were held at three major British research universities and at one scholarly publisher (Taylor & Francis) during the period February to April 2011. Altogether 32 academic researchers and librarians from 12 institutions attended the focus groups—the university groups consisted of both academics and librarians, and the T&F group was a mix of academics and publishers. The focus groups were provided with a summary of the Charleston report's findings to inform the discussions and then we took it from there. Discussions were deliberately wide-ranging and did not just cover the role of the university library because we did not want to influence or direct the deliberations in any particular direction. Thus what we then came away with was comments from academic researchers about the role that libraries might play in the rapidly unfolding social media scholarly environment *and* the views of librarians as to their role in the social media environment.

Findings

If the people we spoke to were representative then the UK university sector appears at sea when it comes to social media. Anecdote has it that US university librarians, a community we have not yet researched, are somewhat ahead of the game, but I leave it to JAL readers to determine this for themselves.

Libraries—An Afterthought

In the focus group that contained no librarians (the T&F group) it was salutary that, while the group spent two hours talking about scholarly information, university libraries were not mentioned once. Even in the case of the groups that did include librarians among their number the role of the library in the new social media environment came up only after prompting on the part of the facilitators. Clearly in the emerging social media environment libraries are very much an afterthought. Three reasons why this should be the case were given.

First, libraries do not have a strong and visible presence in the existing digital scholarly space and therefore are not the natural home for social media. Libraries need to do more to connect and reach out, and especially be more proactive about promoting the resources they have: by email

communiqués, for example. To be fair some of the librarians involved expressed the view that they needed to adapt to a new culture being forced on them by what was looking like another major round of the digital transition, which would involve them reaching out rather than waiting for people coming to them. What also stymies library involvement is that it is not clear whose responsibility social media is in the institution—the library, information systems or communications?

Second, libraries occupy a confining space. A computer science researcher explained: “The library is a building. Google has world-wide reach”. So the whole basis of the library as a local collection of trusted content no longer washes with users since people feel they may be missing things that are outside a confined space rather than in borderless body of knowledge (Google). And, of course, the growth of social media was only likely to enhance the perception that the library was an increasingly confined space.

Third, social media are all about doing-it-yourself and collaborating directly and inevitably represent a further wave of disintermediation. This was even acknowledged at one university library where they said they were not convinced that collaborative tools were a ‘library thing’. There was a willingness on the part of some librarians to join in but it is really a question of whether the newly enfranchised (DIY) users are willing to ask for help in connection with social media tools, especially as many academics are much more technically aware than librarians. And, indeed, some of the researchers in the focus groups expressed the belief that they would not go to librarians; the idea was a nice one, but they would try to work it out themselves.

Not Clear Whose Territory It Is

As mentioned earlier universities and libraries were far from clear whose responsibility social media was, which leads to confusion, lack of leadership and social media being under resourced (and prohibited in some cases). There was a consensus among librarians and academics that the provision of institutional social media resources across the university was inadequate and often mired in bureaucracy which prevented appropriate use of those resources, which might have been helpful to researchers. One researcher cited the use of his own server for part of his research activities in order to get round the systems at his university. Google Docs was seen as an individual rather than a supported activity at the same university. Facebook use was particularly problematic. For example one university had an official Facebook page which the librarian cannot get library related material on to. At another an attempt was made to set up a Twitter account for library users but the library marketing and communications officer wanted to check every tweet before it went out! Clearly there are worries among the university hierarchy about institutional information being placed on platforms not under their control.

Lack of Enthusiasm

Perhaps unsurprisingly given what has been said above, a number of librarians were not actually convinced that they had a role or wanted a role in respect to social media. This showed itself in a number of ways in the focus groups by: a) a lack of enthusiasm and negative body language; b) the elementary levels of social media activities in which librarians were engaged (see section below); c) a lack of familiarity with social media applications and d) a what's it to do with us attitude.

Information ‘Lite’

It was felt by some librarians that social media were somehow lightweight, particularly when used ‘promiscuously’. FaceBook was singled out for particular criticism in this regard.

What Then Were Libraries Getting Up To?

Of the social media tools used in a library context Twitter, used for communication, and blogs, used for dissemination, were mentioned most.

Twitter. How then is Twitter work resourced? There were sighs all round on the part of librarians. They try to respond to issues as they arise in the day and stagger responses to avoid a burst of activity. Ideally tweets should be ad hoc as something crops up. At one university a librarian tweets with other techie people but the official library Twitter account presents problems for him because it is controlled by two people and it takes effort to get a tweet out. Another tweeted academics about library news and included some outside information, for example re-tweeting CABI tweets (partly because it is not for profit). One librarian tweets in a slightly unusual capacity. For instance a reader tweets complaining they can't find a book or journal in the library, the librarian receives the tweet and responds. The librarian has a default search set-up for his library and picks up any comments. The responding tweet often comes as a surprise to the student.

Blogs. One major research university maintains 10/12 subject blogs. It seems however that this is a one-way street with the library posting content but never receiving any comments back. They are run by a content editor and do not always offer subject specific content, which people would find more useful—hence there was little feedback from users. Content control was a problem for those librarians that were running blogs. Wikis were generally thought to be a waste of time and FaceBook seemed to polarise universities, with some banning its use and others promoting it for communication.

What Then is the Future for Libraries in Respect to Social Media?

Academics, clearly trying to be up-beat, mentioned that there could be a role for the library in terms of “catalysing the exchange of knowledge” and that one of the ways this could be undertaken was by the library explaining how social media tools could help researchers and recommend and promote them. In fact one of the university libraries said they are majoring on social media awareness. They are running a Web 2.0 workshop to raise awareness among students and academics. In particular they want to show researchers how to use social media. They said that there was some interest amongst academics in the idea that librarians should be the ‘glue’, holding things together.

In fact the real challenge to libraries comes not directly from social media but indirectly: if there was to be a replacement or displacement of traditional information sources, like journals, by social media. Disintermediation would then have bitten twice, first by e-journals and second by social media; that could be game, set and match. Thus during focus groups we posed the question to researchers, “Were you ignoring journals for social media?” In fact it turned out that there did not seem to be any enthusiasm for giving up journals; although it was the aggregator sites, like ArXiv and PubMed, which were particularly appreciated because all the data is there, whereas it is otherwise scattered across publisher platforms.

The consensus amongst researchers was that peer review, the foundation stone of journal publishing, is still the gold standard. All academic performance metrics were still based on impact factor and the strength of the review process. Peer review was thought to be an effective filter and in that context remains valuable. It was however pointed out that there were differences across disciplines. Thus peer review for medicine and biochemistry is vital, get in wrong and people could die. What then about post-publication peer review or measure derived from downloads? In fact no particular view was expressed in regard to the question, nor did academics have any experiences to offer.

There appears then no threat to university libraries from this quarter and this would be true for publishers too; there was also little demand for shorter journal articles, like those provided in Springer 'Briefs', nor (oddly) was PLOS One of interest to biologists. Even among e-scientists there was no suggestion that publishers would be removed from the chain, although the preference for OA journals if available and with a high enough IF was voiced. Publishers were seen to be adding value to the scholarly product.

Conclusions

In general it was found that the advent of social media was unlikely to have an influence or impact on library functions in any major way, other than possibly negatively, by decoupling university libraries even further from scholarly information communication and provision. On the basis of the evidence we obtained the prognosis is not very good for those hoping that social media might constitute a growth opportunity for the beleaguered university library sector. Thus on the one hand there seems little demand on the part of researchers for libraries to be involved and on the other hand there appeared to be little passion on the part of librarians to do anything strategic—possibly, paralysed by the enormity of the task, and already reeling from the impact of the first digital transition, that occasioned by the introduction of e-journals and e-books. The only real role for the library which gained any weight of support amongst academics was in providing 'Which' type guides to social media [6].

Finally, probably, the real value of social media for libraries lies in its marketing potential, and marketing is something that libraries are not very good at. Thus one of the biggest university users of social media in the UK (not represented in the focus groups) uses Facebook and Twitter quite successfully for this purpose. Social media add powerful ('cool') communication channels to the marketing mix and appeal to the strategic student group. Whether it would appeal to researchers is of course another thing. So the real issue isn't that libraries are failing to understanding social media per se but failing to understand its effectiveness in their marketing strategy overall, and this is why many of them are not really connecting with social media. Perhaps we were unlucky with the constitution of the focus groups in that we only had large and very traditional research libraries? That is something we shall pursue in future research.

Notes and References

- [1] CIBER. Are social media impacting on research? 'First findings from the 2010 Charleston Observatory'. <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/infostudies/research/ciber/>
- [2] Ian Rowlands, David Nicholas, Bill Russell, Nicholas Canty and Anthony Watkinson. 'Social Media use in the Research Workflow.' *Learned Publishing* 24(3, 2011):pp. 183–195.
- [3] Nicholas D. Rowlands I. 'Social Media use in the Research Workflow,' *Information Services and Use* 31(1–2, 2011):pp.
- [4] Social media lure academics frustrated by journals. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. <http://chronicle.com/article/Social-Media-Lure-Academics/126426/>
- [5] Research Information Network, <http://www.rin.ac.uk>
- [6] Which is a consumer magazine in the UK that essentially provides trusted product or service reviews.