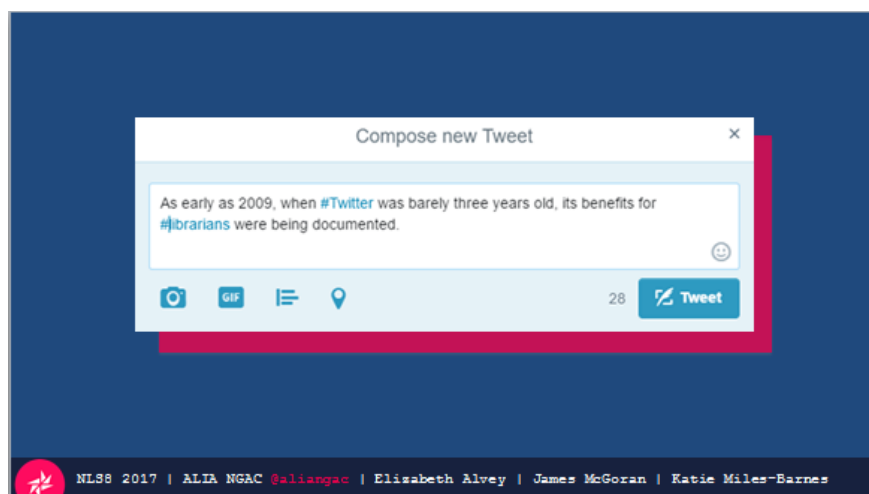# #Auslibchat and social librarians: Building and maintaining your online professional identity

By Elizabeth Alvey, James McGoran and Katie Miles-Barnes. Slides by Evanthia Samaras.

As early as 2009, when Twitter was barely three years old, its benefits for librarians were being documented. From a cost effective way to attend conferences for a liaison librarian's subject area and engage with scholarly ideas (Ovadia, 2009); to the potential for librarians to showcase how they interact with their communities and provide research assistance (Fields, 2010). It is clear that already many individual librarians were already active on Twitter (Milstein, 2009).

In addition, it is often actively promoted as a successful way to connect within our industry. For example, at library conferences through hashtags; for networking (with people you might never meet otherwise!); and, as technology continues to impact upon librarianship/GLAM, to discover new approaches or emerging technologies. It is often particularly highlighted as a good way for new graduates to expand their knowledge and contacts within the industry.

A 2013 pilot study, (Mulatiningsih, Partridge, & Davis) reinforces these key themes, identifying: Being Connected, Staying Informed, and Building Networks as key themes articulated by Library and Information Science Professionals for their use of Twitter.

However, like other social media technologies, it is not without its risks. From the extreme, where Twitter has been one of many platforms used to coordinate attacks or threaten violence on individuals, to the risk of becoming trapped in the "echo chamber" , which has been discussed in particular relevance to the library profession here (Potter & Woods, 2012), but has been more recently illustrated by the American Presidential election. From examples where social media enables careers to be undermined (Ronson, 2015), to the growing reaction of digital minimalism (Newport, 2016), which asks users to critically evaluate the benefits and pitfalls of digital communication tools. (So although we will use Twitter as our case study for the LIS professionals, the questions we are going to ask today, can be more broadly applied).

Consequently, it is worth considering, not only the benefits and risks, but the return on investment. If you are going to commit time, career resources, and energy to engaging with the profession online - how do you make meaningful connections?

One suggested strategy, popular in the literature is Personal Branding. . A personal brand can "summarize and concisely communicate what makes you special to the professional world." (Philbrick & Cleveland, 2015)

In fact, as Schneider noted in a 2011 editorial of personal branding for librarians, for our industry in particular *"simultaneously preoccupied, perturbed, and fascinated by our own image"* personal branding is an enduring topic.

Its application can range from the simple (for example, ensuring your digital footprint is recruitment friendly), to the introspective (a way to self-mentor or identify strengths and weaknesses) to proactively engaging with professional identity (communicate a skill set, which sets you apart; a basis to engage and connect with wider profession).

Some literature maintains that everyone gains a personal brand by default, just as in the course of a career, you gain a professional reputation. (Philbrick & Cleveland, 2015). Consequently, they argue that strategically presenting this professional identity through personal branding can assist professionals in successfully improving reputation and outreach (Gall, 2012).

So personal branding may have the potential to assist library professionals' use of social media technologies to connect, stay informed, and network, professionally. Although it is important to note that its success is not automatic and misleading to assume a professional can control how they are perceived (Schneider, 2011).

So, before putting your entire life on Twitter, or sharing your anecdotal experiences for the benefit of libraryland, decide what you want to make happen. Do you want to:

- Foster your professional identity?
- Gain insights into our constantly evolving industry?
- Engage with other professionals?

We hope this presentation can help you engage critically with these concepts, so you can DIY professional networking.

We feel #auslibchat embodies a lot of the positives of that last point, so let's look at what we did and why it worked so well.

So why #auslibchat? Why, when Twitter already provides us with all these wonderful things? Twitter chats, with an education focus, first appeared on the international scene around 2009. Education chats were soon noticed by the library world and gained traction in the GLAMR sectors of the UK and US, primarily by way of word of mouth and through blogs; the first #uklibchat is dated 7th July, 2011. By 2015, Twitter chats had become a very popular platform in both the education and GLAMR sectors, with multiple variants, but nothing specifically for library professionals or para-professionals in Australia. There was nothing that was at a national level, that was regular and consistent, like the UK model, and very little in the way of structured open discourse that reached the whole sector and was not behind a paywall. Until now.

#auslibchat therefore began with a need. There was an empty niche in Australia for a collaborative and inclusive regular discussion platform for the GLAMR sector. The vague idea of a structured discussion had been on our radar at NGAC for a while, but it wasn't until August 2015, when we held our monthly meeting (that mostly consisted of apologies and was therefore nearly cancelled), that a small number of us formulated the plan that resulted in #auslibchat. A qualitative, in depth discussion within the committee, followed by a face to face meeting with ALIA CEO Sue McKerracher, from which ALIA's full support was given, eventually led us to fill that gap in the market and launch #auslibchat in February 2016.

#auslibchat, as mentioned, is a regular, structured professional online discourse, that is open to all and held on the first Tuesday of the month from 9pm AEDT until 10pm. Each chat has a predetermined theme that acts as a focus point for the hour. During that hour, we present our participants with five key questions, usually starting fairly simple and broad, along the lines of *how do you define X?* or *do you have any experience with X at work?* The key questions, which are identifiable with the prefix Q1-5, then go on to explore various facets of the theme in more depth. Various comments, suggestions and further questions are asked inside each key question bracket by the #auslibchat Moderator with the aim of facilitating discussion and boosting participant engagement. Participants are requested to include A1-5 and the tag #auslibchat when writing their response.

In practice however, it has been much more complex to coordinate. NGAC created a procedure document for #auslibchat that, as our experience holding #auslibchat has increased, has undergone multiple revisions. We have settled on 4 main roles for #auslibchat, that we share on a roster:

Every month we're working behind the scenes, discussing how best to approach each chat and what questions we should ask to elicit the best response from our participants and make sure that everyone feels welcome and included. We also want themes to follow important topics that may be easily avoided by other GLAMR communication channels. Important and current issues are tackled, ranging from: social justice, accessibility and diversity to inter-organisational collaboration and metadata standards; finding your first GLAMR job to customer service.
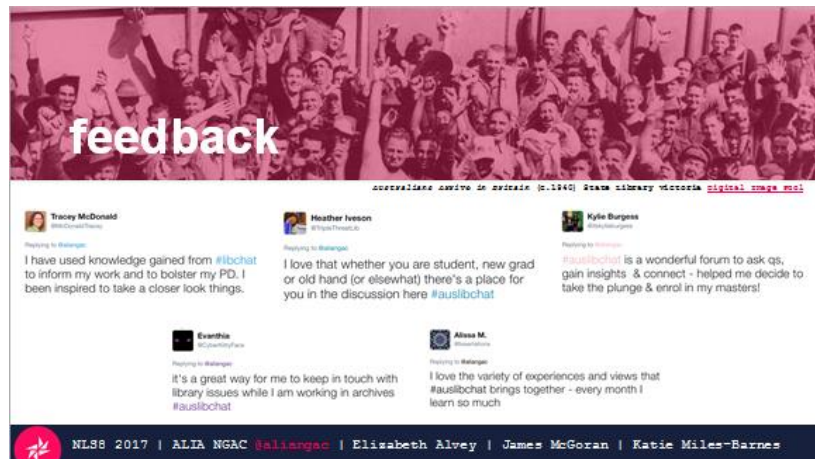
We have had a phenomenally good reception to the first year of #auslibchat. As a kickstart, we asked several champions, individuals in the library world with more prominent twitter accounts (obviously well branded), to be involved and help publicise the chats. The concept was consistently met with a positive response. We have gained a consistent and faithful audience, ranging between 50 and 90 individuals per chat, sometimes higher, with total tweets ranging from 200-500 per chat. Often #auslibchat appears on the top 10 lists of Twitter trend aggregator services for that evening, Australia wide. This response has shown that there was a spot in the GLAMR sector market waiting to be filled, that a need was indeed there. The following statistics are from our chat in February this year.

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In terms of the reception that participants have had to the themes presented, the themes have been both divisive yet also met with shared values between participants, creating an interesting and overall, very positive atmosphere. Through expanded discussion, every chat has ended congenially and on good terms, valuing those differing opinions. We have explored other uses for #auslibchat. In March this year we turned the chat into a Q & A session with ALIA board nominees to give our audience a chance to engage with them directly. This change of format was also met with a positive response, from both the nominees and our audience.

The positive reception received by NGAC about #auslibchat has helped foster an environment where networking is highly valued: sharing goals, forging positive and professional relationships, and granting a sense of community and belonging. And in fostering that environment, allowing anybody to participate at any time, for free, #auslibchat has given participants a sense of ownership over online professional discourse. This in turn allows them to, either consciously or not, create and develop their personal branding. Their profiles and responses are molded into #auslibchat, linked to it. In that way #auslibchat is part of every participant's online identity.

Going back to our initial questions, what do our participants want? At the start of 2016 we surveyed our Twitter followers asking them what they wanted from following @aliangac #auslibchat was in its pilot stage and rapidly evolving, but hadn't reached a lot of people. The response was a request for less impersonal sharing of already over-shared content, less dates and events and no more top 10 book lists or top 10 libraries, or "kitch". Instead, what our audience wanted was more meaningful

engagement, on a personal level. To connect them to their profession by giving them a depth of discussion that had not been provided before. This is exactly what #auslibchat has done; endorse individual personal branding and connecting those individuals to each other, and to the chat as a community brand.
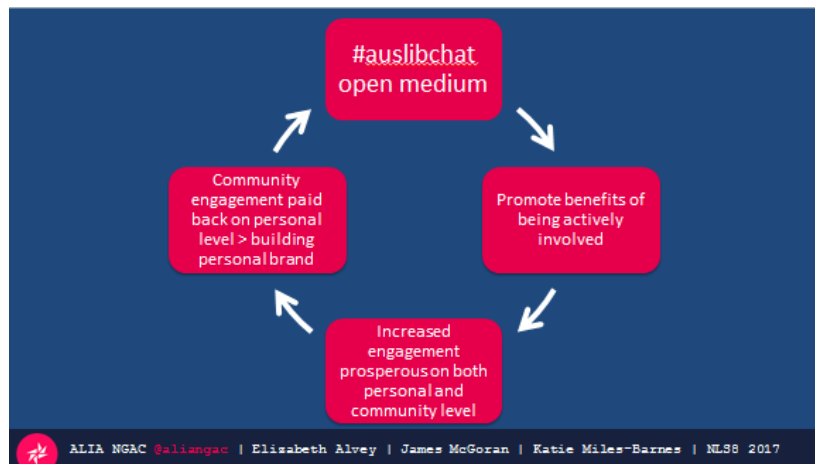
Exploring this idea of community branding, NGAC hopes that #auslibchat can create a bridge between the online LIS and GLAMR community to the combined offline LIS, and ALIA, community as a whole, to help promote the benefits of being actively involved in your profession and professional association, and showing how that increased engagement level can only be prosperous for both the industry and on a personal level. In a cyclical way, that community engagement is then paid back on a personal level, allowing more opportunities to develop your personal brand. One of the ways we do this is by ensuring #auslibchat is planned appropriately to be as accessible and inclusive as we can make it, creating a truly open medium.

Individual professionally developed branding strengthens personal confidence and increases awareness of your own personal online identity, allowing you to take that sense of ownership forward to other platforms both personally and professionally. Being involved in #auslibchat, and other professionally recognised online activities, is itself a form of personal branding. It shows others that you are involved, that you are committed to your profession and personal development, that you care enough to be involved. DIY, it's easier than you think.

So: your brand. The advice commonly offered for establishing your brand (Gehl, 2011) generally runs something like:

- (OWNERSHIP) "Pinpoint your style or aesthetic"
- (AUTHENTICITY) "Be your authentic self"
- (ASSOCIATION) "Interact with brands which are like your brand"
- (SELF-AWARENESS) "Ensure you stay "on brand""

We feel that this kind of advice raises a lot of questions about the nature of branding. So rather than presenting some tips or guidelines we've broken this advice down into four ideas, and looked at the way in which notions of Ownership, Authenticity, Association and Self-Awareness combine to generate the kind of questions we've been asking ourselves.

We encourage you to reflect on some of these questions to determine your own expectations, boundaries and aspirations for managing your online professional identity (OPI). We're mindful too that the kinds of choices people can make with regard to these questions are impacted by factors like privilege. When looked at through the lens of things like ethnicity, ability, gender, sexuality or socio-economic position, these questions can be answered in a multitude of ways.
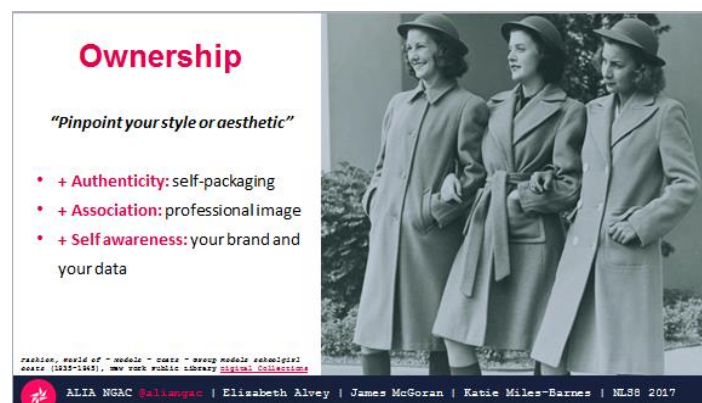
OWNERSHIP ("Pinpoint your style or aesthetic")

Let's start with some fairly existential questions!

- (OWNERSHIP+AUTHENTICITY) Self-packaging: To brand is to curate, to arrange, to label, so we are encouraged to examine the contents of ourselves, and to identify usable components. In a sense we are reducing the self into data-points - what Deleuze would call the "dividual" (1992). How does this sit with you? Are you troubled, or unconcerned, or pragmatic? Is the way you feel about this informed by the fact that your profession involves handling data sets?

- (OWNERSHIP+ASSOCIATION) We are encouraged to seize control over our image, that this is a demonstration of our commitment to the profession, a means of building job security, and of making sure we stand out from the crowd. So what are you trying to achieve? And how comfortably (or uncomfortably) do your own goals sit alongside these expectations - can participation be a rewarding enrichment of your practice, or a grudging obligation? Or both? Or something in between?
- (OWNERSHIP+SELF-AWARENESS) How much control do we actually have, given that our identities may exist across a number of platforms, none of which are owned by us? Our brand is not the same thing as our data - how do you feel about cultivating the former by sharing a lot of the latter, and where do you draw the line?

Authenticity

"Be your authentic self"

- **+ Self-awareness:** the work of being authentic
- **+ Ownership:** self expression vs. privacy
- **+ Association:** how will you speak, and for who?

A group of children playing in the town of Ptuj, Slovenia (1962) photograph taken by Dragiša Modrinjak, via Village Stock Pictures

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AUTHENTICITY ("Be your authentic self")

- What is authenticity? Proper discussion of this question is way beyond the scope of this talk, so here are a few quick questions for you to run with: What does it mean to you? Why does it have so much currency? Is it an inherent quality or is it socially constructed? How is it simulated, and how do we know when it's being simulated, and how do you feel when you discover that it is being simulated?
- (AUTHENTICITY+SELF-AWARENESS) "Identity work" (Davis, 2010) encompasses the decisions we make about who we are, and how we express ourselves. But in order to seem authentic, these expressions must appear "spontaneous, uncalculated and effortless." (Davis, 2010). So at what point do we begin to alter our offline selves to reflect the self we've depicted online? Have you ever started mentally composing a tweet about something you're experiencing, midway through the experience? Have you ever attended an event so that you can tweet about it? (#NLS8) What does this behaviour mean?
- (AUTHENTICITY+OWNERSHIP) Branding marks you as a specific individual; it is intended to convey your particular uniqueness. Do you see a tension between expressing that individuality and retaining your privacy?
- (AUTHENTICITY+ASSOCIATION) How do you navigate the tension between your personal identity as an individual, and your social identity (Kim, Zheng & Gupta, 2011) as a library worker? When are you speaking for yourself, and when for the profession? What are the allowances and what are the restrictions of being a librarian on social media? Twitter generates immediate, endorphin-releasing feedback, in the form of hearts and re-tweets, and in the form of the social capital this represents – how will you know when the prospect of a reward is shaping the way you engage with others? Is this problematic?

ASSOCIATION "Interact with brands which are like your brand"

At this point we'd like to give a shout out to everyone who posts on #auslibcats, #auslibdogs and #auslibpats - this is a kind of brand collaboration we 100% need more of.

- (ASSOCIATION+OWNERSHIP) Having an OPI is a form of self-promotion, and a form of performance - one in which we are both social actors and consumers. Being online, it means our OPI is "always on", and so in a sense we are always at work. Do you see maintaining your OPI as labour? If yes, do you feel you are being fairly compensated for it?
- (ASSOCIATION+SELF-AWARENESS) A Twitter discussion is a public discussion. How will you handle participation in the debate of a contentious subject when your current co-workers or potential future employers are participating or watching?
- (ASSOCIATION+AUTHENTICITY) Which parts of yourself do you feel should be included or omitted from your OPI? Do you ever feel that it might be "unprofessional" to talk about important aspects of your life? Why is that the case?

SELF-AWARENESS ("Ensure you stay "on brand"")

This particular advice speaks to the performative component of social media - it demands a kind of consistency informed by consistent self-reflection and self-monitoring. In some ways this is the same work we do in our libraries - being our professional selves means being... professional. It is a persona we assume - so what about this is different when we're online?

- (SELF-AWARENESS+AUTHENTICITY) To what extent is your OPI a response to your perceived expectations of your audience? To what extent is your OPI actually yours, if it is constructed in collaboration with others? (Merchant, 2006)
- (SELF-AWARENESS+ASSOCIATION) How do you define the boundary between diplomacy and self-censorship? Have you ever hesitated to enter a discussion on Twitter? Why (or why not)?

- (SELF-AWARENESS+OWNERSHIP) The power relations which exist offline also exist online. Sometimes on social media, they are amplified. In this kind of environment, what is the value of disclosure and of visibility? Where can you contribute to the conversation? Can silence be a contribution? How will you know if participation is having a negative impact on you or on others, and what will you do to address it? How can you use your OPI and your participation in these spaces to improve access for others, and support them to participate too?

Not all of these questions are easy ones to ask or answer, and as individuals your boundaries and expectations will be different. As we've already discussed, there are so many benefits to participation in something like #auslibchat and Library Twitter as a whole, and while some of these questions may present challenges, we invite everyone who is curious to give it a go. If the spaces you're looking for don't exist, we encourage you to make them.

We started #auslibchat because we wanted an inclusive and diverse space for Australian library workers to meet, share their ideas, and learn from each other. In turn, our experience has helped each of us determine our own approach to branding and our online professional identities. Hopefully this discussion has brought up some questions we *haven't* asked - let's keep the conversation going. See you on Twitter.

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