Making Social Media Meaningful: Connecting Missions and Policies

Catherine Johnson and Natalie Burclaff

Introduction

In response to a 2011 survey, 96.2% of libraries indicated that social media was of value to their organization.[1] With over 1.06 billion users active on Facebook[2] and more than 200 million active users on Twitter each month[3] libraries must acknowledge that many of their users are active on these sites. Looking at academic libraries specifically, a Pew Research survey found that 86% of undergraduate students, and 82% of graduate students use social networking sites.[4] Social media is increasingly expected to be an extension of any organization as users turn to popular platforms for information. Academic libraries are no exception.

As early adopters, many libraries have created social media accounts without carefully considering how and why social media is important to their organization. As users look to social media to represent the organizations with which they interact, it is critical that libraries reconsider how and why they engage in social media. Creating a social media policy gives librarians the opportunity to consider those motivations and outline goals for social media within their library. Social media policies formalize a library's strategic direction and strengthen its position on social media.

Libraries are mission-driven organizations. These missions serve as the fundamental drivers of the organization, and should guide planning and decision-making.[5] When libraries engage with social media, it should be done based on active reflection of the library's mission and culture.

As social media continues to become a primary tool of connection, libraries must consider how well documents and policies guiding the use of social media embody the mission of the library. The focus of this paper is to analyze academic libraries' social media policies using themes derived from library mission statements.

Literature Review

There are numerous how-to guides and tips for best practices on creating good social media policies in workplaces.[6] These articles focus on legal considerations, Internet etiquette guidelines, quality control, and employee management. The purpose of a social media policy in many of these cases is to protect the company or organization from potential social media risks. Some risks are sharing confidential information, inappropriate posts, responding poorly to a customer's complaint and employees' lack of productivity due to social media use.

Nancy Flynn in her book *The Social Media Handbook* explains that employers must balance the need to stay relevant and engaged on social platforms while they also must "manage social media use effectively in order to protect [their] organization's assets, reputation, and future" by creating and enforcing a social media policy.[7] Flynn provides steps to writing effective policies. Her recommendations include using clear language, which also means defining key concepts and terms; be brief and accurate; and implement the policy with staff education.[8]

Catherine is a Reference and Instruction Librarian at Langsdale Library, University of Baltimore, email: cajohnson@ubalt.edu; Natalie is a Reference and Instruction Librarian at Langsdale Library, University of Baltimore, email: nburclaff@ubalt.edu

Flynn focuses on risk-aversion policies, but some organizations choose to let their social media policies form organically from situations as they arise.[9] Organizations can provide brief expectations and guidelines, but should avoid "arbitrary rules without first seeing where the opportunities and risks really are."[10]

Since social media tools were first available, libraries have been exploring the opportunities and challenges of using different platforms.[11] One study examined the results of a survey on how librarians' believed Facebook was being used at their library, such as "to be where the users are" and to share photos. This survey was then compared to an analysis of library Facebook pages to determine if librarians' perceptions of Facebook use were accurate. The researcher found that qualitatively, librarians' perceived uses of Facebook greatly differed from how their libraries' pages were actually being used.[12] This mismatch can demonstrate a need for libraries to better articulate their purpose on social media, and use the social media tools strategically to meet that purpose.

As noted in a recent literature review on social software policies in academic libraries, few articles discuss the development of library policies specifically for social media. Social software is a broad term that defines software that "supports group interaction."[13] Social software includes social media and other Internet-based interactive tools like instant messaging and online forums. An informal survey with 51 respondents found that only seven academic libraries had a social software policy. Five of those seven were created because of librarian interest, one in response to inappropriate student behavior and one due to a lawsuit.[14] In that same survey, the authors found that 82 percent of the respondents did not have a social software policy, and 24 percent of that group believed having a policy for that purpose was unnecessary. The authors go on to make recommendations for external and internal policies that "allow for flexibility, realization of the media's full potential, and legally sound service practice."[15] They argue that social software policies are necessary to "inform librarians and patrons of their basic constitutional rights and provide legal guidelines for comment editing."[16] From examining external library policies, the authors found similar elements. These elements include a statement of purpose, which explains the purpose of having a policy, the definition of social software, and a section giving guidelines on comments and posts.[17] A more

relevant element for the purposes of our research is the "tie-in to the library's goals," which is important for internal and external audiences so that they understand the purpose of using social media services.

An exploration of academic library policies on computing technologies provides characteristics of and justifications for library-specific policies.[18] Policies should be visible to their intended audience, and approved by some authoritative body. While academic libraries must follow larger university policies, whether it is for computing technologies or social media, a library-specific policy is useful because it provides links and adds visibility to the university policy. Library-specific policies also provide appropriate context for the resources managed by the library. Thirdly, specific policies allow libraries to address both university affiliates and nonaffiliates, the latter of which the library interacts with more than other campus entities.[19] While this last point is in reference to computer use policies, it relates to general policy-writing guidelines, which should be aware of different audiences for different service points on a campus.

A publication from the American Library Association, *Creating Policies for Results*, discusses the link between library mission statements and policies. Since both policies and mission statements reflect the values of the libraries, policies must be "integrally connected to the library's priorities, mission, goals, and objectives."[20] Policies should be reviewed and revised to reflect changes to a library's mission statement or values.

In a case study, the University of California-San Diego library staff re-examined their mission statement during a renovation project that temporarily relocated them.[21] Since they were no longer in their usual location, they reflected and discussed reasons why people would use the library, and how to remain competitive to other resources on-campus and online. They did a series of brainstorming exercises to develop key brand values that they felt the library, both physically and virtually, should reflect. The author acknowledged that even though a library may espouse a particular mission or brand, library users may choose to see the library differently. Because the library staff considered all library resources and points of service, they ended up with a strong mission, which better informs their strategic planning.[22] While this article does not specifically look at the role of social media in their brand, it does highlight the benefit of using a

mission statement as a starting point for making strategic decisions.

Bangert reviewed library mission statements from 58 institutions of higher education in California and discovered themes related to library purpose, vision, and values. The most frequent language expressing purpose was "supports curriculum," which was followed by "provide access," and "teaches information skills." The research identified the varied services of libraries, and concluded that with these numerous roles, libraries must clearly communicate the library's purpose as it relates to their educational institution.[23]

Purpose

Although many articles discuss and examine social media policies, very few look at social media policies in the context of academic libraries. Additionally, there has been no research into the role mission statements play when considering social media policies. This is a large gap in literature, considering the importance of clearly connecting libraries' values to their actions. Social media is growing as a tool for many academic libraries, and clearly linking a library's mission with a social media policy is necessary to make social media use more meaningful. The purpose of our research is to explore the relationship between mission statements and social media policies in academic libraries.
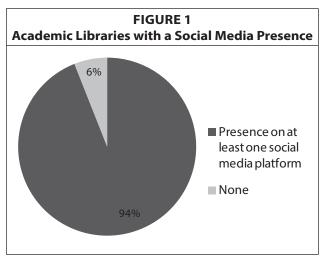
Methodology

A survey was designed to collect information on the social media policies and guidelines of academic libraries. The survey included questions on social media presence. Respondents who indicated social media presence were asked more detailed questions about formal guidelines and social media responsibilities. If the respondents said they had a social media policy, they were asked to attach their policy or social media guidelines. Additionally, if they provided a policy, they were asked to link to, or copy and paste the text of, their library mission statement.

We opted to send the survey to all public universities in the Carnegie Classification Master's L: Master's colleges and universities (larger programs) across the United States. There were 171 college and universities. We excluded our university from the list, which left us with a total of 170. The survey was created and disseminated using Poll Daddy. It was distributed via email directly to library staff with an outreach, mar-

keting, or social media title or description at select universities. If that title or description could not be found, the survey was sent to the library director. We received survey responses from 99 schools, just over a 58% response rate. Of those 99 respondents, 93 indicated that their library has one or more social media accounts. Of those 93 libraries with social media accounts, 17 indicated that they have formal written guidelines or policies that dictate the way their library uses social media. Thirteen of those 17 provided policies or relevant documents.

A classification of mission statements was developed using the themes derived from Bangert's study on college and university library mission statements.[24] These themes were most appropriate because they reflect the missions of the same Carnegie Classification level as our sample. Specifically we used the themes Bangert found in the purpose context because we are focused on mission or purpose statements which are different from vision statements.[25] We then used those themes to code the mission statements from the survey. This provided us with qualitative validity by verifying the accuracy of the themes from the previous study. For additional validity, after the initial coding, we met to discuss potential problems with the coding schemes and added two categories. These modifications were made to reflect themes in the missions that were not present in the original coding scheme. We then independently re-coded the content with the new categories, which are listed in table 1.
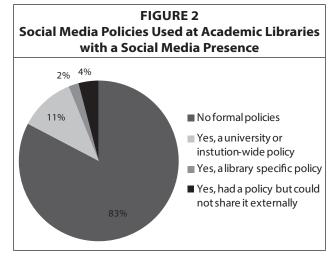
The results of our independent coding were compared and found to have 99.2% agreement, which demonstrates strong qualitative reliability in our coding. The researchers then coded the policies using the same coding scheme. Our inter-coder agreement for coding the social media policies was 99.7%.

TABLE 1 Mission-based Themes Used for Coding
Themes
Encourages Knowledge Creation
Improves Institutional Outcomes
Integrates Print and Electronic Resources
Provides Access
Provides Space
Supports Curriculum
Teaches Information Skills

FIGURE 1
Academic Libraries with a Social Media Presence

6%

94%

■ Presence on at
   least one social
   media platform

■ None

FIGURE 2
**Social Media Policies Used at Academic Libraries
with a Social Media Presence**

2% 4%

11%

83%

■ No formal policies

■ Yes, a university or
   instution-wide policy

■ Yes, a library specific policy

■ Yes, had a policy but could
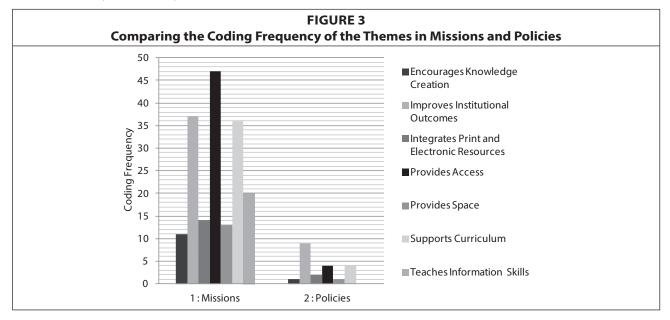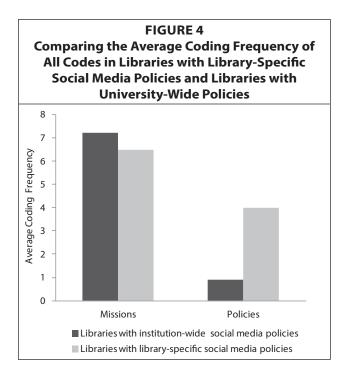   not share it externally

Results

The results of the survey indicate that 94% of libraries have some social media presence (see figure 1). Many institutions indicated they had accounts on multiple platforms. Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube were the most popular platforms with 21%, 19% and 13% of the libraries surveyed, respectively. Of the 93 libraries with a social media presence, only 17 indicated that they had formal written guidelines or policies that dictate the way their library uses social media, which is shown in figure 2. Of the 17 libraries that indicated they have formal policies or guidelines, four indicated their policies were for internal use only and could not provide them for this survey. We excluded their results from our analysis. The remaining 13 libraries shared their social media policies: Two were library specific policies and 11 were policies intended for the entire university community.

Using the methodology described above, the results were coded according to the agreed upon coding themes (see table 1). As was expected, the themes were present far more often in the library missions than in the social media policies. After coding, the most frequent themes present in the missions of libraries that have a social media policy were "provides access," "improves institutional outcomes," and "supports curriculum." When the social media policies were coded using the same themes, the most prevalent theme was "improves institutional outcomes." The theme "teaches information skills" was present in most library missions, but was not present in any of the social media policies. Figure 3 shows that, overall, themes present in library missions were rarely present in the policies or guidelines dictating the way those libraries use social media.

FIGURE 3
Comparing the Coding Frequency of the Themes in Missions and Policies

■ Encourages Knowledge
   Creation

■ Improves Institutional
   Outcomes

■ Integrates Print and
   Electronic Resources

■ Provides Access

■ Provides Space

■ Supports Curriculum

■ Teaches Information Skills

An analysis comparing the coding frequency between library-specific social media policies and university-wide social media policies revealed that library mission-based themes appear more often in library-specific social media policies than those intended for the entire university community (see figure 4).

FIGURE 4
Comparing the Average Coding Frequency of All Codes in Libraries with Library-Specific Social Media Policies and Libraries with University-Wide Policies

Discussion

The findings show that 82% of survey respondents are active on social media but do not have a policy or other formal social media guidelines. This gap is problematic; libraries are using social media tools as a point of communication with their users, yet have no policies directing their use. In the optional comments section of the survey, some respondents explained why they did not have a formal social media policy. Six comments stated that they were in the process of or planning on creating library-specific social media policies. There were seven comments that referred to their library as having an informal policy either because no attempt had been made to establish a formal one, or because so few people manage their social media account that it did not seem necessary. Although having an informal policy is a good starting point to allow for flexibility while creating guidelines that fit the culture of an organization, eventually policies should be formalized. Handling staff turnover, justifying social media posts and interactions, and assuag-

ing management concerns are all reasons why even a simple formal social media policy should be in place.

Libraries with their own social media policies borrowed themes from their mission statements more often than policies that were written for the entire university. While this may seem obvious, it is important to point out. Because academic libraries' missions differ from university missions, libraries need to have their own social media policies that reflect their unique purpose and service to the university community. Many of the university-wide policies we read even encouraged individual departments to consider their purpose before creating social media accounts. In this regard, the university may want to avoid superfluous or inactive social media accounts, but it also speaks to the importance of strategic social media implementation. Library-specific policies should reflect their values and mission statement in order to keep the brand and service consistent, regardless of how users to choose to interact with the library.[26] In addition, thoughtful implementation will make it possible to measure the effectiveness of social media efforts. This strategic planning and thoughtful implementation should be evident in the social media policy, usually in a purpose or opening statement.

While the focus of our research was to examine social media policies in libraries, the large number of university-wide policies also provided us with interesting insights. We observed statements in multiple policies emphasizing the purpose of social media for universities, which primarily were to engage the community in conversations and to share information. The most coded theme in the social media policies we analyzed was "improves intuitional outcomes." This makes sense because a general mission or goal of a university is to improve intuitional outcomes, and this is reflected in the social media policies the university uses.

None of the policies we examined had the mission-based theme of "teaches information skills." This might be expected of university-wide policies, but as a prevalent theme in library mission statements, it was surprising to not see this theme at all in library-specific policies, despite our small sample size. Information literacy, essentially the ability to correctly identify, find, evaluate, and use information, naturally has a technology component.[27] While it may seem challenging to integrate the theme of "teaches information skills" into library social me-

dia policies, social media is a natural environment to teach information literacy skills. The idea of transliteracy, "the ability to read, write and interact across a range of platforms, tools and media from signing and orality through handwriting, print, TV, radio and films to digital social networks," has increasingly been discussed in library literature for its tendency to overlap with information literacy.[28] Using social media not only as tool for developing information literacy skills, but as an element of information literacy and transliteracy, can reinforce active learning and critical thinking about social media itself. These ideas should be present in library social media policies, at least in a basic sense that as librarians, we should be cognizant of the learning opportunities that this medium provides.

Generally, the policies provided from respondents were restrictive in nature. Rather than encouraging participation in social media, the policies were risk-averse. They reminded employees of appropriate behavior, and gave rules for creating and monitoring social media accounts in different departments. One legal issue specific to academic institutions is to comply with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), which protects the privacy of student education records.[29] In a social media setting, this would extend to sharing, posting, or publishing in any public platform any part of a student's education record. Library-specific policies should additionally reflect the ethical and legal codes of the library profession concerning privacy and intellectual property.[30] This includes properly citing content we post and respecting copyright law.

The limitation of our study was the small number of policies available for analysis. Future studies should survey a much larger number of libraries in order to get a larger sample of policies. Hopefully, more libraries, even among our own sample, will have developed social media policies soon. We recommend studies to build on our research by analyzing and examining themes derived from the policies themselves, and to compare academic library social media policies to public library policies, or other organizations. Additionally, studies may explore how social media decisions are made when policies are not in place, how closely social media policies are followed or what implementation strategies lead to social media success. These studies may entail more in-depth research at a select number of libraries.

Conclusion

Policies manifest an organization's beliefs, priorities and commitment.[31] The development of thoughtful policies gives libraries an opportunity to revisit and demonstrate the intent of their mission. Mission-based goals and actions are particularly valuable in areas of rapid change, like social media.[32] Few academic libraries have social media policies and when they do, they are rarely rooted in the library's mission. The library mission should drive the library's activities and should therefore be present in these guiding policies. Our research indicates that general themes in library mission statements are not reflected in the policies they use for social media. We recommend that academic libraries think carefully about why they use social media, how it reflects their overall mission, and create a policy that reflects that purpose.

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