

Library Social Media Needs to Be Evaluated Ethically

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Abstract:

Library literature about engagement has drawn from business marketing practices for years which has unsurprisingly influenced our approach towards social media communication. This article will evaluate how continuing this practice without a critical evaluation of the ethics behind marketing practices is contradictory to our institutional values. The principles discussed in this article may be useful for current library workers and administrators looking to engage in reflective practice in their outreach efforts. In response to the pervasiveness of marketing culture in library outreach our field has an obligation to support and encourage authentic interactions with our patrons without jeopardizing what makes us different from businesses. I will explain why a marketing perspective limits our efforts, initiate a discussion about this issue, and highlight some examples of effective engagement.

Keywords: social media, marketing, outreach, engagement, library culture

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Due to the increased pressure to engage in outreach and the limited resources often available to institutions, many libraries delegate responsibility for social media. The role of social media manager then becomes additional work for library employees with full workloads, a new position created for an individual from the profession of business or marketing, the responsibility of multiple employees in an ad hoc or committee setting, or a task delegated to student workers. I am in the atypical situation where I am a full-time librarian whose primary responsibility is in engagement and communications for my library. As a result of my observations of library outreach in general as well as my own experience, I hope to outline why our field's modelling of traditional marketing principles is limiting and detrimental to communicating our institutional values. Instead, I will argue that we need to more consciously consider the ethics of our practices as we proceed into the world of social media.

The pervasiveness of marketing culture of course influences our library practices. Instead of using the marketing practices of businesses, we need to understand that we do not need to trick our users into engagement. We exist for the benefit of the community, and as a result we can use our outreach mechanisms for promotion and dissemination of information. We have the opportunity to create and cultivate truer cultures of engagement based on the public-oriented nature of a library. Libraries do need to prove use and engagement in order to find sources of funding, but our purpose in outreach and branding can exist without the deception. A library does not expect payment from a patron in order to provide our resources and services. This liberates us from traditional marketing practices focused solely on sales. As institutions charged with supporting the information needs of public, academic, and special user-groups, and not as revenue-generating companies, we should seek to engage our patrons through personal and honest communication designed to anticipate, meet, and respond to user needs.

Marketing, Outreach, and Communications in Library Culture

In this article I will make an effort to be precise about the differences between marketing, outreach, branding, communications, and promotion. In libraries we often use these terms interchangeably. They are *not* the same and we should be cautious about using them interchangeably because of the implications inherent in these terms.

These terms have very specific definitions and connotations in the business world. Marketing is used to refer to the act of convincing users to purchase a product. Outreach is the act of extending your work into communities or spaces and is often used to indicate work with primarily under-engaged groups. Branding is a strategy of marketing. Communications is a broad term that encapsulates the act of exchanging information between groups or individuals. Promotion is a form of communications used to draw attention and encourage engagement with specific information. With the boundaries blurred between these concepts in library literature, the conversation regarding ethical social media engagement should include a concerted effort to be more precise in the language we use to describe our interactions with patrons in these online spaces.

Library literature about social media seems to fall into two main categories. The first is written as a practical response to the need to conduct social media. This literature seems written for the anxious library worker who has been tasked by their colleagues with managing a social media account and is looking for guidance on how to do so. The second type of literature is written by individuals who, after having managed a social media account for some time, write to reflect on their practices and decisions as the social media manager. My impression is that both categories generate conversations about whether or not libraries are doing social media well and how they can generate more engagement. Despite this focus on process, in my observation there is a lack of discussion of ethics in our field's

conversation about library social media. It is this conversation that I hope to start with this article, in the hopes that we can begin to examine our practices through the lens of ethical engagement with our patrons.

Often, discussions of social media management focus narrowly on how to best portray the library online. We should shift our communications culture to promote user-focused programs and materials through active and authentic engagement. We need to adapt to a world where social media is an expected mode of communication, but this cannot happen at the expense of critical evaluation (and iterative reevaluation) of our actions both in terms of our institutional missions and in how they relate to the larger issues of communication culture. We can use social media, and may use it to great effect in our local communities, but we should make sure that our continued support for social media engagement is an extension of our stated institutional goals and principles. Overall I think that library administrations would agree that they value authentic interactions with patrons, that they would value those interactions if they took place on social media, and that those digital interactions may be valuable if incorporated into assessment practices. Although the use of social media data for assessment is not the purpose of this article, evaluating social media by equating metrics such as views and likes with actual community engagement is incomplete (Bodnar & Doshi, 2011).

This is not to say that social media is bad or that it cannot be done effectively by libraries. The widespread use and prevalence of social media in our communication culture can act as a democratizing force. To make use of social media on this level your users need to have access to internet-enabled devices, the technological literacy to engage and learn platforms, and a sense of ownership and acceptance in the community to engage as a participant and not an outsider. I want to strongly encourage libraries to evaluate whether social media may provide a new avenue for communicating that previously has been unavailable to them. We are able to communicate with new users who previously may have been unreachable. We can use social media in a way that does not necessarily mimic policy-based professional language in order to engage on a more personal level with our users. And social media can allow for more direct interaction with users on a one-to-one basis that allows for greater accessibility than before.

But why are we modelling traditional marketing practices for our social media? Businesses use marketing in order to drive consumer engagement in their products and services. The primary goal is to convince users to continue buying their products or to draw in new consumers to their products. As traditional marketing avenues have proven to be incomplete in drawing user engagement (Holmes, 2015), businesses often seek to expand their audiences through nontraditional marketing channels such as social media. All of this is in order to maintain a business's bottom line through new or sustained consumption of their product or through increased brand recognition.

Marketing now not only intends to drive individuals directly to purchase a product, but often uses a tactic of engagement commonly referred to as "lifestyle branding" which markets a company's products as being integral to a user's identity. The product is no longer a good that serves a specific purpose, but is instead "authentically" integrated into a person's entire lifestyle (Schonfeld, 2017). Of course, it is self-evident that a product is not a facet of an individual's personality. This is the fallacy of lifestyle brand marketing. This culture of turning products into lifestyle brands seems incredibly problematic and I believe should be cautiously modelled in our library marketing. Although there is marketing literature about why a specific brand would not be categorized as a lifestyle brand (Swystun, 2016), there is less literature evaluating the deception built into marketing a product into a lifestyle brand.

Library Outreach is an Ethical Issue

Given the profit-motivated nature of marketing proper, I argue that our current modelling of business marketing practices without critical evaluation is a disservice to our professional values. Library workers must as a result begin to reconsider our approach to social media in order to align this engagement more thoroughly with our institutional missions. This article is not intended to respond directly to current literature, but instead to give my overall impression of our field. I do not intend to provide a comprehensive list of resources or a complete guide to best practices. Instead I hope that a consciousness of the ethical component of these issues can be added to our professional dialogue as we further embrace social media and outreach overall. Based on the idea that libraries could and should engage authentically through their social media presence, I will discuss examples of effective and authentic engagement. Overall, this article is intended to initiate a change in the perspective we have for our social media in order to better engage our patrons and contribute to a more human and honest digital world.

Libraries are not businesses...

My purpose in discussing ethical social media engagement with libraries is prompted by the idea that our communications can stand apart from traditional profit-based marketing. Libraries are not for-profit entities, and do not have the resources to compete for patrons' interest by engaging as if they are. Libraries provide services regardless of the financial engagement of our individual users and therefore are not beholden to a bottom line-driven business model. Using business-focused marketing is antithetical to our professional values and prioritizes unethical practices when we engage with our community. However, there are ways to engage which are more in line with our community-oriented mission, which I will illustrate by example.

Like businesses we operate based on a distribution of scarce resources and therefore we need to make decisions in response to economic realities. Unlike businesses, which are designed to generate revenue, we operate often by drawing from endowments, donations, and budgets that have not been able to adapt as successfully to the current political climate of public need. Whether a public, special, or academic library, our budgets have to consider changes in collection development, user expectation of technological access, and competitive employment markets. This is not even taking into consideration the political considerations around the financing of libraries. Frankly, we have to do more work with more limited budgets. We see job creep altering the expectations of our work. Finally, we have boards and public communities that are invested in our decisions. These considerations are important for the growth and development of modern libraries, but do create pressing issues that influence library management and public relations.

Comparatively, businesses have private boards and stakeholders who are primarily invested in the profits of their companies. Managers and boards can more easily make unilateral decisions about their financial investments without justifying their decisions to a public body. Businesses can employ ethically gray decisions of using unpaid or underpaid labor to produce social media. Libraries unfortunately participate in similar labor practices. While our field can benefit from more serious conversations about the ethics of job expectations (Ettarh, 2018), there needs to be more consideration of our use of interns and library workers. Perhaps even more than for-profit businesses, we must contend with building the issues of equitable access, labor, and supporting our constituent voices into our labor practices.

Libraries benefit from the dedication and hard work of student workers, interns, part-time workers, and non-librarian staff members. Our social media benefits from the contributions of the many different experiences of library workers and an inclusive voice should be cultivated as an important part of our institutional communication. But these social media workers need to be provided support and guidance unique to their situation. They may not have sufficient decision-making power due to institutional hierarchies. They may not have adequate time for robust social media management. They may be contingent employees. In order to protect them from many of the risks in public relations work and in order to maintain a coherent public communications style, centralized and compassionate guidance needs to be provided to these library workers.

This might mean that due to limited resources available at your library, a full-time outreach-focused librarian might be a lower priority than adding another position or purchasing additional resources. We should not shift our resources to prioritize social media engagement over all other considerations. Contingent staff needs to be adequately supported in order to manage social media; if that is impossible, social media engagement needs to be limited. Our social media engagement cannot be done at the expense of our integral professional work.

It is important to consider why we engage in outreach. A library's patrons are its reason for existing. And unless a systematic change occurs in library values and practice, we will not begin requiring our patrons to pay for our services. That said, of course there is a large degree to which the capitalist system affects who can access our services in the first place. Patrons need to have the financial capability to travel to a library in order to physically engage with our resources and services. A public library user in California will not be able to access the resources of a Pennsylvania public library user. A more affluent public library may be less accessible to a patron living an hour away via bus, and is therefore less usable for them. While we celebrate the accessibility of our digital services and e-resources, if a patron does not have an internet-capable device or access to high-speed internet, they are unlikely to be able to use our resources to their fullest capacity. A patron who has recently been released from incarceration may not have the foundational skills or resources to sign up for online accounts which are then required for account usage. Housing insecure patrons cannot demonstrate the proof of address necessary to obtain a library card. None of these cases are outright limitations on our services due to the financial capability of our patrons, but they do highlight the realities influencing our institutional values of free access to library resources.

The capability of a consumer to save for or buy a product is what drives the marketing language of social media for businesses. Decisions about marketing are made to incentivize repeat buyers or capture the attention of new buyers who will ultimately give the business their money. We should be excited to realize we are not restricted by this goal like businesses! We have the opportunity to decide why we want to drive our users to our information. Do we want increased attendance to a lesser-known program? Do we want to introduce our patrons to new library workers? Do we want to drive our patrons to become donors? Each foray into social media allows us the opportunity to decide what our goal is in promotion.

...so libraries don't need to act like businesses!

My goal is not to dictate what we should be doing in order to produce engaged and compassionate social media. What is popular and positive is unique to each library and can include the technological capabilities of their chosen platforms and devices, their audience demographics, and current events in popular culture. We will quickly have outdated practices if we try and stick to a set of best practices too

rigidly. We need to be adaptive and also willing to try (and sometimes fail) in order to grow our relationships. I hope to propose the idea that we need to be critical about the ethics of our decisions and actions using social media. Overall, by adopting best practices designed by the marketing industry, we have decided to mimic business values in our social media use. I don't think that these are values we are actually willing to stand behind when we think about how this choice reflects on our work and our institutions.

Considering the contingent position of many library social media managers and the real need for support, I want to illustrate my argument by briefly introducing some representative examples of effective engagement. Focusing only on practical examples can distract from the long-term, difficult work of building a culture of evaluation of and reflection on the implications of our communication decisions. However, I believe that the principles of authentic social media practices that I have presented in this discussion will be supported best by some examples of library social media posts which demonstrate effective communication, creative outreach, and community engagement.

All too often institutional or business social media accounts exist purely as a space to push out information. Personality and genuine human voice matters in communication, which often means personality reflected in social media is helpful in connecting to users. But this use of personality needs to be considered cautiously. It's becoming very common for brands to market their products through satirical or purely humorous social media presences (for an example, see the @DennysDiner Twitter account). These accounts use cultural relevance and dark humor to draw attention from younger audiences in order to stand out apart from competitors. Personality and humor are important, but are not the goal. The goal is not just to make our patrons laugh but to connect our users to the library collections, invite them to programs relevant to them, or to humanize our institution in order to welcome them into our community.

Take for instance the humor found in the Twitter account of the Scottish Orkney Library and Archives (@OrkneyLibrary, <http://www.orkneylibrary.org.uk/>). Their library community engages very actively on their social media, but their accounts have also gathered attention worldwide. One of my favorite posts is this imagined scenario where a patron might come to the library for a book suggestion:

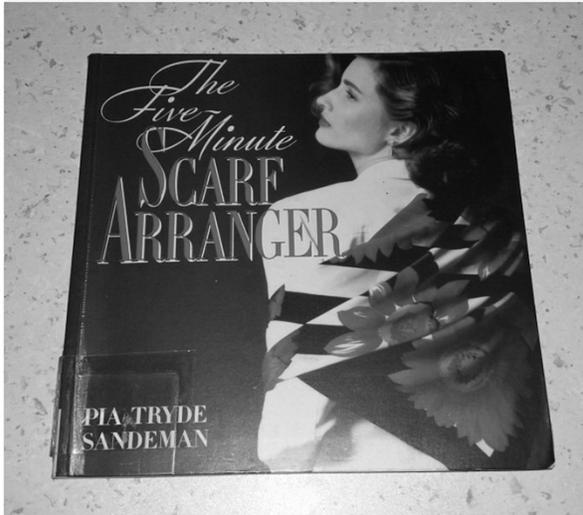


Orkney Library
@OrkneyLibrary

Following

'Excuse me. Do you by any chance have a book that could explain how to arrange my scarves of a morning? Ormerod is getting frightfully het up about how long it takes me. I like to spend at least six minutes on it but he swears it should take no more than four.'

#NicheBookMonday



11:23 AM - 8 Jan 2018

66 Retweets 326 Likes

14 66 326

Example 1. Credit to Orkney Library (2018).

It is common for library social media accounts to find books in their stacks and take photos highlighting unique or unknown items in their collection. This trope is used often and with varying degrees of popularity. In this example, the poster highlights not only an item from their collection, but also the personality of their library and its staff.

Try to commit to a voice in your messaging. Speaking to your audience with an authentic voice rather than a public-relations voice is often received better by users. This can be difficult for many reasons; sometimes you just need to put out information, are limited by time, don't know how to explain something effectively, or are even disinterested in the "thing" you have to promote. In most of these cases it helps to bring in your colleagues when you are struggling. Ask them what makes them excited about their program. Use their answer to guide your post about it. Accept that often you will post something that is boring. Try to explain in a conversation to a friend or to your partner (preferably someone not in our field!) the post you're trying to make. Use their feedback about wording and sense to help you create your post.



Yes, we lost a bet.

Congrats @FreeLibrary & @Eagles.



1:53 PM - 5 Feb 2018

867 Retweets 2,620 Likes



35 867 2.6K

Example 2. Credit to Boston Public Library (2018).

This post from the Boston Public Library (@BPLBoston, <http://www.bpl.org/>) was a result of a bet between BPL and the Free Library of Philadelphia over which of their football teams would win Super Bowl LII (52). The Philadelphia Eagles won, and as a result the Boston Public Library put up this display and tweeted this post. The post is simple, it doesn't use overt marketing language, and it's connected to a current event of interest to their community.

Connecting to your collections and resources does not have to be a simple outward push of information. It can be hard to make the collections of your libraries seem relevant to a social media audience. The Folger Shakespeare Library Instagram account (@folgerlibrary, <https://www.folger.edu/>) used the silly "holiday" of National Pizza Day to bring attention to their collection. While pizza and Shakespeare are tenuously connected, the post is light-hearted without taking itself too seriously and still manages to support the institutional goal to promote their resources.



Example 3. Credit to The Folger Shakespeare Library (2018).

Part of the Issue: Communications Platforms and Infrastructures

This article has thus far avoided a discussion of the infrastructure of social media. I've purposefully avoided going into how to use different engagement platforms effectively. The first reason is that I think we need to discuss this issue as it relates to communication agnostic of platforms. Secondly, the quality of a platform needs to be assessed based on many components including (but not limited to) the applicability of the platform to your users, rate of popular adoption of the platform, ability to schedule posts, image capabilities, and mobile responsiveness. We also need to make sure that we support platforms that protect our users' privacy. Twitter is widely used by both individuals and institutions and allows for quick back-and-forth communication between users while still allowing for private messaging. Instagram operates similarly to Twitter, but its image-focused platform can allow for institutions to present unique content different from that which they might post to text-focused platforms like Twitter. Platforms such as Twitter and Instagram allow users to opt into engaging with libraries in unique ways. Twitter and Instagram also allow for a level of privacy that is forbidden on Facebook, which requires users to sign up for accounts with their real name (Facebook, n.d.).

I do not maintain a personal Facebook account and mostly maintain my library's Facebook as a duplication of our Twitter presence to reach users who are not familiar with Twitter. In some ways, the time investment necessary to maintain an institutional presence on Facebook precludes me from actively updating a personal account; however, I also believe that the company's continual misuse of user data is untrustworthy. (It's also important to note that Facebook owns Instagram and some of the privacy issues extend to the company's use of user data in Instagram, but the personal information collected through Instagram is often far less robust than Facebook.) I choose not to prioritize Facebook in my library's social media management because I don't want to provide increased access to my patrons as data points for Facebook; moreover, I don't want the type of broad access to my patrons' private lives that the ability to view their pages allows. I don't want to treat my patrons as data points

based on the information I can gather from their Facebook accounts. I think individual users can opt into this type of sharing and data distribution on their own, but I do hope that libraries more deeply reflect and act on the privacy issues inherent in communicating with our community members in semi-public online spaces.

Conclusion

In libraries we need to strive to engage honestly and actively with our community members not only because this genuine interaction is lacking in our communication culture in general, but also because it aligns more closely with our professional ideals. Libraries do need to adapt to user expectations in terms of the methods and platforms used for communication. Libraries do need to prove use and engagement in order to find sources of funding. But our purpose in outreach and communications can be to truly engage with our users rather than seeking to capture their attention through deceptive marketing practices. As institutions charged with supporting the information needs of public, academic, and special user-groups, and not as revenue-generating companies, we should seek to engage our patrons through personal and honest communication designed to anticipate, meet, and respond to user needs.

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