

Survey of the use of social media by a selection of Cambridge libraries

During February 2011, eleven Cambridge college and departmental / faculty libraries were approached to provide their views on their experiences of using social media. The survey is intended to provide a snapshot of the views of a limited number of Cambridge libraries which currently use some form of social media. A questionnaire was designed using Survey Monkey, consisting of seven open ended questions. Replies were received from each library, and a summary of replies follows.

What social media does your Library use?

8 libraries use Twitter ; 8 use Facebook ; 5 use both Facebook & Twitter ; 5 have a blog ; 3 use Delicious ; 2 use Library Thing. Netvibes: 1 library; RSS feeds: 1 library; texting 1 library.

3 libraries use Facebook only, and 1 library uses Twitter only.

What was your aim (or aims) in using social media for your library?

The aim/s of the respondents in taking up the use of social media in their libraries is almost unanimously in order to improve communication with their users; by offering more widespread, more immediate and less formal communication channels. There is no discernable difference between the aim/s of the respondents and the type of social media used. A summary of aim/s can be categorised as follows:

To provide more communication channels / alternatives to email: 7 respondents.

To provide a more immediate form of communication: 4 respondents.

To generally improve communication channels: 4 respondents.

To provide a more informal communication channel: 4 respondents.

To communicate with students in a way they prefer: 3 respondents.

To improve publicity / promotion / marketing of the library: 3 respondents.

To what extent is your aim or aims being achieved?

It's difficult to summarise responses into whether the aim/s of libraries have been achieved, as these on the whole aren't easily quantifiable. Generally, responses can be categorised as either a guarded 'yes', or 'not sure' at this stage. Research into student use of social media sites by respondents is currently limited to the statistics provided by social media sites (eg. Facebook Friends), and informal contact with students. Whilst the social media sites currently offered by respondents' libraries are all being used, not one library reports that a majority of students are using them (with

the possible exception of one). Several respondents report a low take up of the social media offered by libraries, and one respondent points out that the majority of those registered to their social media sites are in fact non-library users. However, several respondents mention that reaching a new audience, such as alumni, has been an unexpected benefit of using social media, which illustrates the promotional potential of having a social media presence. A number of respondents also emphasise that having a social media presence is intended to compliment rather than replace existing services and forms of communication. It is also worth noting that none of the respondents report a decreasing use of the social media they offer.

Replies can be summarised as follows:

Yes: Library has friends / followers: 3 respondents; Posts are being read: 2 respondents; More enquiries: 1 respondent; Profile of library raised: 1 respondent.

Yes, but less so: Slowly getting off the ground: 2 respondents; Not many students signed up: 3 respondents.

Not sure, or not explored beyond usage statistics provided by social media sites: 4 respondents.

Are you looking at using any other forms of social media for your library?

Not currently: 4 respondents

Considering other forms: Blog: 2 respondents; You Tube: 1 respondent; Slideshow: 1 respondent; Mobile texting: 1 respondent.

Regularly looking for new forms of social media: 2 respondents.

Looking into improving the delivery of social media already offered: 1 respondent.

What feedback have you had from students about your use of social media?

Positive (although mostly rather limited) feedback: 6 respondents (includes: positive feedback in annual library survey; 'likes' on Facebook announcements). One respondent reports that their Facebook presence has been better received by students than their Twitter presence.

No feedback from students: 5 respondents.

How many hours per week does your library spend maintaining your library's social media presence?

Less than 1 hour: 3 respondents

Between 1-2 hours: 2 respondents

About 2.5 hours: 2 respondents

Between 1-3 hours: 3 respondents

About 3 hours: 1 respondent

Based on your experience, do you have any advice on the likely benefits / drawbacks of our library setting up a social media presence, and would you recommend any social media in particular?

The use of social media by libraries is seen as overwhelmingly beneficial by respondents, and one respondent also suggests there is a pressing need for librarians to engage with social media. "Librarians need to use all tools at our disposal to prove our relevance and enhance our services." The only drawbacks mentioned by a minority of respondents relate to a relatively low take up by students, and the time commitment required to maintain a social media presence.

Use of social media by libraries has been beneficial: 6 respondents ... plus:

Benefit of proving relevance of library service: 1 respondent; Benefit of providing better communication channels: 1 respondent; Benefit of engendering a closer community with users: 1 respondent; Promotional benefits: 2 respondents; Maintaining a social media presence is not time intensive: 1 library.

4 respondents advise against over-expectation, given their own experience of lack of interaction via social media, or relatively low take up rate by students.

Only drawbacks mentioned are the time spent (1 respondent) and the commitment to keep posting / adding new material (2 respondents).

All respondents recommend using the social media they themselves are using, with particular reference to starting with Facebook & Twitter. This is reinforced by one respondent who suggests concentrating on the social media most used by students. Another respondent recommends having a clear idea of what you hope to achieve by setting up a social media presence.

Conclusion

Based upon the responses in this survey, it is clear that the use of social media by libraries has been beneficial. The key reason identified for this is the potential offered by social media to improve communication with users; specifically by providing more widespread, more immediate and more informal communication channels. Indeed, most respondents have found there to be no drawbacks to using social media, which can be linked to the view of several respondents that their use of social media compliments rather than replaces existing services and forms of communication. One concern identified by respondents relates to a relatively low take up of social media to date by their users, which leads four respondents to advise against over expectation. The only other concerns raised by a minority of

respondents relate to the time and commitment required to maintain a current social media presence.

It is notable, however, that the issue of to what extent the aims of the respondents have been achieved in providing social media for their library has proved rather difficult to ascertain. Although a majority of respondents generally believe their aims have been achieved, five responses claim this only cautiously, and four respondents do not know if their aims have been achieved. This is largely due to a lack of feedback received from users regarding libraries' social media presence, limited to basic usage statistics provided by social media sites. This suggests that whilst respondents' view their use of social media as overwhelmingly beneficial, they may also, to a certain extent need "a rigorous theoretical underpinning of why we use social networking and how we interact with digital users," which Derek Law (CILIP Update, January 2011, p.32) claims to be essential in order for libraries to use these sites successfully. This point is also illustrated by one respondent who recommends having a clear idea of what you hope to achieve by setting up a social media presence. Law offers more caution to libraries considering setting up a social media presence by suggesting that Twitter only reaches a fraction of library users, and whilst Facebook has many more users, there is a general feeling that it is used for social engagements rather than for library use. Whilst a majority of respondents in the survey did recommend setting up library accounts for both Facebook and Twitter, Law's view is also reinforced by several respondents who report low student activity on their sites. These respondents consequently warn against expecting much interaction with users. Law also points out that the majority of communication on library sites for both Facebook and Twitter actually takes place between librarians, with alumni also being well represented, compared with current students. However, as illustrated by several respondents, although this may not meet the original aim of improving communication with users, this has nonetheless proved to be an unexpected benefit of setting up a social media presence.

In summary, this survey demonstrates how libraries can benefit from the potential offered by social media sites to improve communication with users. Effective communication with library users will continue to be a key requirement for libraries to operate successfully, and in an increasingly digital age, social media sites offer libraries the ability to achieve this by reaching users through the channels now preferred by many users. Use of social media has grown enormously in the last two years, a growth which currently shows no signs of abating, and in addition, social media sites are free and easy to use. However, as the survey also demonstrates, the current take up by students of libraries' presence in social media sites is relatively low. The survey also suggests that more investigation needs to be undertaken in order to better understand how effective the use of social media by libraries is in achieving the aim of improving communication with library users.