The Social Media Directory of Academic Libraries: A Resource for Academic Librarians Managing & Researching Social Media

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Abstract: The Social Media Directory of Academic Libraries (SMDAL) website is a directory of hundreds of international academic library social media accounts across numerous social media platforms. The SMDAL is an online resource designed by academic librarians in New Jersey that launched on May 31, 2018. In June 2018, the site had nearly 2,000 site visits by more than 600 unique users, across ten countries worldwide. This article presents the development of the SMDAL, discusses the value of the content it provides, details the technology and tools used to create the directory website, and touches on the ongoing expansion and new initiatives of the project. Of special interest are two challenges that were faced by the directory team: maintaining the long-term viability of the project and overcoming language barriers caused by an international expansion—which was solved by developing partnerships with librarians around the globe. The project site can be accessed at https://tinyurl.com/SMDAL.

Keywords: Social media, academic libraries, library marketing, directory

Introduction

The Social Media Directory of Academic Libraries (SMDAL) began with a discussion between librarians elaborating on their experiences managing social media activities at their respective libraries. The discussion inspired three New Jersey academic librarians to participate in a social media presentation at the New Jersey Library Association (NJLA) annual conference in May 2018. The session, entitled "Maximizing Your Library's Social Media Efforts to Engage or Reach Your Audience,' concluded with the launch of the SMDAL, a new online social media resource. The SMDAL is now a fully functional website with social media directory listings for hundreds of social media accounts from academic libraries around the world. This article discusses the project's early foundations, evolution, and expansion and details the tools used to develop and manage this international directory. The conclusion provides suggestions for the use of the directory in research and teaching, including future project initiatives.

Social Media and Academic Libraries

Social media have become an integral element of contemporary society, providing a wide range of benefits for social interaction, business development, and organizational success. For this reason, libraries have experimented with social media as tools for marketing their resources and services. Recently, Harrison, Burress, Velasquez, and Schreiner (2017) looked back at the evolution of social media use in academic libraries, detailing how it went from a fringe practice to an essential communication tool. Many researchers have evaluated the effectiveness of social media use by academic libraries (Howard, Huber, Carter & Moore, 2018; Kim & Sin, 2016; Luo, Wang, & Han, 2013). Stvilia and Gibradze (2017) assessed undergraduate priorities for academic library social media usage by examining undergraduate student perceptions of the usefulness of library social media postings. Johnston (2014) discussed the vital importance of developing policies or guidelines for the execution of social media activities. Ramsey and Vecchione (2014) provided guidance on developing and implementing social media strategies and emphasized their necessity in any social media endeavor.

The array of available case studies, how-to guides and guides to best practices is extensive. Among these are platform-specific examples such as a LinkedIn collaboration presented by Santiago, Vinson, Fisher, Lierman, and Warren (2017), community building via Twitter by Young and Rossmann (2015), and building student relationships using Facebook by Phillips (2011). Peacemaker, Robinson, and Hurst (2016) provided insightful connections between public relations best practices and academic library social media strategies, and Brookbank (2015) offered guidance on developing social media strategies using student feedback. There are also several examples of creative social media campaigns and activities, as well as promotional guidance. These include scavenger hunts (McKee, 2017), a unique "catbrarian" campaign (Eastman, Saulnier, and Richardson, 2018), and post-event promotions (Lafazan and Kiebler, 2017). These contributions to the social media landscape provide a backdrop to the development of the SMDAL, and it was the phenomenological study of Harrison et al. (2017) that convinced SMDAL developers that a directory could be valuable to both librarians coordinating social media and researchers examining the topic.

Enormous potential also exists for academic libraries to use social media to communicate and interact with their current and future audiences. Recent surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center revealed that 88% of adults aged 18–29 and 95% of teens use some form of social media platform, noting that the variety of platforms and usage trends have continuously been in flux (Anderson & Jian, 2018 and Smith & Anderson, 2018). A more in-depth analysis of the Pew research shows the variety of platforms used by these two age-groups and demonstrates the importance of academic libraries not only actively using social media, but also simultaneously adapting to future trends in the social media landscape.

Development of the Directory

Maintaining an active social media presence to reach and engage library communities requires an enormous amount of time and energy (Brookbank, 2015, and Taylor & Francis Group, 2014). Librarians who lead or manage their library's social media activities seek out resources that can provide guidance and inspiration to make their social media efforts less tedious and more effective. These experiences gave rise to an idea to develop a resource that could provide collaboration, inspiration, and guidance. During preparations for a state library conference, three librarians shared their experiences managing social media, keeping up with the latest trends, and seeking inspiration from others. The conversation prompted the concept of a social media directory to emerge, and the three librarians joined forces to launch the project together. The original idea was to collect social media links and handles from academic libraries around the state, share them with conference attendees, and create a new working group of social media librarians within the state. This collection of social media links and handles would become an opportunity to find inspiration and learn from others.

The project's initial scope was strictly local—the social media directory would focus on academic libraries within the state and would be made available through a shared spreadsheet. The first step was the creation and dissemination of an online Google form to gather directory data, including each responding library's name and parent institution, the social media coordinator's contact information, and full URLs for each of the library's social media platforms. The team drafted an e-mail cover message, and the form started making the rounds on the various academic librarian mailing lists within the state. This effort also included a promotional social media graphic and message to advertise the directory in state-oriented social media groups.

During the distribution of the Google form, the project team encountered its first significant challenge when a Facebook group comprised of an international pool of librarians mistakenly received the call to participate. Before the team had an opportunity to decide how to address this issue, submissions started to come in from academic libraries in other states. Immediately, the team became concerned about the sudden expansion of the directory's scope and the possibility that it could expand into a massive project. Accepting these scalability concerns, however, the team acknowledged the benefit of a directory with a broader range of listings and made the decision to continue promoting the initiative to librarians outside of the state.

Within fourteen days of the initial call for submissions, a second call went out noting the expansion to libraries outside of the state. This led to an immediate influx of submissions from across the United States. Soon after this expanded effort was underway, the project team received inquiries from librarians outside of the United States—including South Africa, Turkey, and Argentina—about whether the directory would include international participants. Now the project team was again forced to address scalability issues and decide whether to expand the initiative even further. Unlike the decision to go nationwide, extending to an international audience involved language barriers. Initially, the directory team considered assisting the international librarians with designing separate directories, but the team could not overlook the opportunity to include libraries from around the world in a central social media directory. After careful consideration and discussions with librarians from several countries, the team decided to make the directory an international venture. The discussions were leveraged into forging new partnerships, and several librarians across the globe agreed to serve as "directory liaisons." These liaisons would translate

the directory submission forms and tables into several languages and would both promote the directory and respond to user inquiries in their home countries.

The rapid expansion of the project required the team to reconsider how the directory would be found, accessed, and maintained over the long term. The continuation and longevity of the project became a major focus of the project team. They wanted the project to be able to evolve over time as a resource for librarians engaged in social media activities. One possible avenue for future sustainability was the Marketing and Outreach (M & O) Committee of the College and University Section of the state library association and the state chapter of the Association of College and Research Libraries. As members of this committee, the project team was able to approach the committee about supporting the directory. The committee leadership agreed enthusiastically to develop a solution for the continuity of the project. However, the more difficult question related to accessibility remained unanswered.

Creating a spreadsheet and sharing it via e-mail was simple, but the project team believed this would be ineffective for widespread access and long-range planning. While a Web-based spreadsheet could provide necessary information to social media coordinators, it would not be able to grow without ongoing, widespread communication via LISTSERVs and social media. The search for a solution to this challenge led to the concept of developing a Web-based directory. The team considered several options, including developing a LibGuide hosted by a team member's institution or building a standalone website using Google Sites' free development tools and hosting. The team eliminated the LibGuide option because it would tie the directory to a single institution. Also, the M & O Committee raised some additional concerns about the management and continuity of a LibGuide. Ultimately, the directory team chose to utilize Google Sites with its free development tools and site hosting. This decision relied on several factors, including ease of sharing and transitioning site management, the ability to seamlessly integrate data from the Google submission form into a Google-based website, and the freely available hosting and storage space.

Implementation and Tools

The broad international expansion of the directory led to a new focus on usability, metadata, and organization. Confident that Google Forms and Google Sites could be adapted to suit the project's needs, the project team turned to conceptualizing a site that provided the functionality, accessibility, and intuitive features that would make it a valuable resource for academic librarians. This effort began by adapting the submission form for an international audience. The team included new data fields regarding geographic location, expanded the form's list of social media platforms to include those used outside the United States, and created translated forms. The revised form supported the expansion of the directory audience and quickly made the rounds on social media and various library LISTSERVs. Within a few weeks, directory submissions had expanded to more than 100 libraries.

While the revised form resolved several issues, the expanded audience and increased metadata collection led to challenges related to directory structure and usability. The first challenge focused on data organization. The expansion of the directory outside of the state had created a new layer of metadata. Would users prefer the directory to be organized in a location-based hierarchy, or should it remain organized by social media platform? After much discussion, the team agreed that social media platforms would be the preferable way to organize the directory. When investigating how other institutions were using social media, the team members preferred to learn how others were using each platform, with location being a secondary consideration.

With this decision, the design of the directory site began. The design draft included single site pages for social media contacts, a separate page for each of the major social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube), a page for other platforms (LinkedIn, Snapchat, etc.), and the addition of a "Social Media Resources" page.

As international participation increased, the project team faced significant complications with compiling data in several languages. The partnerships with the directory liaisons proved to be invaluable in translating the forms and adapting the directory to an international audience. Translating the forms, however, required their duplication and resulted in independent data sets for each translated form. This duplication forced a decision to have both a central directory and several international directories. Two challenges arose from this decision. First, the website would require a redesign to account for the international presence and the inclusion of directory forms and tables in the translated languages. Second, the organization of the submitted data would now be spread across several spreadsheets and would require extensive work to develop formulas merging the desired data points from each sheet.

To address the first challenge, the site was redesigned to ease navigation and allow for expansion. Instead of single pages for each platform, each platform became a subpage of a top-level "Social Media Platforms" page and a top-level "International" page was added. The International page included translated submission forms, links to each language-based directory, and contact information for the directory liaisons.

Addressing the second challenge of organizing the data requires an explanation of how the directory works—from receiving a form submission to the presentation of the data on the SMDAL website. Conceptually it is a simple process. Data are submitted through an online form, are exported to a spreadsheet, and appear in table form on the website. However, the process is not so simple in application. Data collection involves several Google Sheets formulas, the Google Sheets add-ons copyDown and AwesomeTable, and Google Data Studio. Building the website using Google Sites enabled seamless integration of these tools.

Gathering data in several languages was challenging. With data fields not matching identically and data exporting to a spreadsheet with different headers, it was time-consuming to write the formulas to extract the desired data from each submission form into a single master spreadsheet. Currently, each submission form for the directory feeds into a single master spreadsheet file; each translated language form has a spreadsheet tab that is separate from the primary tab. Several formulas were written to merge all the desired data into a central sheet that serves as the dataset for the directory tables. Each of the international sheets serves as the dataset for the respective international directory tables.

CopyDown (http://cloudlab.newvisions.org/add-ons/copydown), an add-on feature from developer Cloudlab, provided a valuable function to the directory. Unknown to many Google Sheets users is the fact that formulas written into Google spreadsheets, when linked to an active form, are not applied to new data submitted through the form. Activating e-mail addresses provided through the form would have to be done manually every time a new submission was exported to the spreadsheet in order to have it live on the directory table. The copyDown add-on allowed the application of selected formulas to any new data submitted to the spreadsheet and allowed the directory to feature active e-mail addresses and URLs in real time.

The directory tables would also not have been possible were it not for AwesomeTable and Google Data Studio. AwesomeTable (https://sites.google.com/site/scriptsexamples/available-web-apps/awesome-tables), available as a gadget for Google Sites and as an add-on feature for Google Sheets, was used as the Social Media Contacts page's display table because it offered extensive filtering options and displayed active e-mail links within the table. Unfortunately, AwesomeTable was free only with certain usage limitations, so the project team decided to use Google Data Studio (https://marketingplatform.google.com/about/data-studio/) for all the directory platform tables and international tables. Both AwesomeTable and Google Data Studio easily integrated with Google Sheets and Google Sites, which eased the transfer of data to the site, provided several sort and filter options, and allowed the table data to be downloaded as a CSV file.

New Initiatives

Recently the project team launched the beta version of a Social Media Documents Repository. Many librarians have come to recognize the necessity of developing policies and guidelines for their library's social media activities (Bauer, 2010 and Johnston, 2015). The project team had observed conversations about library-specific social media policies, guidelines, plans, and strategies in the various librarian social-media groups in which it participated. For that reason, the team perceived a need for a document repository to archive, organize, and share those types of materials.

The Social Media Documents Repository submission form accepts several file formats as well as document links. It requires the selection of document types and an acceptance of terms and conditions that grant permission to display submitted documents on the site. The linking of submissions to the existing directory's Google folders enables direct publication to the website using Google Data Studio. Submissions are tagged with a unique document ID upon submission for archival purposes. Users can sort, filter, and access documents by document type (policy, marketing plan, etc.). This new element to the site required a slight redesign, and it is now available on the Resources page of the website.

Conclusion

The directory was designed to broaden communication between academic library social-media coordinators and to provide a venue for perusing and seeking inspiration and guidance from hundreds of social media links. The international growth of the directory added further benefit by offering perspectives on the use of social media by academic libraries in a global context.

The directory has also become a tool for academics studying social media use by academic libraries and for instructors teaching future librarians about academic library marketing practices. As the directory expands, a growing body of data will be available to quantify the usage of various platforms in different contexts. Researchers looking to analyze social media trends and usage across academic libraries already can easily acquire hundreds of social media links, filterable by geographic location. A faculty member from the University of Costa Rica's School of Library Science and Information has already begun using the directory and noted its usefulness in teaching library marketing (D. Rodriguez, personal communication, September 11, 2018).

June 2018 was the first full month the site was online. Google site analytics reported that, in that one month alone, the site received nearly 2,000 visits from over 600 unique visitors, representing ten countries worldwide. At the start of 2019, the number of institutions in the directory has surpassed 200 and represented 16 countries. Moreover there were more than 1,600 unique visitors to the site, spanning 25 different countries.

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