

Spring 5-5-2017

In the Library and Online: Social Media and Civic Discourse

Samantha A. Mairson

University of Connecticut, samantha.mairson@uconn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://opencommons.uconn.edu/srhonors_theses



Part of the [Digital Humanities Commons](#), [Fine Arts Commons](#), [Library and Information Science Commons](#), and the [Photography Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mairson, Samantha A., "In the Library and Online: Social Media and Civic Discourse" (2017). *Honors Scholar Theses*. 520.
https://opencommons.uconn.edu/srhonors_theses/520

**IN THE LIBRARY AND ONLINE:
SOCIAL MEDIA & CIVIC DISCOURSE**

by S. A. Mairson

Table of Contents

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	3
Project Overview	4
THESIS In the Library and Online: Social Media & Civic Discourse	6-14
Appendix 1. Literature Review and Online Bibliography	15
Appendix 2. Interview Question Set	17
Appendix 3. Podcast Prototype	18
Appendix 4. Magazine Article Prototype	19
Appendix 5. Photographs.....	21

Abstract

This thesis analyzes the findings of an interview-based research study of public-serving libraries in the state of Connecticut. Specifically, it examines these institutions' use of social media to promote civic discourse online and on-site with the purpose of producing guidelines for best practices. This new research emerges from the Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts research Experience (SHARE) Award project, "Museums, Libraries, and Civic Discourse in Connecticut," which concluded Spring 2016.

The research develops an understanding of the use of social media by public-serving libraries, presents three models for dissemination of findings to the field, and concludes with key observations and further research questions.

Project Overview

This research was created to prioritize continued involvement with the Museums and Civic Discourse Project, and in order to explore research questions that evolved from my interviewing approximately ten library and museum leaders in the State of Connecticut regarding civic discourse practice.

The first step involved meeting with a research group to review transcriptions and analyze findings from the Museums and Civic Discourse project. These meetings, and the research documents that emerged from that effort, aided my formulation of a more specific research focus. My methodology, interview sample, and question set borrowed from that work.

The next step was conducting a literature survey on the topic of social media and civic discourse in libraries (Appendix 1). Zotero, an online bibliography tool, was utilized in order to make the literature survey open and accessible to others researching similar topics. In the course of the survey, it became clear that the library field has separately considered social media and libraries, and civic and libraries, but seldom the two together.

After developing a questionnaire and recruiting five Connecticut library professionals as respondents, interviews were conducted formally via email or using radio production-grade equipment. The interview question set is attached (Appendix 2). Preliminary findings are discussed in the thesis (pages 6-14), with a focus on interviews that were recorded with radio production equipment. These interviews were used to produce a podcast prototype (Appendix 3) and magazine article prototype (Appendix 4). The article draft makes practical recommendations on best use of social media for libraries, and weaves in the narrative developed in the thesis. Photography was another element of the project, which can be found throughout the thesis and via my online research blog “Digital Tools Applied to Research”.

The three mediums were selected as a demonstration of my research and digital media training, as well as my intentions to become more actively involved with the American Library Association. The audio essay enabled my involvement with WHUS, the local radio station, and allowed me to acquire audio production skills using software such as Adobe Audition. This component drew inspiration from the Dewey Decibel Podcast - a production of the American Library Association (ALA).

The photography (digital and analog) enabled my involvement with the UConn School of Fine Arts photography department, which grew to include the responsibility of darkroom monitor. The magazine article prototype is geared toward the audience of *American Libraries*, the monthly magazine of the ALA. The article aims to distill best practice and disseminate key findings with regard to social media as it affects libraries and civic discourse.

To prepare for the work of disseminating full results and guidelines for best practice, my future includes the pursuit of a graduate degree in library science at Syracuse University.

For more insight on the process behind developing this thesis, please refer to Figure 1 on the next page.

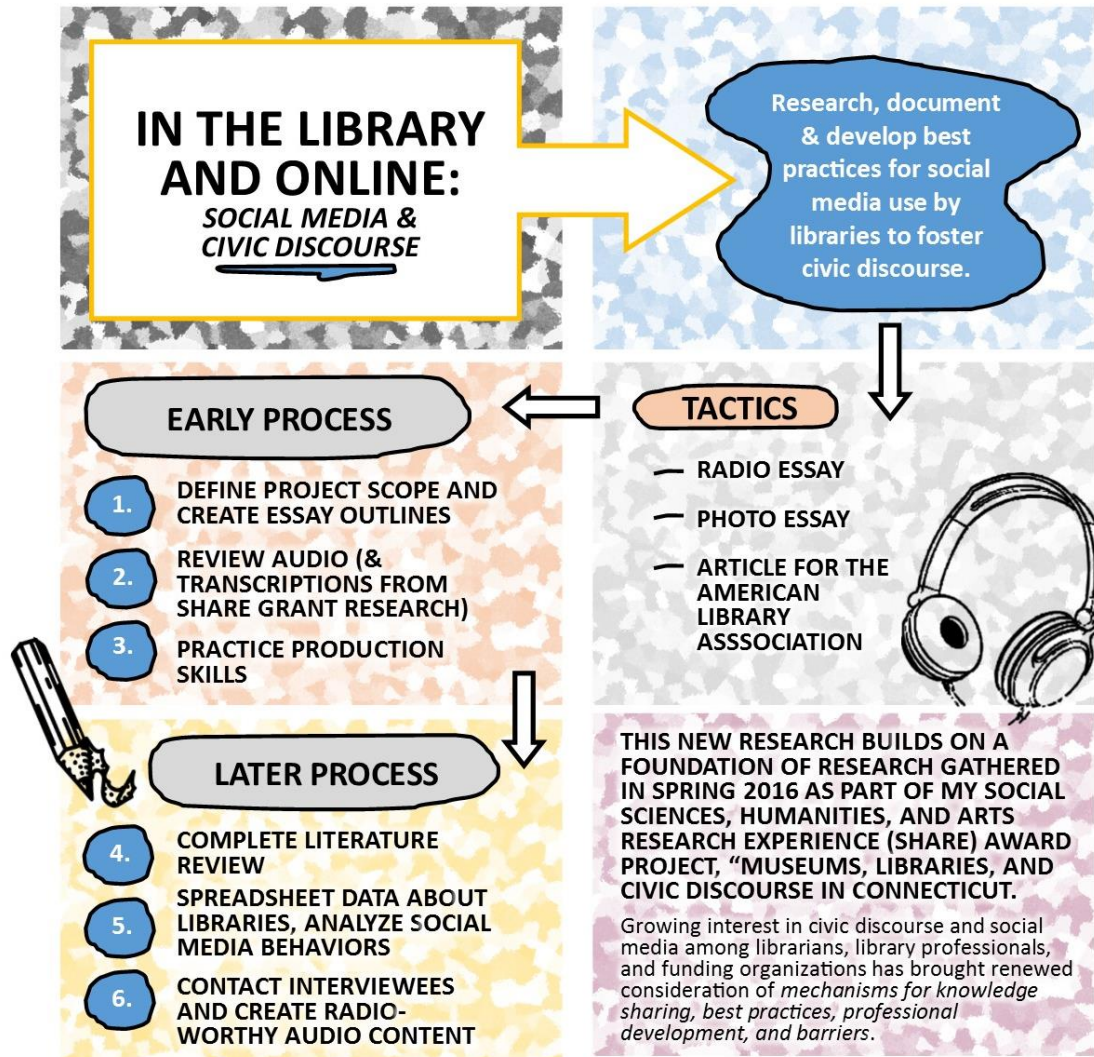


Figure 1. This infographic aims to distill the research process. It was created to aid a poster presentation of this research in Spring 2017.

THESIS
In the Library and Online:
Social Media & Civic Discourse



As part of her honors curriculum in Digital Media and Design at the University of Connecticut, the author interviewed library leaders in Connecticut to gauge the overlap between libraries, civic discourse and social media.

“**Y**ou have to keep trying,” Ken Wiggin, Connecticut State Librarian, said into his office phone. “There is no one-way to reach people.”¹ He was speaking about libraries, social media and its relationship to public discourse. In a time when civic discourse increasingly occurs in online comment boxes, libraries are challenged to strategize. “The hardest thing for libraries - or any institution - is to be able to rapidly adopt new forms of communication and to be ready to jettison that when its time is over.”

The library is both meeting place and resource provider. These characteristics have long correlated with the institution’s role in civic discourse practice. Civic discourse, however, has changed along with mediums of the age. Community dialogue has made a substantial move online. Social media platforms connect and curate information, communities, and their dialogue.

The National Council on Public History convened a working group on the topic of civic discourse in libraries and museums.² Dr. Clarissa Ceglio, a primary investigator in the working

¹ Ken Wiggin (Connecticut State Librarian) in phone interview with the author, April 2017.

² “Museums and Civic Discourse: Past, Present, and Emerging Futures – 2016 Working Group | National Council on

group, drafted the following definition of civic discourse:

“Social forms of collaborative meaning-making around topics and issues of importance to a community that opens pathways to understanding, action, and change. Social forms include but are not limited to dialogue-based programs and can include more playful but seriously productive forms of encounter.”

These “social forms of collaborative meaning-making” include social media communication.

Social media takes the form of websites and applications that facilitate content sharing and social networking. Broadly, the library field has adopted social media. In March 2016, the Library Research Service released its biennial report from the longitudinal study “U.S. Public Libraries and the Use of Web Technology”.³ The report indicates that libraries, serving populations large and small, have overwhelmingly embraced social media to extend their mission.

By 2014, all of the largest libraries - those serving 500,000+ people - were using at least one social media channel. Up 10% since 2012, 93% of libraries serving 25,000-499,999 had at least one social media channel. Across libraries of all sizes, the trend continues. The “U.S. Public Libraries and the Use of Web Technology” report also indicates that Facebook is the most widely adopted social media by libraries. Facebook is followed in popularity by Twitter, then YouTube and Flickr.

Through a series of interviews, library leaders in Connecticut demonstrated a strong grasp of the pros and cons of social media. For example, it requires greater digital literacy of its users. When libraries create social media presence, it becomes challenging to maintain. Content is distributed in a way that encourages engagement. But that engagement is not always positive. Platforms grow, evolve, or become irrelevant. Social media best use policies quickly become outdated. Impact becomes hard to measure. Community dialogue becomes fractured or siloed.

Researchers Chen, Chu, and Xu suggest that libraries have four main types of interactions using social media: knowledge or content sharing, communication, knowledge gathering, and marketing.⁴ Marketing seems the least likely of these interactions to promote civic discourse, but Jean Nelson sees it as a critical driving agent to in-person programs and resources.

Public History,” accessed May 2017. <http://ncph.org/phc/ncph-working-groups/museums-civic-discourse-2016-working-group/>.

³ Meghan Wanucha and Linda Hofschire, “U.S. Public Libraries and the Use of Web Technologies, 2014,” March 2016, https://www.lrs.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/webtech_public_2014.pdf.

⁴ Referenced on page 11. Meghan Wanucha and Linda Hofschire, “U.S. Public Libraries and the Use of Web Technologies, 2012,” *Library Research Service*, November 2013, https://www.lrs.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/WebTech2012_CloserLook.pdf.



Jean Nelson explains library social media strategy at the UConn Library.

“If you can get one person out of it, you’ve won,”⁵ said Jean Nelson, Head of Communication and Engagement for the UConn Library. She describes her role as being responsible for the communication piece of the library. She manages internal and external communications for the library. Social media is directly under her umbrella; as is donor relations, outreach, public exhibition programs, and print marketing. “Tone and consistency is important,” says Jean. “The other organizations associated with the library are using social media in a similar way. They’re primarily using it for marketing.” She says “feel-good content” is most successful.

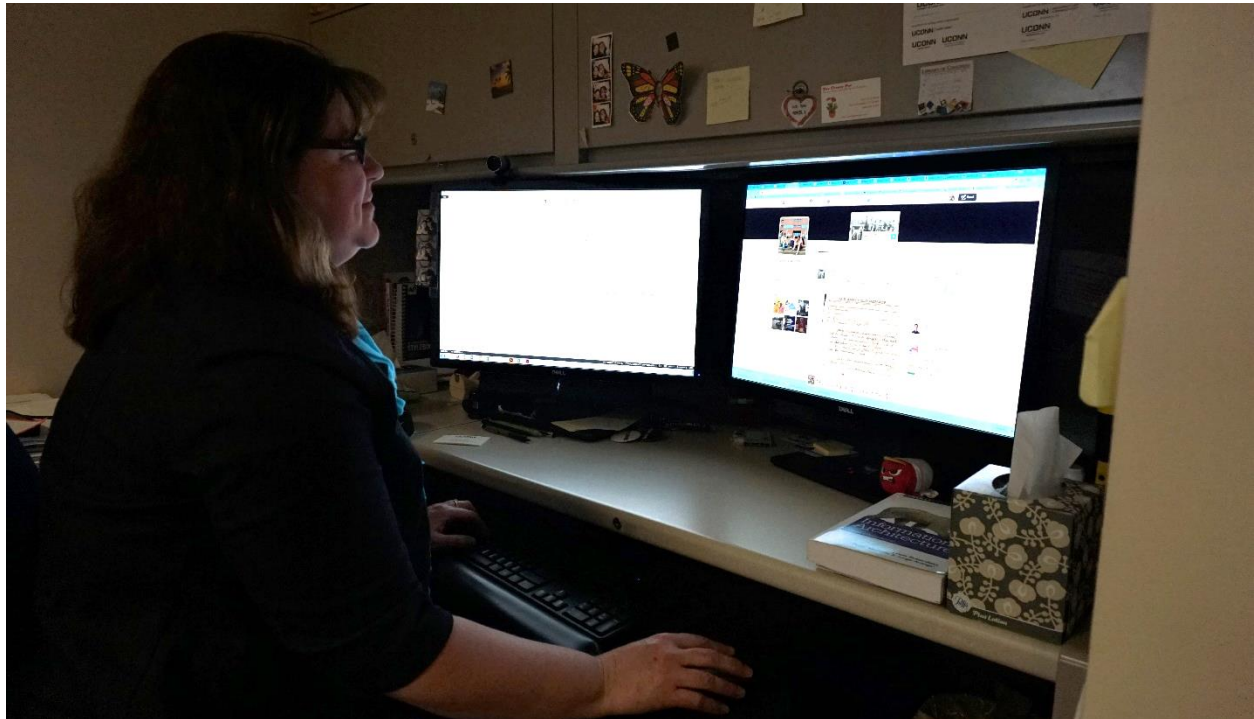
Ken Wiggin said, “the role libraries should be playing right now - they should be doing more with digital literacy.” He says that platforms have come and gone and evolved faster, probably, than policies do. Another challenge, he says, is that staff needs good training in how to use new media. “Or they need a kid,” he says, laughing. “It’s hard to keep it up and keep it fresh.”

Ken Wiggin has been Connecticut State Librarian for eighteen years. During that time, he has witnessed a lot of change. He oversees the Connecticut State Library, which includes the principal law library for the state, history and genealogy, the federal and state documents program, general reference, the state archives, the state public records administrator, the library

⁵ Jean Nelson (Head of Communications and Engagement) in discussion with the author, April 2017.

for the blind and physically handicapped, and the division for the library development.

Another challenge, he said, is analyzing impact. “You’re doing all this work and you think you’re out there,” and the questions are, “how many people are actually really, really benefitting from that? Or how many people are we really reaching?”



Jean Nelson takes a look at the UConn Library’s Twitter page.

Jean Nelson, of the UConn Library, articulated similar concerns. “Sometimes I wonder; you throw all this stuff out there. Who’s reading it? Is it worth our time?”

Alice Knapp, President of the Ferguson Public Library in Stamford, sees it as part of her role to strategically address these kinds of questions.

“My job is to shepherd the system forward; do strategic planning for the future, manage the budget, hire the staff, make sure the service is provided,” Knapp said. She described herself as not being on the front lines very much anymore, and so, her job is making sure that staff have enough resources to “do the job they need to do”.⁶

“I’m also the spokesperson for the library,” she said. “I’ve been with the library off and on for 17 years, and in my current role for 3 years.”

⁶ Alice Knapp (President of the Ferguson Library) in phone interview with the author, April 2017.



Alice Knapp showcases the 3D printing space while giving a tour of the Ferguson Library.

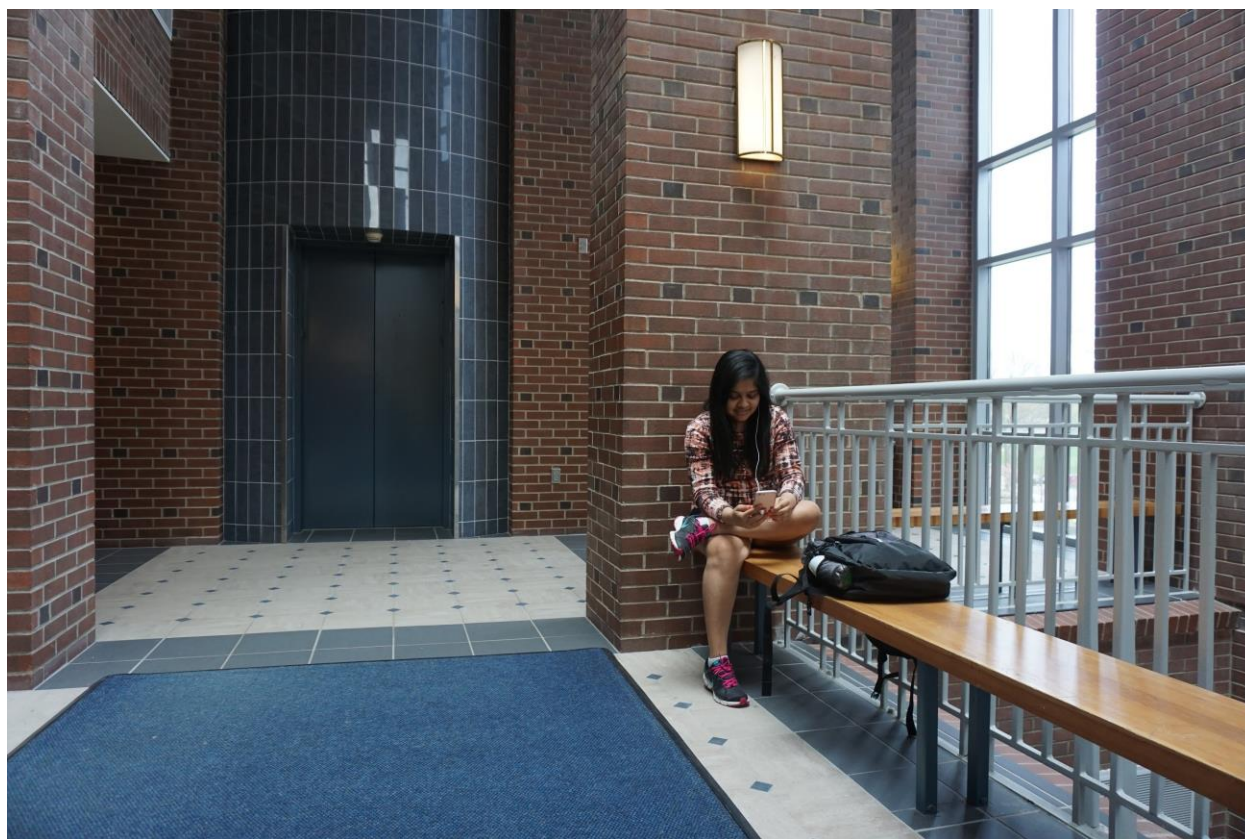
Knapp sees social media as fitting into a more dynamic communication strategy for her library. She identifies her institution as being active users of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. As a library leader, she uses LinkedIn to promote the library. “As our local paper has shrunk we have these other avenues to get our story across. Social media has allowed us to engage more broadly and more intimately.”

Each platform connects with different audiences, she explained. “For example, we have a lot of followers on Facebook and they’re usually our library users.” The library’s Twitter following, however, “is mostly other libraries and reporting agencies”.

Jean Nelson identified a similar congregate effect. Only for Jean, her primary users are not connecting with the library on Facebook. “For the most part, our Facebook crowd is not a student crowd...” She said that’s where donors connect to the UConn Library. Whereas the library’s Twitter has a large following of students and faculty.

In Connecticut, library leaders understand that social media is “changing the game”. When asked to define social media, they do so by naming the companies and brands who control the popular platforms: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Flickr, and so on.

Jean, who began working with the UConn Library Archives in 1998, says she has seen a significant change in the UConn Library’s approach to social media and civic discourse. “Definitely [there’s been a change in] the use of social media. Obviously in ’98 there wasn’t a lot of social media out there. So I started them [the UConn Library] off with Facebook and Twitter accounts. When I started, there wasn’t such things. In terms of civil discourse, I don’t really see any change there.”



A student at Eastern Connecticut State University's library uses her phone for streamed video chat.

Nancy Kranich, former President of the American Library Association, asserted that strong democracy needs libraries to provide informal learning opportunities and spaces for citizens to engage. In her article “Promoting Adult Learning through Civil Discourse in the Public Library”, Kranich paints a picture of Americans fleeing the public square.⁷ In her call to action, she says, “If public libraries are to fulfill their civic mission in the information age, they must find active ways to engage community members in democratic discourse and community renewal.” She quotes Harvard Professor, Robert Putnam: “Citizenship is not a spectator sport.”

When asked if she saw social media as having a significant role in civic discourse, Jean Nelson said, “Yes. But we have steered away – and I say we, I mean me – from using the [UConn Library] accounts for politics – I guess politics really captures most of that. We don’t use it as a platform to talk about libraries in general and political action around that kind of stuff. I just really haven’t done that – I haven’t wanted to use the platform that way. We follow all sorts of academic libraries and there are some that are very politically active in that way.”

Jean perceives tension with civic discourse, and that tension has to do with politics. Jean articulated a need to try and remain apolitical. Libraries seem more comfortable engaging face-

⁷ Nancy Kranich, “Promoting Adult Learning through Civil Discourse in the Public Library,” *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 2010, no. 127 (September 1, 2010): 15–24, doi:10.1002/ace.377.

to-face. Online engagement is less clear-cut than providing spaces in which to engage, programs with which to engage, and educational resources with which patrons might further their interests.



The staircase view overlooking the entrance and circulation desk of the Ferguson Library.

“Often an act that starts at the library transforms someone’s life,” said Alice Knapp. She shared an anecdote in which a Ferguson librarian helped an illiterate man learn to read a driving manual, so that he would be able to pass his driving test. “He’s now driving and he’s now reading,”

She indicated that social media gave the library a new channel for telling their story, and the story of that man. His story speaks to the role and power of the library. But social media can be a fast medium, and she mentioned that one challenge is control. The messages sent out by staff can positively or negatively affect the library’s brand and public image. Her library is actively working to develop a social media policy to take back some of the control before it ever becomes an issue.

Of the people actively contributing to her library’s channels, she said, “They are talented but they are few.” Alice Knapp said that social media success is measured by engagement metrics, such as likes and followers, and also in terms of the library’s overall metrics for success. She mentioned, for example, higher circulation of items and more dollars donated.

One pro of social media is its pre-built, user-tested architecture. In many cases, library patrons are already comfortable using the platforms. Library leaders often refer to this as “meeting the user where they are”.

Knapp said that in the good ole days, her library had centralized reach by printing a unified

message in the Stamford Advocate. The audience is now fractured. But she said that, in spite of this, social media contact allows a kind of intimacy and direct connection, which makes it distinct from the newspaper.

Libraries do not have a good sense of who their social media content is reaching, and whether it is reaching intended audiences. Communities risk getting siloed on social media. Potential discourse is lost thanks to social media's algorithmic drawstrings, which control what and who show up in the newsfeed.

Public-serving libraries are using social media and continuing their mission to advance civic engagement and collective public intellect. Specifically, libraries are using the platforms to extend their brand and identity into the community, as well as promote programming and resources. The managers of social media directly affect and influence whether accounts are considered major or minor activators of online civic discourse. This activation is also impacted by the institutional identity and mission.

Continued research should engage concerns around the "siloing" effect of social media, the development and maintenance of effective social media policy, and metrics for defining social media success. This could expand to include recommendations for social media strategy, as it affects public engagement with libraries.

The research would shed light on why public-serving libraries are weary to directly facilitate online civic discourse, in ways comparable to discourse fostered by libraries' physical spaces and in-person programs. Additionally, some research should be conducted regarding whether libraries trust social media platforms. Thorough and up-to-date recommendations should be made to the professional field with regard to privacy and brand management when using social media, as well as digital literacy more broadly.

Appendix 1. Literature Review and Online Bibliography

The online bibliography can be found in the form of a Zotero Library:

<https://www.zotero.org/samanthamairson/items/collectionKey/B8EUJN8Q>

“60.3.o-Connor.pdf.” 2017. Accessed April 29.

<https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/bitstream/handle/2142/31892/60.3.o-connor.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y>.

Kranich, Nancy. 2010. “Promoting Adult Learning through Civil Discourse in the Public Library.” *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 2010 (127): 15–24. doi:[10.1002/ace.377](https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.377).

———. n.d. “Libraries and Civic Engagement.” In *Library and Book Trade Almanac 2012*, 75–97. Medford, NJ: Information Today.

<http://connect.ala.org/files/2139/LBTA%20Libraries%20%26%20Civic%20Engagement.pdf>.

Kwanya, Tom, Christine Stilwell, and Peter G Underwood. November 10, 2011. “Library 2.0 versus Other Library Service Models: A Critical Analysis.” *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science* 44 (3): 145–62.

Lammers, Deborah. n.d. “Still Facing Obstacles to Web 2.0 Use By Your Library? Try Henrico’s Approach.” <https://ejournals.lib.vt.edu/valib/article/view/1195/1572>.

“LBTA Libraries & Civic Engagement.pdf.” 2017. Accessed April 29.

<http://connect.ala.org/files/2139/LBTA%20Libraries%20%26%20Civic%20Engagement.pdf>.

O’Connor, Lisa, and Marcia Rapchak. 2012. “Information Use in Online Civic Discourse: A Study of Health Care Reform Debate.” *Library Trends* 60 (3). doi:[Project MUSE, 10.1353/lib.2012.0008](https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2012.0008).

Richards, Anna, and Barbara Sen. 2013. “An Investigation into the Viability of LibraryThing for Promotional and User Engagement Purposes in Libraries.” *Library Hi Tech* 31.3: 493–519. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/LHT-03-2013-0034>.

Scott, Rachel. 2011a. “The Role of Public Libraries in Community Building.” *Public Library Quarterly* 30 (3): 191–227. doi:[10.1080/01616846.2011.599283](https://doi.org/10.1080/01616846.2011.599283).

- . 2011b. “Strategies That Public Libraries Use to Build Communities.” *Public Library Quarterly* 30 (4): 307–46. doi:[10.1080/01616846.2011.625604](https://doi.org/10.1080/01616846.2011.625604).
- Solomon, Laura. 2013. *The Librarian’s Nitty-Gritty Guide to Social Media*.
- Taylor, Natalie Greene, Paul T. Jaeger, Abigail J. McDermott, Christie M. Kodama, and John Carlo Bertot. 2012. “Public Libraries in the New Economy: Twenty-First-Century Skills, the Internet, and Community Needs.” *Public Library Quarterly* 31 (3): 191–219. doi:[10.1080/01616846.2012.707106](https://doi.org/10.1080/01616846.2012.707106).
- “The State of America’s Libraries 2014.” 2017. PDF. Accessed March 27. <http://www.ala.org/news/sites/ala.org.news/files/content/2014-State-of-Americas-Libraries-Report.pdf>.
- Wanucha, Meghan, and Linda Hofschire. 2013. “U.S. Public Libraries and the Use of Web Technologies, 2012.” *Library Research Service*. November. https://www.lrs.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/WebTech2012_CloserLook.pdf.
- . 2016. “U.S. Public Libraries and the Use of Web Technologies, 2014.” https://www.lrs.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/webtech_public_2014.pdf.
- Willingham, Taylor L. 2008. “Libraries as Civic Agents.” *Public Library Quarterly* 27 (2): 97–110. doi:[10.1080/01616840802114820](https://doi.org/10.1080/01616840802114820).

Appendix 2. Interview Question Set

Date interviewed -

Person interviewed -

1. Describe your roles and responsibilities -
2. How long have you been with the library?
3. Which social media channels does your library utilize?
 - a. Facebook
 - b. Twitter
 - c. YouTube
 - d. Flickr
 - e. Pinterest
 - f. Google+
 - g. Tumblr
 - h. Instagram
 - i. Snapchat
 - j. Other
4. Have you seen any significant changes in the institution, its use of social media, or its approach to public discourse?
5. Do you see social media as having a significant role in civic discourse?
6. Do you see the library as having a role in civic discourse?
7. How do you define social media?
8. Can you speak more about the communities who come to and are served by the institution? Who are they?
9. Can you speak to the content that's being directed at those audiences?
10. How would you define civic discourse?
11. Social media as part of marketing - do you think it represents the library's identity in a way?
12. What do you think are some of the barriers or challenges the staff might face in using social media? (in relationship to the library accounts)
13. How have you measured success?
14. What are the pros/cons of social media?

Appendix 3. Podcast Prototype

<https://soundcloud.com/samantha-mairson/in-the-library-and-online-social-media-and-civic-discourse-thesis-mixdown>

Appendix 4. Magazine Article Prototype

When was the last time you looked critically at your library's social media accounts? Chances are good that, like most public-serving libraries, your institution experiences:

1. A lack of knowledge around how to collect and make sense of social media analytics in order to understand how efforts achieve goals or advance mission.
2. Confusion when it comes to social media policy and best practice.
3. An inexplicable clustering of unique audience types in different channels.
4. Reticence to embrace social media channels, often linked to an important sense of the library's value as an "in-person" experience.

It's understandable. After speaking with a diverse sample of library leaders in Connecticut, these repeat issues emerged.

Tackle these issues.

- **Evaluate existing resources.** Create a conversation with or amongst the person(s) managing your social media accounts. Assess your social media situation. Seek out resources such as *The Librarian's Nitty Gritty Guide to Social Media* by Laura Solomon.
- **Seek administrative support.** Get buy-in from administration, which means prioritizing social media, as well as articulating and assessing its value (and ROI) for your library.
- **Strive for developing two-way conversations with your audience,** even if that conversation risks becoming uncomfortable or negative. Your library is interested in building long-term relationships with patrons, not completing a quick, lifeless transaction in cyberspace.⁸ It is important to have a pulse on what people are saying about your library via social media. Good online relationships with patrons can mean positive things for your in-person relationships with patrons, and for your library's reputation.
- **Develop a meaningful social media policy.** Make it a living document; which could mean scheduling quarterly re-evaluation. Take the time to articulate tone, thoughtful metrics for success, and must-have disclaimers (like respect copyright, don't share confidential information, and use good judgment).⁹ Include this as part of a more robust, annual social media plan.

Libraries have a reputation for promoting civic engagement and intellectual discourse. If that reputation is to survive the digital age, libraries need to be participants in the new public square: social media platforms.

Social media has the power to connect and mobilize your patron base around important issues.

⁸ Laura Solomon, *The Librarian's Nitty-Gritty Guide to Social Media*, 2013.

⁹ Ibid.

Previously prioritized communication channels have lost power; the river has become a series of streams. When patrons are not in your library, and sometimes even when they are, they are online. That online space is robust with information, but also private companies whose interest is profit. Library leaders must understand the implications of this dynamic, use digital tools wisely, and become pioneers of digital literacy.

Alice Knapp, President of the Ferguson Library in Stamford, Connecticut, sees social media as fitting into a more dynamic communication strategy for her library. She identifies her institution as being active users of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. As a library leader, she uses LinkedIn to promote the library. “As our local paper has shrunk we have these other avenues to get our story across. Social media has allowed us to engage more broadly and more intimately.”

Each platform connects with different audiences, she explained. “For example, we have a lot of followers on Facebook and they’re usually our library users.” The library’s Twitter following, however, “is mostly other libraries and reporting agencies”.

Jean Nelson, head of Communication and Engagement for the UConn Library, identified a similar congregate effect. Only for Jean, her primary users are not connecting with the library on Facebook. “For the most part, our Facebook crowd is not a student crowd..” She said that’s where donors connect to the UConn Library. Whereas the library’s Twitter has a large following of students and faculty.

You know your users well. Your task, now, is to create a meaningful connection with those users online. Ready, set - go.

Appendix 5. Photographs

All photographs were taken by (CC) Samantha Mairson. More can be found online at the author's research blog: digitaltoolsapplied2research.wordpress.com.