Successful SOCIAL NETWORKING in Public Libraries

WALT CRAWFORD
Walt Crawford is a writer, researcher, and sometimes speaker on libraries, technology, policy, and media. Recent research focuses on library use of social networks, but also on micro-publishing and library roles in that area. He has written 17 traditionally published books in the library field (and several self-published books), most recently The Librarian's Guide to Micropublishing (Information Today, Inc., 2012) and Open Access: What You Need to Know Now (ALA Editions, 2011). Crawford was a library systems analyst, designer, and programmer for five decades at RLG and the University of California and was president of LITA in 1992–1993. He received the LITA/Library Hi Tech Award for Outstanding Communication for Continuing Education in Library and Information Science in 1995, the ALCTS/Blackwell Scholarship Award (for Future Libraries: Dreams, Madness or Reality) in 1997, and the Gale Group Online Excellence in Information Authorship Award in 1998.

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Preface

This book has been a voyage of discovery—one that began with a loose agenda and ended with a greater appreciation for the sheer diversity of America’s public libraries and the extent to which small libraries are the centers of their communities.

The loose agenda was not a set of theses and prescriptions for what constitutes successful social networking and whether public libraries were doing it right. Instead, I set out to see what was happening: how prevalent library social networking actually is and whether it seems to be reaching an audience.

I assumed then (in early 2011 when I proposed the project to ALA Editions) that most public libraries with active Facebook pages or Twitter accounts probably considered those efforts to be successful. After all, they’re not long-established services with significant budget lines, ones that require decision making to retire. They’re newcomers with little or no dedicated budget, ones that should be balanced against other initiatives. If they’re not working, libraries should and, I believe, would redirect the time spent on social networks to some other, more profitable endeavor. That may have happened in some cases.

In other words, I assumed that librarians are intelligent people who generally know what they’re doing. I did not assume that there was one and only one proper way to use Facebook or Twitter. I certainly did not assume that a public library serving four million people should have the same kind of Facebook page as one serving 400.

I also disbelieved the occasional assertion that all or almost all public libraries already had Facebook pages. That struck me as implausible, but it also struck me as easy to investigate. If, say, 180 of the first 200 libraries I checked had Facebook or Twitter accounts, then unless that sample was biased, I was wrong.

The appendix includes some notes on how the usage survey began and how (and why) it grew. Suffice it to say that what began as a two-state project possibly including 300 reporting
libraries wound up as a 38-state project including nearly 6,000 public libraries—and the larger the body of data, the less willing I was to claim that the results could be projected to the rest of the country.

• Diversity in Size and Approach •

I’ve always believed that the sheer diversity of America’s public libraries is a strength, as is local control of those libraries. At the same time, although I was aware that most of America’s public libraries are relatively small, I’ve always been a patron of medium-sized and large public libraries.

In the course of viewing library websites, Facebook pages, and Twitter streams, I’ve become much more aware of how many small libraries there are—and how effectively some of those libraries serve their community. Most small libraries don’t have Facebook pages and few have Twitter accounts, but some small libraries clearly reach a substantial portion of their community through social networks.

Just as libraries differ in size, they differ in how they use social networks. That’s as it should be, I believe. This book includes several dozen examples of public library tweeting and Facebook updates showing a range of approaches.

As of fall 2011, it was reasonable to say that most public libraries (at least in 38 of the 50 states) had social network accounts—but also that most public libraries were not active on either Facebook or Twitter. I suspect the latter statement won’t be true by the time this book is published, as the rate of adoption appears to exceed the rate at which libraries stop updating social network accounts or shut them down.

• Acknowledgments •

Thanks first to Susan Mark, statistics librarian at the Wyoming State Library. She has her own list of Facebook-using Wyoming libraries—and it was a different list than my initial results. An e-mail exchange convinced me to revisit 1,500 of the first 2,406 libraries, using an expanded search technique and finding many more Facebook accounts.

Thanks also to Colorado’s Library Research Service for making freely available its study of 689 public libraries and their use of web technologies (including social networks) in 2010.

Thanks to all those who responded to my questions about social network use in their libraries. That includes 10 comments provided on a background-only basis as well as the following people who allowed me to quote them (although in some cases I didn’t have room to include part or all of their comments):

• Ellen Druda at Half Hollow Hills Community Library in New York; Alan Thibeault at the Winthrop Public Library & Museum in Massachusetts; Gwendolyn Vos at Sioux Center Public Library in Iowa; Janette McMahon at West Liberty Public Library in Iowa; Amber Mussman at Cedar Rapids Public Library in Iowa; Jan Kaiser at Des Moines Public Library in Iowa; Diane Sinclair at Williams Public Library in Iowa; Vicki Hibbert at Clive Public Library in Iowa.
• Donna Robertson at Christchurch City Libraries in New Zealand; Ann Foster at the Saskatoon Public Library in Saskatchewan, Canada; Jamie Williams at Ericson
Public Library in Iowa; Cheryl Heid at Johnston Public Library in Iowa; Valerie Marino at Sawyer Free Library in Massachusetts; Karen Burkett-Pederson at Bondurant Community Library in Iowa; Michelle McLean at Casey-Cardinia Library Corporation in Victoria, Australia; Claudia Haines at Homer Public Library in Alaska.

- Darcia Grace at Nenana City Library in Alaska; Anita Falltrick at Benicia Public Library in California; Barbara Eales at Ventura County Library in California; Terzah Becker at Boulder Public Library in Colorado; Marie Spratlin Hasskarl at Burlington Public Library in Connecticut; Andrea Ingala at Windsor Public Library in Connecticut; Carrie Andrew at Norwood Public Library in Colorado; Mary Lukkarila at Cloquet Public Library in Minnesota; Lynn Schofield-Dahl at Boulder City Library District in Nevada.

- Kit Thompson at Pierce County Library System in Washington; Theresa Barnaby at Richland Public Library in Washington; Marjorie Dailey at Albany County Public Library in Wyoming; Christina Greenfield at Big Horn County Library in Wyoming; Isabel M. Hoy at Goshen County Library in Wyoming; Melinda Brazzale at Laramie County Library System in Wyoming; Susan Worthen at Lyman Branch Library, Uinta County, Wyoming; Debbie Iverson at Sheridan County Public Library System in Wyoming; Moreno Barros at the University of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil; David Bigwood at the Lunar and Planetary Institute in Texas.

- David Lee King of the Topeka and Shawnee County Library System in Kansas, who made a case for not having network icons on the library home page; the Library Society of the World contingent on FriendFeed for a variety of discussions; and others who helped bring this project about—including, last but most important, my patient and supportive wife (who has been a public library cataloging supervisor and an academic library director, albeit before library social networking was feasible).

This project involved a rolling snapshot of how 5,958 public libraries in 38 states use two social networks. I believe this book will be useful for every library that has a Facebook page or Twitter account—and for every library that’s considering such activity.
LIBRARIES SHOULD BE active within their communities and visible to their patrons.

That doesn’t seem like a controversial statement. Here’s one that might be a little more troublesome: Libraries should be where patrons want or expect them to be, when that’s feasible and appropriate.

The flip side of that statement: Libraries should not intrude on the lives of their patrons when such intrusion is unwanted—and what’s helpful at one level may become intrusive at another level.

This book considers public libraries in social networks—specifically, how public libraries were using Facebook and Twitter in the fall of 2011. These social networks offer new ways for libraries to be active within their communities and engage their patrons. Many libraries use Facebook effectively. Many others have Facebook pages but may not be effectively reaching and engaging their patrons. Thanks to the wonders of Facebook Community Pages, many public libraries also have Facebook pages that they did not create and may not be aware of.

Public library Twitter accounts are much less widespread, but there are still hundreds of them, almost certainly more than a thousand nationwide. Neither Facebook nor Twitter is a universal solution, and no single set of guidelines for their use will serve all libraries equally well. What I hope to do here is to show what’s being done and offer a variety of examples of how libraries use these networks—and what some librarians and library workers have to say about that use. Along the way, I’ll note a couple of ways that libraries can fail at social networking, with the caveat that there are many more ways to succeed than to fail.

Before diving into Facebook and Twitter, it may be useful to think a little more about library community activity and patron engagement in general. I believe there’s a set of questions that should be considered (not necessarily answered) for any such activity—whether you call it marketing, outreach, engagement, or publicity.
CHAPTER 1

· Not Only Whether, but Also Which and How ·

You may have read or heard that all or nearly all public libraries are already on Facebook. That is simply not true. At least as of fall 2011, there are thousands of U.S. public libraries that have neither library-maintained Facebook pages nor Twitter accounts.

Does every library need to be on Facebook? Clearly not, although library social networking gurus have made such suggestions. After years of hearing “every library must . . .” and “every librarian should . . .” followed by various things that couldn’t possibly apply to every library, I think a reasonable filter is to place before the “should” or “must” this qualifier: “. . . that has at least the resources of libraries I’m most familiar with.” So, for example, according to Angel Rivera’s notes on David Lee King’s November 2011 webinar on “Facebook in the Library: Enhancing Library Services and Engaging Users,” King said: “Libraries need to be in Facebook given that our communities are there already.” As a general proposition, saying that libraries need to be wherever their communities are is absurd, but within context—including, most important, that these librarians all had resources and time to attend a webinar—King may be right. (Incidentally, Rivera’s post outlines a number of good suggestions from King on goals and techniques for Facebook.)

Are most U.S. public libraries already on Facebook or Twitter? That’s not clear. In a summer 2011 survey of public library agencies in 25 states, slightly less than half (48%) appeared to have either library-run Facebook pages or Twitter accounts. The missing majority was not just smaller rural libraries, however. Although a majority of libraries serving 25,000 people or more did have Facebook pages, more than a third of those libraries were not apparently active on Facebook or Twitter.

A majority of libraries in 38 states did have either library-run Facebook pages or Twitter accounts when checked in fall 2011, including a majority of libraries in the original 25 states, but in both cases it was a narrow majority: 54% of the 2,406 public libraries in 25 states and 55% of 5,958 libraries in 38 states. That’s with the broadest possible definition of “have,” including pages that have never had posts and pages and Twitter accounts with no posts or tweets in more than a year. That still leaves 45% of public libraries checked—just under 2,700—with no apparent social network presence. Indeed, the majority is so small that I would not be willing to assert that a majority of all public libraries in all 50 states have social network presences. It’s quite possible that participation within the remaining 12 states (involving more than 3,000 more libraries, most of them small) was low enough to reduce overall involvement to less than half.

SHOULD YOUR LIBRARY BE ON SOCIAL NETWORKS?

Answering that question involves some thought and a little planning—and maybe a little research. Let’s break it down into several smaller questions that need to be answered for each social network you may be considering:

- Can your library devote staff time to create and manage the social network account?
  For some smaller libraries, “staff” includes (or may consist entirely of) volunteers, but this question needs to be answered in every case. A social network presence that’s empty may be worse than no social network presence at all. A social network presence with nobody assigned primary responsibility might as well not exist.

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Opening an account on a social network is free. Maintaining an effective account most definitely is not, although the cost is staff time, not money.

- **Can your library sustain activity on this social network, not only posting items but also following up on feedback?** I’m not ready to say your library should post something every day (that’s ludicrous for many libraries) but if you’re successful, someone should be checking your account every day the library is open and probably at least once every open hour during that time. You also need to have some plan for succession and backup so that social network activity doesn’t cease abruptly when one person leaves or is out of the library for an extended period.

- **Does your community use this social network?** At this point, the answer is likely to be yes for Facebook. For Twitter, the answer is less clear in some communities.

- **Do your patrons expect or want to see you on this network?** Your goal should be to increase community involvement, engagement with, and support of the library—not to be an intrusion into areas where patrons don’t think the library belongs. Is your library ready to treat this social network as what it is—that is, a social network? Ideally, social networks involve engagement. Your library should be listening to your community and engaging with it. You should be talking with your patrons, not just to them.

That last question moves from whether to how. If there’s one thing I’m sure of after glancing at how more than 3,200 libraries use Facebook and how more than 950 use Twitter, it’s that no set of rules applies to everybody. There is no doubt that some libraries use Facebook or Twitter strictly as another publicity medium, to good effect and with good results. Is it the best use of either network, however? I don’t believe it is, but I’m not willing to claim that as unassailable truth.

### WHICH NETWORKS?

With all its failings and privacy issues, Facebook is currently the more than 1.1-billion-user whale in the social networking ocean. Given Facebook’s claim that half its users check in at least once a day, that’s particularly impressive. That 1.1 billion figure is worldwide. U.S. and Canadian usage may be falling, but you can still assume that roughly half of your patrons have Facebook accounts—and that roughly one-quarter of them use those accounts every day.

You could make the claim that Facebook’s shoddy and ever-changing privacy practices make it a poor match for libraries, but that’s a discussion beyond the scope of this book. In practice, Facebook suits libraries because it has pages designed for organizations and companies, so people can follow you by “liking” your page rather than by the clumsy reciprocal “friending” formerly required for personal accounts. (That has changed, however; people can now follow other people’s feeds on Facebook without requiring reciprocity.)

After Facebook, there’s a huge drop in usage. According to comScore’s December 2012 rankings by unique visitors from U.S. addresses, Facebook had 150 million U.S. visitors (a drop from 162 million in August 2011). Twitter was a distant second at 40.7 million (up from 33 million in August 2011). LinkedIn was nearly tied for second at 40.6 million. MySpace, which was second with 37 million in August 2011, was number 48 at 27.5 million.

At this point, MySpace appears to focus primarily on entertainment and music. It’s also gained a reputation for some less savory pages and lost much of its usage within the United States. In my initial scan of 2,406 public library websites in 25 states in the summer of 2011,
I found 21 libraries with MySpace icons on their home pages—and I’d have to wonder how many of those were active sites.

The obvious second choice for library involvement is Twitter, and hundreds of public libraries use Twitter. Like Facebook, Twitter doesn’t require reciprocity: any number of people can follow your library’s tweets without your approval. But it’s much less widely used than Facebook; as noted earlier, it has roughly one-quarter the usage. Given the probability that Twitter users aren’t spread as evenly across the population as Facebook appears to be, it’s more than possible that, in many smaller communities, there aren’t enough Twitter users to make a library account worthwhile. There are other factors to Twitter usage as well—for example, crafting messages within the 140-character limit that aren’t just links and maintaining the level of activity that seems to be expected of tweeters.

Then there’s LinkedIn. To most of us, it’s a business network, primarily for business and professional relationships. It makes sense for a library to use LinkedIn as one recruiting tool. Does it make sense to use it as part of social networking? I’ve seen some libraries on LinkedIn, but I believe it’s an open question as to whether this network is where patrons expect or want to interact with libraries.

Among 3,266 public libraries with a social network presence in fall 2011, 57—6% of the libraries using Twitter—appeared to use only Twitter. That is, they didn’t have visible Facebook accounts other than teen or children’s pages. I can only assume that in these five dozen cases librarians made a conscious decision that for their community and patrons Twitter was a better network.

Google+ began offering pages for organizations in late fall 2011. Before then, it was not feasible for public libraries to maintain a Google+ presence, at least not legitimately. When I was rechecking the 2,406 libraries in 25 states, I observed perhaps half a dozen G+ icons leading to Google+ pages. It’s fair to assume that there will be many more Google+ library pages in the future—if Google+ grows to be a serious alternative to Facebook.

**Communities and Social Networks**

It really is all about community and engagement—or at least it can be. An effective social network presence can combine functions of a bulletin board where patrons post questions or complaints and staff members post responses, library blogs, the news area of your website, and your e-mailed newsletter. That presence can have a single focus, but more often it will include a range of topics and even voices.

But every community is different, just as every library is different. At one extreme, two libraries in Alaska, one in New Mexico, and one in Idaho, each serving fewer than 300 people, have Facebook pages liked by roughly half the people in the community—a level that’s unheard of for larger libraries. (Among the 5,958 libraries in this study, the highest percentage of Facebook likes for libraries serving at least 25,000 people was just over 7% of the community; for libraries serving at least 500,000, it was 2.6%.)

Should the Los Angeles Public Library (LAPL), serving just over four million people, or the County of Los Angeles Public Library (serving more than 3.6 million) be unhappy because they don’t have two million likes? Clearly not. For that matter, should the updates from LAPL and other huge public libraries sound the same or serve the same purposes as those from Hope Community Library, the Village of Corona Public Library, Stanley District Library, and Seldovia Public Library?
Consider some Facebook updates from four very small public libraries. Here’s Hope Community Library in Alaska with feedback noted by boldface first names, last names omitted:

All—I had hoped to post more about the Hope Wagon Run that will be this weekend; however, I have been unable to get any electronic information to pass along. The Wagon Run will be this Sunday and there will be lots of events throughout the weekend in Hope. 3 people like this.

Breezy Looking forward to it! We’ll be headed that way in the morning!

Susan Pancake breakfast from 8–11am at the social hall, cake walk at 3pm, music at the seaview, antique car parades through the day, and Sunday is the Run at 11am. Raffle will start at 2pm.

Wow, summer is in full swing and it is looking fabulous outside! Check out our book shed for an inexpensive book to stick in your back pocket. Then, go find that perfect spot off the beaten path and spend some time living in someone else’s imagination. 5 people like this.

That first post is direct engagement: The library filled in the basics and a community member added the particulars. Seldovia Public Library, also in Alaska, weighs in with a slightly more formal tone:

Board meeting: Tuesday, August 8 at 7pm Agenda Annual meeting of the Seldovia Public Library Board of Directors August 9, 2011 at 7 pm Roll call (excused absences) Call to order . . .

The Big Bang: How do they know that? Seldovians for Science and the Seldovia Public Library invite you to Dr. Travis Rector An evening with Dr. Travis Rector Dr. Rector is a professor of physics and astronomy at the University of Alaska Anchorage. . . .

Look for us on the Fourth! That’s right: we’ll be there for our annual used book sale, just as we are every year: library parking lot starting at 7 am. And oh, have we got some great books for you this year. We did a big weeding of our fiction section last year and there are bunches of novels by your favorite authors. . . .

Here’s a third, very small library, Stanley District Library in Idaho:

The library will be closed tomorrow. Stop by our booth at the Sawtooth Mountain Mamas Arts and Crafts Fair to purchase your 2012 calendar. Chris likes this.

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CHAPTER 1

Buy the 2012 Sawtooth Scenes Calendar, Now Available Online! [Link]

It was a big snow year in the Sawtooths and while the flakes flew outside our team of volunteers was poring through photographs and looking at proofs. The result is a gorgeous calendar showcasing the beauty that surrounds us here in Stanley, Idaho. It may be the best of our calendars yet. As always, 2 people like this.

Stanley Community Library created an event. Third annual Friends of the Library Luncheon Friday, July 29, 2011 at 12:00pm Redfish Lake Lodge

Songwriter Josh Ritter from Moscow, Idaho has published his first book, "Bright’s Passage." Check it out!

Heather Awesome. I love his music!

And here's the Village of Corona Public Library in New Mexico—with four updates over an eight-day period in November in a library potentially serving 185 people (with 100 Facebook likes):

LAST CHANCE to get your important dates, ads and brands into the 2012 Corona Community Calendar! The calendar goes to the printer on November 16. All proceeds benefit the library and literacy in the Corona area. Pick up a form at the library or email us at friends_of_vocpl@yahoo.com to get your order form. Thank you!

NM Centennial Steam Train passes through Corona on Saturday, Nov 11. (Photo courtesy of Alvina H.) 5 people like this.

Trish Phenomenal Photo!!

Great picture Alvina

***GREAT NEWS!!*** The Library has just received many new Non-fiction DVDs which are now ready to check out! Subjects include animals, sports (rodeo, basketball, football), places (Rift Valley, Ganges, Yellowstone, the Universe), people (the Apostles, the Founding Fathers, cowboys), music (Elvis, Taylor Swift, Cats the musical), events (Mayflower crossing, 9/11/01, and comedy (Gilda Radner, Steve Martin) just to name a few. COME BY AND SEE IT FOR YOURSELF!! 2 people like this.

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IT’S THAT TIME AGAIN, FOLKS!!! The Friends of the Village of Corona Public Library are now taking orders for the 2012 Corona Community Calendar! The price is still an easy $10. If you have any questions, please call the Library or any member of the Friends of VOCPL and they will be glad to help. CALL OR COME BY NOW!!

Heather I want a calendar . . . but it would take me too long to come by the library. Can I mail a check? :)

Village of Corona Public Library We will mail you an order form tomorrow!!

Susan I would like a calendar as well. I live in Arizona so could it be mailed to me?

Village of Corona Public Library Absolutely, Susan! We will contact you with info!!

Each of these four libraries, primarily if not entirely volunteer-run, serves fewer than 300 people. At the other extreme, here’s LAPL, serving more than four million people—and it’s worth noting that LAPL’s updates also maintain a personal voice (one post has been trimmed):

Who knew our Chatsworth Branch Library was a hotbed of young, cutting-edge musical talent? Check out Patch Magazine’s video coverage of the August 18th Teen Concert event at the branch. [Video] 3 people like this.

LA City = Books R Us! Is L.A. The World’s Next Great Literary City? The Los Angeles Review of Books Says Yes: [Link] That’s right: the days of dogging LA book culture might soon (finally!) be behind us thanks to The Los Angeles Review of Books, an ambitious new LA-based literature review journal that’s re-imagining the art of literary critique and propelling it into the 21st century. Digital, sprawling, and fearless . . . 6 people like this.

Those are extremes: some of the smallest and largest libraries among Facebook users in the 25 states surveyed. You’ll find more personal but also more formal attitudes in between.

I believe all five libraries serve their communities well and engage them effectively with Facebook, albeit at different levels of engagement. (LAPL has more than 3,000 likes—but that’s less than one per thousand residents, typical of very large libraries.)

HOW SMALL?

The Alaska, New Mexico, and Idaho libraries noted earlier are not the smallest libraries in the 38 states surveyed—not even the smallest with Facebook pages. There are 27 libraries
serving fewer than 100 people. One of those established a Facebook page in the late summer of 2011. Here are three Facebook updates of four over the course of 16 days from Whale Pass Community Library—with nine likes in a legal service area of 31 people:

Winter hours are in effect now: Monday 3–5 pm Tuesday 1–3 pm Wednesday 4–8 pm Saturday 11 am–2 pm WIFI available indoors and out—electrical outlets on the side deck with table and chairs.

Big winds yesterday—all the notices on the bulletin board flew away—lots of room for new posts now.

We just had our first story time for and with the children from Whale Pass School—what fun! Thursday mornings will be something to look forward to in the coming weeks. Next week, we’ll take pictures!

I omitted a September 22 post with six new photos from that second reading day. It’s worth noting that there are posts from others on the wall: the library is engaging the community. Sometimes, not all of the likes for a public library Facebook page are from members of the local community. One small library in New Mexico has a legal service area of 439 and 755 likes on its Facebook account; clearly, those aren’t all patron likes. Still, when I’ve checked Facebook likes and Twitter follows (where it’s possible to do so), all but a few apparently have been either patrons, local businesses, and organizations or fans of the library from nearby communities. Yes, some librarians like or follow a fair number of libraries around the country—but that doesn’t appear to be a substantial portion of any library’s following.

IS ENGAGEMENT MANDATORY?

Is it wrong for a library to use Facebook or Twitter purely as a publication channel with no room for actual engagement? I’m not ready to make that claim. Anita Falltrick, technology librarian at Benicia Public Library in California (serving 28,000 people, with an average of 10 to 15 tweets and Facebook updates per month) had this to say:

We use both as another form of outreach mostly for events. The center section of our website’s homepage is a blog. Each week I either copy and paste or link each blog story from our homepage to Facebook and then I shorten the entry to fit in Twitter. We have linked the events page to our Google calendar. We do not allow comments with either of these social media. It’s another way to reach out to people who do not use our website or paper calendars. [Emphasis added]

With 87 followers and 154 likes as of late November 2011 (up from 67 and 131 in late August) and a streamlined workflow, social networks may be an effective way to reach out—even without comments. Notably, Falltrick does create shorter tweets, rather than simply offering the first portion of a Facebook update and a link. Here are two tweets from Benicia followed by the equivalent Facebook updates:

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Teen Karaoke Party—Wed, Jul 27, 6–8 pm. What better way to spend a summer night than with your friends, some karaoke and treats?

Poetry Reading—Thurs, July 28, 7 pm. Poems written for the exhibit “I Read the News Today, Oh Boy!” will be read by their writers.

Teen Karaoke Party | Benicia Public Library. [Link] What better way to spend a summer night than with your friends and some karaoke? Join us at the library for some tunes and some tantalizing treats to wet your whistle in between songs! Janet likes this.

I Read the News Today, Oh Boy! Poetry Reading | Benicia Public Library. [Link] Poems created for the exhibit will be read as well as related work by distinguished poets who participated in the project.

Janette McMahon, director of the West Liberty Public Library in Iowa—serving 3,300 people with 153 likes in September 2011 and fairly frequent posts (around three per week in recent months)—also sees Facebook as primarily a one-way tool: “West Liberty Public Library uses Facebook for promotion and dissemination of information. We do not use Twitter.”

But even a quick glance at West Liberty’s Facebook wall shows that “promotion and dissemination” does not mean impersonal or lifeless posts:

Make sure you save us a little time right after trick-or-treating Halloween night. More info to come bwahahaha . . . 2 people like this.

Whew, just finished updating the Library events. We’ve got A LOT going on this month!

West Liberty Public Library created an event. Wimpy Kid Lock-In Friday, September 30, 2011 at 8:00pm West Liberty Public Library RSVP to this event . . . [followed by more event posts].

On the other hand, engagement is an important part of social networking for many libraries and can go hand-in-hand with understanding your community. Terza Becker, reference librarian at the Boulder Public Library (Colorado), serving 97,000 people with very active Twitter and Facebook accounts—averaging more than one tweet and update per day, and with more than 950 likes and 1,380 followers—and following more than 1,500 people, offers this commentary:

Boulder is a tech-savvy college town (home to the giant University of Colorado, several federal labs and numerous venture capitalist firms and technology start-
ups), so meeting them in the places they frequent (many of which are now virtual) is mandatory for us.

We’ve had our Facebook page and Twitter accounts for a couple of years. For a while, we didn’t get a lot of fans/followers or traffic. But it’s been really picking up this year thanks in part to the facts that we have a dynamic new Web master and that two of our reference librarians (one of whom is me!) had our jobs redefined to specifically include an emphasis on bridging the communication gap between the digital side of the library and the public-facing desk side.

Our most successful posts are the ones that invite people to interact with us (questions, RA type things where we suggest books to people via Facebook, funny things, anecdotes about our building and our colorful patrons, pictures of Boulder Creek which runs right below our building). [Emphasis added]

Boulder’s tweets do seem to be the first few words of the Facebook posts, followed by links to those posts. Here are three posts (edited for length) from a one-week period in August 2011 showing some of the range of Boulder’s approach—and some of the feedback that resulted:

A little humor for your day. . . . Yeah, Kindles will complicate things like book burnings. . . . [Link] 7 people like this.

Todd Heh. :-)

A young girl came to the children’s desk and said, “I found the books on cats, but I can’t find the books on cheetahs.” I responded, “Cats are in the pet section, let me show you where the wild animal section is. I’m assuming you don’t want a cheetah for a pet right?” She replied, “Well, I keep asking my mom and she says no, but I am going to learn how to take care of cheetahs and then maybe she will let me have one for a pet.” 23 people like this.

Manifestor Cheetah power animal!

Timothy little cutie

Books can change your life or at least shift your points of view. For this librarian, two that come to mind are Peter Hessler’s River Town and Toni Morrison’s Jazz. What about you? What book affected you deeply and why? The Happiness Project: 7 Books That Changed the Way I See the World. [Link]

www.alastore.ala.org
Casey

Reading James Salter’s LIGHT YEARS feels like taking vitamins for the soul and mind. Evidence seems to appear in my own writing, and I find more light in my view.

Joanne

“Perfection of the Morning: A Woman's Awakening in Nature” by Sharon Butala. It led to a new way of seeing our connection with the natural world as well as women’s place in that world. I recommend the book to everyone.

Community engagement is at the heart of many libraries’ use of social networks, but—as with most expectations—it’s not a universal need. For some libraries in some communities, a new broadcast channel may be what’s feasible and what’s needed.

· Some Definitions and Caveats ·

This book is based on an external survey of all the public libraries or library systems I could locate in 38 of the 50 United States—5,958 in all, or just under two-thirds of the 9,184 public libraries in the United States. More details on the stages of the survey appear in the appendix. It’s also based on direct comments from several dozen librarians on their own use of social networks, notably including more than a dozen libraries that are not within the 38 states (three of them are outside the United States entirely).

While there are a lot of numbers in this book, it’s mostly about the libraries and what they’re doing. So that I don’t need to repeat “probably” and “roughly” and “at least” and various other qualifiers too often, you should be aware of some definitions, simplifications, and caveats up front. Definitions also include a new grouping of public libraries by size that I find useful in discussing public libraries in social networks.

In many cases, general terms will be used in this book as follows:

Public library: A library or library system that has a defined legal service area (LSA) population and reports to its state library and/or the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS). That does not include branch libraries. It does, in some cases, include double-counting in states where library systems and individual libraries within those systems both have LSAs and both report.

LSA: Legal service area population as given in the most recent spreadsheet available from state libraries (as downloaded in July 2011 for 25 libraries and late August 2011 for 13 others). In most discussions, I round the LSA to the nearest thousand (the nearest hundred or 10 for small libraries).

Page: Sometimes used for both Facebook pages and Twitter accounts, noting that Facebook pages also include a few regular Facebook accounts (with friends rather than likes) and a few Facebook groups.

Likes: I usually use “likes” for the number of friends or likes or group members on a Facebook page or account, although “fans” is the more common usage. If I use fans it may refer to both Facebook likes and Twitter followers.

HAPLR size or H#: Ten divisions of public libraries by LSA, as used in Hennen’s American Public Library Ratings. The divisions are noted in the appendix. I
sometimes use H# for a brief version of HAPLR sizes—from 0 (libraries serving fewer than 1,000 people) to 9 (libraries serving 500,000 or more).

**Urban and rural**: A two-way split of libraries by size, with “urban” indicating libraries potentially serving at least 25,000 people (H5–9) and “rural” indicating libraries potentially serving fewer than 25,000 people (H0–4). I find this split too broad, just as I find it silly to call Darien, Connecticut, “rural.”

**Small, medium, and large**: My own attempt at a slightly more useful split of libraries by size. Small libraries are those potentially serving fewer than 10,000 people (H0–3); medium libraries are those potentially serving 10,000 to 99,999 people (H4–6); large libraries are those potentially serving 100,000 or more (H7–9).

**Presence**: I define Facebook presence as broadly as reasonably possible, including accounts with no updates or no likes and those that haven’t been updated in more than a year—but excluding Community Pages (with no apparent library involvement), cases where libraries had teen or children’s Facebook pages but not general-purpose pages, and pages I couldn’t find using the methods detailed in the appendix. Twitter presence includes all Twitter accounts I could find, including those with no tweets and those that haven’t had a tweet in more than a year.

**Activity**: It’s reasonable to look at numbers of posts or tweets as one aspect of social network presence and success. Chapter 2 includes the definition of one breakdown of both currency and frequency in six levels from very frequent (five or more posts within the week checked) to moribund (no posts within the last quarter). That six-way breakdown (numbers 1–6) is used later in the book as well.

**Reach**: After looking at the reality of Facebook pages and Twitter accounts, I’ve defined a five-level breakdown for reach that partially depends on the library’s LSA population, using the small, medium, or large split. Chapter 2 includes the definition of that breakdown from broad reach (10% or more of the LSA for small libraries, 1,000 or more likes or followers for medium libraries, and 3,000 or more for large libraries) to minimal reach (usually indicating a very new account or one that’s essentially dead: less than 1% of LSA for small libraries, fewer than 100 likes for medium libraries, and fewer than 300 for large libraries).

There are three obvious and important caveats to these general terms:

- I surveyed only 5,958 libraries in 38 states, leaving out more than 3,000 libraries in 12 states. Given how much states differ in character, I am not willing to project the figures for these 38 states and 5,958 libraries to all 50 states and 9,000-plus libraries. There’s a little more on that in the appendix.
- I could measure only what I found. The appendix details the process I used. It’s nearly certain that I missed a few well-hidden Facebook pages and Twitter accounts, just as I may have missed a few library websites entirely. I know that the pages and accounts discussed here exist (or existed when I checked them); I have not verified that others do not, although I’d guess there are very few of them.
- Your library—that is, the librarians and staff of your library—is the only agency that can determine whether or not your social networking is successful and what defines success. I can offer benchmarks, criteria, and numbers showing actual practice, but those benchmarks and criteria aren’t rules.
The rest of this book expands and fleshes out the numbers and offers a range of examples of Facebook and Twitter strategies—and how the two relate. I spend more time on community involvement and note some problems with social networks.

The last part of the book considers change. I rechecked the libraries in 25 states originally checked in late July through late August 2011 four months later to see how many have added Facebook or Twitter accounts and updated the level of activity and likes/followers for library accounts.

You’ll see lots of examples throughout the book and a few dozen more comments, both signed comments and paraphrased comments provided on a background-only basis. This book is about how and why public libraries use social networks. I’m hoping it will help you and your library to see how you compare to others, to see what others are doing, and to consider what you might change to make social networking more effective in your library and your community.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

Most of the quoted material in this book comes either from tweets and status updates or from several dozen e-mailed responses to some questions that I posed on my blog and on several library lists. I am not footnoting those sources. For tweets and updates, they’re either identified along with the quoted material or, in some cases, anonymized (since I have no interest in making libraries look bad). I have deleted last names in user feedback within tweets and updates. For other quotations (and background comments) that do not have citations, consider this to be the universal citation: Personal e-mail to me, sometime in July–September 2011. I’m grateful to all those who responded, including 10 who preferred that I not quote them directly. The acknowledgments include other respondents.

Tweets and Facebook updates were copied directly from Facebook walls and Twitter pages. In many cases, they have been edited for length and to simplify formatting. Some minor typos have been corrected as well. Where feedback appears (other than likes), it’s broken to the next line with the person’s name (omitting last name) in boldface. URLs are replaced with [Link], and most text that appears to come from such URLs is omitted.

A FEW WORDS ON LAURA SOLOMON’S DOING SOCIAL MEDIA SO IT MATTERS

Laura Solomon wrote Doing Social Media So It Matters, published as an ALA Editions Special Report in 2011, based partly on her own experience using social networks to try to save Ohio’s public libraries from a threatened massive cut in state funding.

In some ways, this book follows up on Solomon’s work—but with substantial differences. Solomon has been a public library web supervisor; I’ve never worked in a public library. Solomon has strong opinions as to what works and what doesn’t; I’m looking at how libraries across the country (and in a few cases around the world) are using social networks, offering a range of existing models with few strong opinions of my own.

To take the most extreme difference in treatment, Solomon says this on lack of content as a reason for social media failure:
Your library needs to post very regularly. If your social media posts only happen a couple of times per week, this is not enough to build on, especially in a medium where twenty-four hours is an exceptionally long amount of time to go without any communication. Ensure you’re participating daily at the absolute minimum.3

If “participating” means posting or tweeting, that makes most public library social networking failures. Among Facebook pages, based on the five most recent posts when checked, only one-fifth of Facebook pages and one-third of Twitter accounts averaged five posts a week (or roughly one a day). I’m unwilling to assert that four out of five libraries with Facebook pages and two out of three libraries with Twitter accounts are failing. For any library serving fewer than 10,000 patrons, I’ll say that a post a day is extraordinary activity (although some small libraries do seem to meet that criterion).

Similarly, Solomon says that libraries using Twitter should follow about as many people as follow the library—a criterion that says half of library Twitter users are doing it wrong.

Laura Solomon’s book is well worth reading. Maybe her stiffer criteria for success make sense. Those criteria are not applied in this book; I just can’t write off so many libraries. At the same time, Solomon offers so much good advice on a range of social networking issues that I encourage you to buy her book and read it carefully.

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