

Use of Social Media by Alaskan Libraries

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Abstract

This paper summarizes a survey study of the use of social media by school, public, and academic libraries in Alaska. Librarians at 243 Alaskan libraries were contacted and asked to participate in the study; 83 librarians responded by taking the survey. Results show that public libraries are heavily engaged in social media; academic libraries regularly use social media; and some school libraries use social media but many face school district restrictions on usage. The top reasons Alaskan libraries use social media is to promote library news and events; promote specific resources; and promote specific services. Reasons for not using social media include: not having enough time; social media isn't deemed as important; and poor Internet connectivity in rural communities. Social media platforms are selected based on librarian preference and comfort level, as opposed to audience characteristics. Libraries that aren't under prohibitive restrictions, such as policies against using social media or poor internet/bandwidth issues, should frequently reassess their use of social media platforms to best engage with patrons and the community.

Introduction

Knowledge of social network application use in libraries is important because social media is a fixture in the lives of library patrons and their communities. The use of social media continues to increase, year after year (Pew Research Center, 2018). Studies have shown that 69% of adult Americans ages 18 years or older use social media (Pew Research Center, 2018). 95% of teenagers have access to a smartphone and 45% are online "almost constantly" (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Social media is heavily used technology.

For libraries, social media can be used for marketing resources, events, and services, and is free to use. Social media can also provide a platform for communicating with local and remote patrons -- patrons from all over the world. Since social media is regularly used by library visitors of all ages from all over the world, it is timely to examine the extent to which libraries are making informed and appropriate choices about which social media platforms to utilize, as they engage in local and remote outreach.

This study seeks to contribute to knowledge about social networking application choices made in libraries. The study examines social media applications used in Alaskan school, public, and academic libraries.

Literature Review

Social media has become a common tool for librarians to interact with patrons and the community. According to a white paper published by Taylor & Francis (2014), 70% of libraries use social media, with Facebook and Twitter being the most popular applications used by libraries.

To date, there have been no published studies examining the use of social media by Alaskan libraries. Several scholarly articles have been published on the topic of social media use in academic libraries, including Collins & Quan-Haase (2014), Dickson & Holley (2010), and Harrison, Burrell, Velasquez, & Schreiner (2018).

A relatively small number of scholarly articles focus on the use of social media use by public libraries, for example Anwyl & Chawner (2013), King (2015), and Smeaton & Davis (2014).

Few scholarly articles exist in the literature that pertain to social media in school libraries. Magee, et al., (2015) notes that use of social media in school libraries is restricted. Brooks (2009) is an advocate for school librarians to embrace new technology and support social media.

The literature does not reflect the geographic distances spanned by use of social media in libraries.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine the use of social media applications of Alaskan school, public, and academic libraries, and to characterize which applications were utilized by which types of libraries.

This study was approved by the University of Alaska Fairbanks Institutional Review Board (IRB). The study used an online survey via SurveyMonkey. Personal names and IP addresses were not recorded in the survey results, however the names of libraries were recorded.

The sample population came from the 2012 Alaska Libraries Directory. Librarians from each school, public, and academic library in the directory were contacted by email and asked to voluntarily complete a survey about their library's use of social media. The 2012 Alaska Libraries Directory is the latest published directory; there have been no printed directories since 2012 and an online directory does not exist.

The intent was for one librarian per library to respond to the survey. See Appendix A for the survey instrument.

With regard to confidentiality, the survey did not ask respondents to record their name, however, it did ask for respondents to record the name of the library where they work. The reasons for recording the names of the library were to: a) ensure only one survey per library was completed, and b) as a way to contact librarians in case follow-up phone interview was needed.

For this study, librarians at 243 libraries in Alaska were contacted, comprised of 10 academic libraries; 50 public libraries; 176 school libraries; and 7 school/community libraries. A school/community library is a library that is shared with the school and the community.

Of the 243 librarians contacted, 83 responded by taking the survey (34.4%). Seven surveys were incomplete, and therefore dropped from the analysis. The response rate breakdown for type was: academic libraries 60%; public libraries 44%; school libraries 21%; and school/community libraries 71%.

Limitations

This paper only reports on Alaskan libraries who completed the survey. There is no information about the libraries that did not respond, nor about the extent to which Alaskan libraries are different from libraries elsewhere. Furthermore, it is possible that some survey respondents were not aware of all social media use in their libraries. Another limitation of this survey is that it only includes Alaskan libraries.

Discussion

This section lists the percentage of use of social media by academic, school, and public libraries in Alaska, and then discusses the findings.

Academic Libraries

68% of academic libraries use social media to engage and interact with patrons, students, or community members. Approximately one third of academic libraries reported they did not use social media.

School Libraries

- 58% of elementary school libraries use social media.
- 57% of middle school libraries use social media.
- 55% of high school libraries use social media.
- 20% of school/community libraries use social media.

Public Libraries

100% of public libraries use social media.

As shown in Figure 1, the choice of social media platform varied by library type. Figure 2 shows that Facebook dominated the choice of platform for all library types, with 88.4% of libraries using this social media platform. Over 50% of Facebook users were from public libraries. It is likely that the choice of Facebook is at least partially due to the fact that librarians are in Facebook's main demographic (i.e., adults of 30+ years of age).

Only academic libraries reported use of blogs and Snapchat as social media types. This may reflect the higher level of effort required to provide content to those types, and to maintain a vibrant online presence by making frequent postings.

YouTube, which also requires a relatively high level of effort, was also utilized by elementary and public libraries. The relatively higher level of effort to contribute a YouTube video is accompanied by less pressure for frequent postings. This use of YouTube is in contrast to Snapchat, in particular, where postings have short lifetimes and so this social media type takes a lot of regular effort to maintain. Blogs, on the other hand, are persistent but less likely to be relevant long after they are written. A well-made YouTube video, such as for a tutorial on library use, would be expected to be relevant for a longer time.

It was no surprise to see that Facebook was the top reported social media platform used by Alaskan libraries, since Facebook is the number one social media application used by adults (Pew Research Center, 2018). Twitter was reported as the second most commonly used platform. This was somewhat surprising to see because according to Pew Research Center studies (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2018; Duggan, et al., 2015; Lenhart, 2015), Twitter ranks 4th (among adults) and 5th (among teens) as a commonly used social media application. Instagram, a rising star among social media platforms, was the third most commonly used social media application by Alaskan libraries.

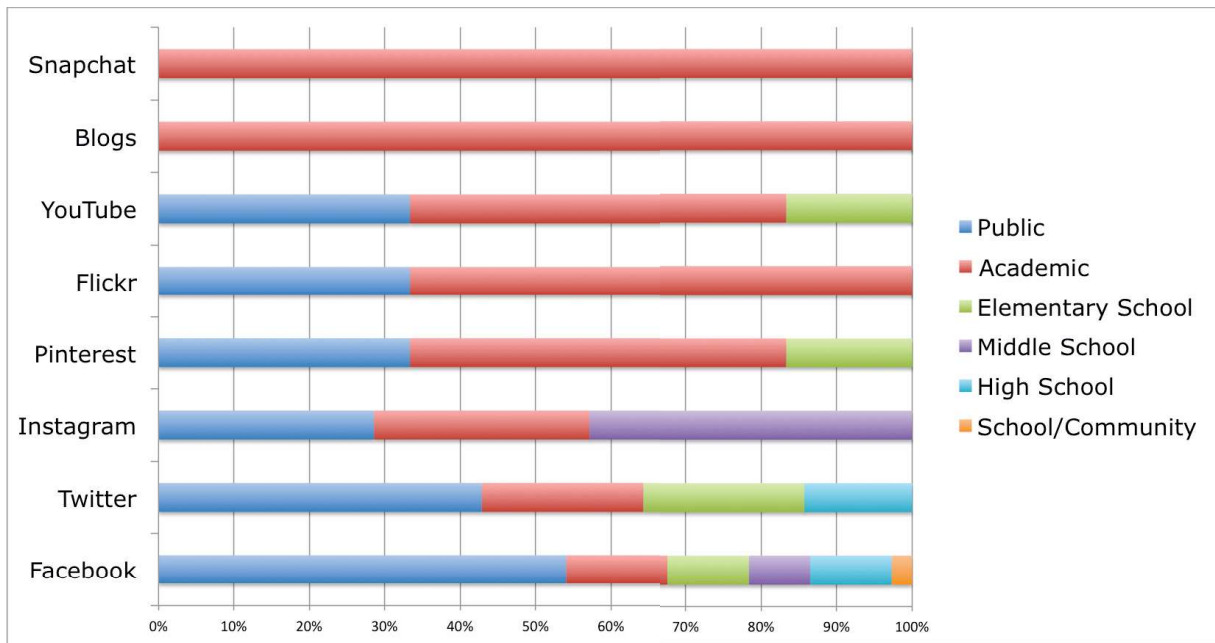


Figure 1. Use of Social Media By Library Type and Application Type

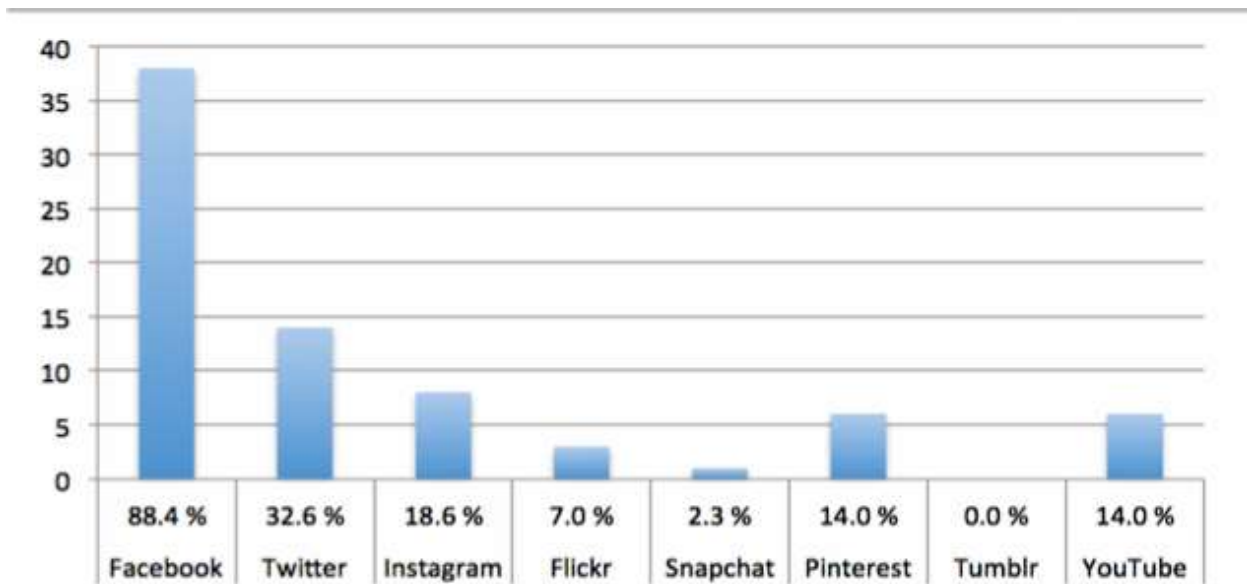


Figure 2. Social Media Applications Being Used by Alaskan Libraries

Reasons for Not Using Social Media

All of the public libraries that responded to the survey use social media, however some school and academic libraries do not use social media to engage with their patrons or community.

School librarians reported the main reason for not using social media are school district restrictions. School librarians were very enthusiastic about using social media to engage with students and parents (Kingsley, personal correspondence at AkLA 2017 annual conference), however, due to administrative regulations some are not allowed to use social media to interact with students or parents.

Other reasons Alaskan school and academic libraries don't use social media are:

There's not enough time in the day to use social media.

Social media isn't important.

Poor internet connectivity.

Reasons for Using Social Media

The top three reasons for using social media (across all library types) were to: 1) promote library news and events; 2) promote specific resources; and 3) promote specific services.

Other reasons for using social media include:

- Engaging with local community members.

- Engaging with students.

- Promoting specific collections.

- Engaging with people not directly affiliated with a specific branch library.

- Engaging with school faculty, instructors, or teachers.

- Engaging with donors or potential donors.

- Seeking feedback from library users about library services.

- Answering patron questions.

- Providing tribal information to tribal members.

- Letting parents know what's going on in the library.

- Teaching digital literacy.

- Fundraising.

How Social Media Platforms are Promoted

An important part of getting people to subscribe or follow social media platforms is to promote and market the social media applications used. The survey collected data about how Alaskan libraries promote their social media sites.

The main way libraries promote their social media sites is by linking to the sites from their library web page. Other ways libraries promote their social media sites are:

- Using printed posters or displays within the library.

- Using email signatures with links to the social media platform.

- Using digital displays within the library.

Letting students know about social media applications the library uses during presentations and classes.

Posting flyers in the community (e.g., post office).

Newsletters and newspaper columns.

A couple of libraries stated that they don't promote their social media sites.

Conclusion

Borders within Alaska include geography, language and culture. Alaska is the biggest state in the United States, more than two times the size of Texas. It includes vast areas that cannot be reached by road, and this is where many small communities -- along with their schools and libraries -- may be found.

Like elsewhere, people in Alaska utilize social media to keep in touch with their community, their friends, and institutions they are part of. Unlike most other places, in Alaska the geographic distances and other challenges of travel had led to increased importance of social media and other online communication methods.

School and community centers in Alaska may be the social hub of a small community, and this places additional expectations on the roles of their libraries. With relatively few large population centers and academic libraries, the smaller library types provide a gateway to information found elsewhere. Internet access and bandwidth issues can be a real issue in these smaller communities, and thus a valid reason for librarians to not use social media.

Responses to the survey highlighted the self-selecting nature of social media choice by many librarians. As long as it was not prohibited by policy, it seems that librarians chose whatever platform(s) they were confident in using, and for which they could generate content with quality and quantity appropriate for the platform.

Very few libraries in Alaska have specific library personnel roles for social media. Instead, one or more librarians utilize social media platforms based on self-selection and personal interests. Adding social media roles to job descriptions would help to legitimize social media use.

A more deliberate approach to selecting social media platforms may be desirable. Target audiences can be prioritized and appropriate social media platforms can be selected and used. For example, in academic libraries if the target audience is students, who are most likely ages 18-30, then Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube would be the most appropriate platforms to use. In public libraries, if the target audience is teenagers (13-17 years old), then YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat should be used; and if the target audience is older adults, then Facebook should be used. In school libraries, if the target audience is parents, then YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram should be used.

Selecting social media platforms for the most appropriate audience will change every couple of years based on the popularity of each platform among specific age groups. Keep in mind, each library may have multiple audiences, and thus multiple social media platforms can be used.

Since the percentage of use of social media increases every year libraries that aren't under prohibitive restrictions, such as policies against using social media or poor internet/bandwidth issues, should reassess their use of social media to engage with patrons and the community.

This study was limited to school, public, and academic libraries in Alaska. Future studies could examine the use of social media by Pacific Northwest region libraries. A multi-state survey would be more complex to plan and implement. Limiting the study to a specific library type (e.g., school, public, academic) could help reduce the challenges of surveying such a large area. Focusing on Pacific Northwest school libraries could yield interesting insights into policies about students and teachers using social media.

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Appendix A (Survey Instrument)

Social Media in Alaskan Libraries

About the Survey:

You are being asked to take part in a research study about the use of social media by Alaskan libraries. The goal of this study is to learn which social media applications are being used by libraries in Alaska. You are being asked to take part in this study because you are a school, public, or academic librarian in Alaska.

If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to complete this 10 question survey which takes around ten minutes to complete.

Additionally, you may be selected for a phone interview based on your answers to some of the open-ended questions in the survey. The phone interview consists of follow-up questions and will take no more twenty minutes to complete.

When the results of the study are presented and published, survey and phone interview answers will be presented anonymously and will not be tied to your name.

The benefit to you for taking part in this study is that you will contribute knowledge to the field of librarianship, specifically in Alaska, of which social media applications are currently being used in school, public, and academic libraries.

Confidentiality:

Any information obtained about you from the research will be kept confidential.

Any information with your name attached will not be shared with anyone outside the research team.

I will code your information with a number so no one can trace your answers to your name.

I will properly dispose paperwork and securely store all research records.

Your name will not be used in reports, presentations, and publications.

This survey is Voluntary:

Your decision to take part in the study is voluntary. You are free to choose whether or not to take part in the study. If you decide to take part in the study you can stop at any time or change your mind and ask to be removed from the study.

Contacts and Questions:

If you have questions, contact Ilana Kingsley by email, imkingsley@alaska.edu or by phone: 907-474-7518 (leave a message and I will return your call).

The UAF Institutional Review Board (IRB) is a group that examines research projects involving people. This review is done to protect the rights and welfare of people involved the research. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you can contact the UAF Office of Research Integrity at 474-7800 (Fairbanks area) or 1-866-876-7800 (toll-free outside the Fairbanks area) or uaf-irb@alaska.edu.

Next Step:

If you wish to participate in this survey, click the blue Next button.

1. What is the name of the library you work at?
2. What type of library do you work at?
 - School - Elementary
 - School - Middle
 - School - High
 - School/Community
 - Public
 - Academic
 - Other (please specify)
3. Does your library use social media to engage & interact with patrons, students, or community members?
 - Yes
 - No
4. Why doesn't your library use social media? Check all that apply.
 - There are restrictions and we're not allowed to use social media.
 - We don't have the time to use social media.
 - We don't think social media is necessary to use.
 - Other (please specify)
5. Indicate which social media applications your library uses to engage and interact with patrons, students, or the community, by including your library's link or handle with the corresponding social me-

dia application.

- Facebook _____
- Twitter _____
- Instagram _____
- Flickr _____
- Snapchat _____
- Pinterest _____
- Tumblr _____
- YouTube _____
- Other (a) _____
- Other (b) _____
- Other (c) _____

5. Why does your library use social media? Check all that apply.

- To seek feedback from library users on library services
- To promote specific collections
- To promote specific services
- To promote specific resources
- To promote library news and events
- To engage with with school faculty, instructors, or teachers
- To engage with with students
- To engage with with donors and potential donors
- To engage with local community members
- To engage with people not directly affiliated with your library
- To answer patron questions
- Other (please specify)

6. Do you evaluate the effectiveness your social media applications?


- Yes
- No

If yes, how do you evaluate effectiveness?

7. Has your library had any unsuccessful attempts at using social media? If so, explain why it was unsuccessful.

8. How do you promote your social media site(s)? Check all that apply.

- Links from the main library web page
- Email signatures
- Printed posters/displays within the library
- Digital displays within the library
- We don't promote our social media sites
- Other (please specify)



9. How many people post to your social media accounts?

One

Multiple

It depends on the social media application

Other (please specify)

10. Use the area below to offer comments you may have about your library's use of social media.