Hashtag Outreach: Using Twitter as Subject Specialists to Integrate the Library in Classroom Discussions

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Introduction

The prevalence of social media in our society is no longer news. Many of us are active participants on a number of social platforms that allow us to interact with both friends and strangers in various ways. That it is particularly popular among college-age students should also come as no surprise. As of 2015, 90% of those between the ages of 18 and 29 are using some form of social media (Perrin, 2015). Of the many platforms out there, Twitter is one that often is strongly associated with young adults. Perhaps this explains why certain academic disciplines have begun to incorporate the use of Twitter into classroom discussions. Not every university class is already using social media for student engagement in discussions, nor does it make sense for it to be automatically incorporated in every subject area. It has been shown that using tools like Twitter in the classroom must be done in "educationally relevant ways" to actually have an impact on what the students get out of it (Junco, Heibergert, & Loken, 2010). This would explain why it seems to pop up more in communications-related classes, such as journalism or public relations; however, it still pops up in other academic areas as diverse as English and Biology (DiVerniero & Hosek, 2013). Regardless of the class, this growth in classroom Twitter use provides an interesting outreach opportunity for librarians.

Traditionally, libraries have used Twitter and other social media accounts to represent the library as a whole in their outreach, primarily using it to make announcements (Mahmood & Richardson, 2011). However, individual librarians, particularly subject specialists, could use this social media tool to connect with students and faculty within their subject area and share relevant resources. In the last year, I have been using Twitter in this manner. As the Journalism and Communication Librarian for the University of Oregon (UO), I have shared content relevant to specific class discussions, answered reference questions, and developed stronger connections with students and faculty in my departments.

Twitter and the Librarian

Before I started at UO, I had already experimented a bit with using Twitter in a library context. During my second year as a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW), I worked as the Project Assistant Librarian in the Journalism Reading Room (JRR). Essentially, I was the head librarian for this small, departmental library that catered to the School of Journalism and Mass Communication. This is a one-year position specifically for graduate students to allow them the opportunity to gain management experience in a library setting. Among my many responsibilities, I was also in charge of the social media accounts for the library, which already had a strong, established presence and following. Particularly through using Twitter, I was able to connect with students and faculty, stay up-to-date on the school's research, and share useful resources to all.

Figure 1: Journalism reading room on twitter

UW-JRR
@UW_JRR

Heard a rumor about design week in #j202. Have you seen these on the new books shelf? ow.ly/i/1luY7

RETWEET 1   LIKE 1

10:37 AM - 19 Mar 2013

After finishing my MLIS, I began my current position as the Journalism and Communication Librarian at UO. Because of the similarities in my job responsibilities, serving as a liaison librarian for the School of Journalism and Communication (SOJC), it made sense to me to continue and even expand upon my Twitter outreach efforts within my new community. This began slowly since I was starting from scratch, meaning I had to take the time to find specific users on Twitter and learn which hashtags were being used by classes. However, over several months of engagement, I have been able to find a rhythm in how I use Twitter to interact with those in my subject areas at UO.

I am certainly not the first to attempt this type of engagement with students and faculty members through Twitter. While I have been unable to confirm who originally enacted this practice, some of the previous graduate students that had worked in the JRR at UW had already laid the groundwork for using Twitter there before I began. Elsewhere, Ellen Hampton Filgo has done similar work, adapting the "embedded librarianship" model and engaging with individual classes on Twitter (2010). She follows along in real-time and participates in the discussion a class is having through Twitter, sharing resources with the students as they become relevant to the conversation. However, by Filgo's own account, this method would be too time intensive if expanded to be used for more than one class each term since the process requires planning beforehand, and the actual class times each week need to be set aside to allow the librarian to focus on those discussions and provide instant feedback. Though my methods are similar, they scale back the focus from an individual class and eliminate the time sensitive aspect. This allows for interactions with a wider group of users and makes it more flexible for a librarian's schedule.

METHODS OF ENGAGING ON TWITTER

Before jumping into actually tweeting, it is important to create a new Twitter account. Like me, many of you may already have your own personal usernames, but I recommend creating a new one to be used specifically for subject librarian work and to keep separate from personal use. I created a new account under the username @sojclibrarian. This has helped me form a stronger online identity since the username itself not
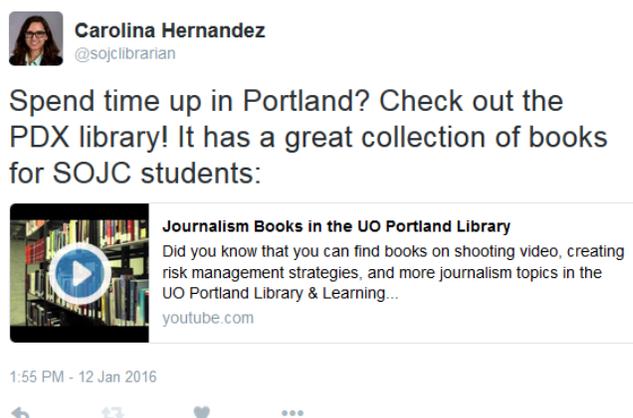
only clearly states my role, but also because the only content I tweet through this account is related to the subject areas for which I liaison. This helps to reinforce with students and faculty my existence as the librarian in their subject area long after any instruction session in their class is over. It has also allowed me to keep any personal information I might share on my own account separate from what I share through the professional account.

I also found it helpful to do some planning and set some goals before I started tweeting. For me, this included deciding on what type of content I wanted to share, how often I wanted to tweet, and what I wanted to achieve by using Twitter. This plan does not have to be set in stone, and in fact, will likely evolve over time. The important thing is to have some sort of framework that allows for consistency in how you use Twitter. This can be especially helpful if you are new to using the social media platform. Once I had a plan in place, I felt I could start tweeting in earnest and would be able to recognize whether or not I was on track with the goals I had set for myself.

Passive Engagement

The simplest way of using Twitter as an individual librarian is sharing resources and links that will be of general interest to people in your subject areas. Particularly for those unfamiliar with using Twitter, this can be an easy way to get started and ease into the process. On my Twitter account, I have done this by promoting specific collections or databases on the library's website I felt would be relevant to those studying in the journalism, advertising, public relations, or media studies areas. I also link to news articles that discuss issues going on in those fields. This can be a useful part of a social media strategy, but is really most effective in conjunction with other methods. This passive form of tweeting can play an important role in shaping your Twitter identity as the subject librarian, as it shows that you are in touch with what sort of information would be of interest to those in the field. However, it requires you to already have a following for the content to actually reach someone, which you can really only develop through more active methods of engagement on Twitter.

Figure 2: Sharing content passively

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@sojclibrarian

Spend time up in Portland? Check out the PDX library! It has a great collection of books for SOJC students:

Journalism Books in the UO Portland Library
Did you know that you can find books on shooting video, creating risk management strategies, and more journalism topics in the UO Portland Library & Learning...
youtube.com

1:55 PM - 12 Jan 2016

Hashtag Interactions

One way of more actively engaging with patrons on Twitter is to follow along with hashtags designated for classes in your subject area. For those who are unfamiliar with the term, hashtags are words or phrases marked with a # symbol and typically used to tag tweets that are part of the same conversation or share a similar theme. Course hashtags are created by the professor as a way for students to participate in class discussions or share materials related to the course topic. Generally, these course hashtags reflect some aspect of the class, such as using the course number. For example, #j202 is used for the introductory J-school class at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Another format is to use part or all of the course name, or even to add the initials of the school to differentiate it from course hashtags at other universities. #UOcreativestrat combines both of these types of hashtags, thus designating it as the hashtag for the Creative Strategy class at the University of Oregon.

At the start of each term, I ask SOJC faculty members if they will share with me the course hashtags they will be using for that term so that I can check in with discussions. In my experience, most are excited to provide this information and to have someone else who can share some form of expertise in discussions. They will sometimes even tweet out my username to their class to introduce me, as well as to let students know that I am someone who can help them with research and library-related questions.

Once I have compiled these hashtags, I can begin to check in with these discussions. I keep track of the hashtags using TweetDeck, which is a dashboard application connected to Twitter that allows me to see multiple hashtag streams at the same time. Depending on my schedule each day, I will sometimes check in with course hashtags as the discussions are happening in real-time, but other times I will read over tweets after the discussion is over and check to see if there is anything useful I can add. Because the hashtags stay the same between individual class discussions from week to week, I know the students will continuously check these hashtag streams and see something I have shared.

The type of information that can be shared in hashtag conversations can vary. Sometimes I will use the more passive method of simply sharing resources and articles. However, by adding a course hashtag, I can make sure that information is getting out there to a targeted group even if those users are not already following me. Other times I will respond to a specific student's query or comment with the hashtag, which allows me to address them directly while also sharing my response with others in the class.

Figure 3: #MPatUO, or media professions at the University of Oregon
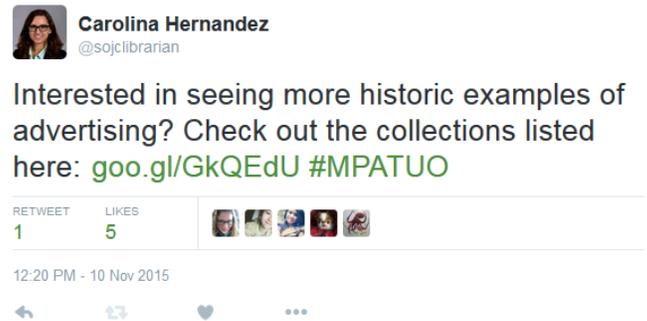
Direct Interactions

Moving beyond using hashtags, it can also be effective to directly interact with individual students or professors on Twitter. This means it is necessary to follow some of these people so that you can read their tweets as they come through your stream. With faculty, it can be a lot easier to track down what their usernames are. In my experience, though, they will gladly share this information if you just ask. Following many of the faculty members from SOJC has allowed me to interact with them more often than I likely would have otherwise, making me feel more quickly connected to the department in my first year here. I have also received the occasional reference question from professors since some of them find it easier to send a short message through Twitter. When a more in-depth response is needed, I follow up through email.

With students, it can be a little trickier. Over time it is possible to get a better sense of which students in a particular academic discipline are actually active Twitter users. Of course, there is the consideration of whether it might awkward to interact with students on Twitter. However, the environment of Twitter is such that it promotes discussion beyond that with friends. What I witnessed when I first started was that many students were already following and talking with their professors through Twitter and vice versa, so it was not a stretch to assume they would be comfortable doing the same with a librarian in their academic field. To find students to follow, I simply identified participants in the hashtag discussions I was already checking in on. After identifying these students, I checked their Twitter page to determine whether they were following or being followed by faculty members. Once I added these students, more often than not, they would follow me back. Of course, with many of my students being in the journalism and communication fields, where it is important for them to be active participants on social media in preparation for their professions, my experience might be unique.

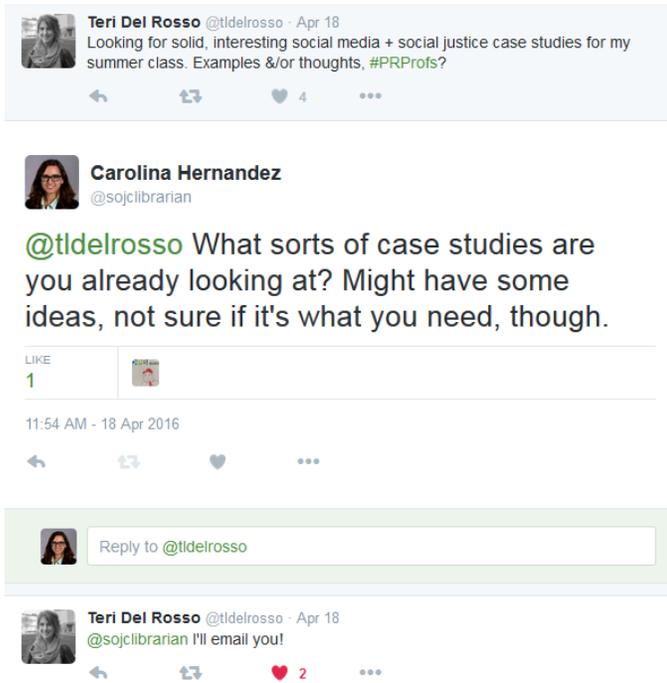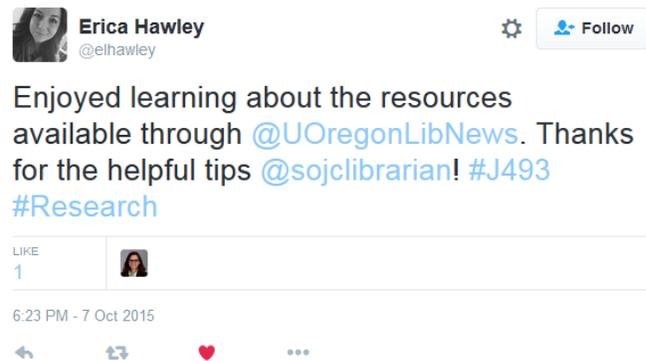**Figure 4: Offering assistance to a graduate student**

Figure 5: "Thanks for the helpful tips @sojclibrarian!"

Having only been doing this for less than a year at the University of Oregon, it is hard to know how using Twitter as a subject specialist will work out in the long run. There is still potential for more benefits to crop up from engaging in this type of librarianship on Twitter and likely many other possible methods to employ as well. I would like to attempt to establish more collaborations with faculty on in-class Twitter use, as well as to integrate it into my actual instruction sessions. I am also curious to see how others might use it, especially in connection with other academic disciplines. Used in conjunction with other tools, I hope and expect it to continue to augment the quality of service I can provide as an academic librarian to students and faculty.

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BENEFITS AND FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

Though the process is ongoing and my methods will likely evolve over time, I have noticed some benefits to engaging with students and faculty in my academic subject areas on Twitter. The primary one is the opportunity to follow along with classroom discussions and get a better sense of what topics they are covering. This is useful because it has allowed me to share relevant library resources with students even when I am not doing an instruction session. It also helps me get a better sense of the research and projects some of the students are working on when I see what they are talking about in class, which in turn can affect my collection development or what research guides I create. The other major benefit is the ability to offer another way for students and faculty to reach out with reference questions and research concerns. This is certainly not a tool to use on its own. However, with so many people already using Twitter on a daily basis, it makes sense to meet them where they already are and assist them with their questions. Finally, as mentioned earlier, I have found it helpful in reinforcing my existence as the Journalism and Communication Librarian to students and faculty.

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