



Article

“What Would I Tweet?”: Exploring New Professionals’ Attitudes Towards Twitter as a Tool for Professional Development

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Abstract

Twitter is a relatively common platform through which libraries can connect with their user communities. However, it also represents an innovative tool for professional development by allowing library and information sciences (LIS) professionals to communicate and share information across distance and time. Using data gathered from a workshop activity, this article explores the attitudes of new and emerging professionals towards Twitter, including barriers to usage and how these can potentially be reduced. The results indicate that some librarians are still reluctant to fully utilize it as a continuing professional development tool for a variety of reasons. Promoting strategies that specifically address these concerns may help to increase the level of engagement with Twitter by the LIS community as an innovative learning and development resource.

Twitter is a tool that many librarians¹ are now familiar with because they utilize it to connect to and communicate with their user communities. However, little research has been done to date on librarians' attitudes to and perceptions of Twitter as a tool for their own professional development. In this respect, Twitter potentially represents an innovative tool for networking, collaborating and learning across distance and time. In the face of declining library training budgets and staffing cuts, it offers free and flexible support for knowledge and information sharing. Moreover, in contrast with many other online resources for continuing professional development (CPD), it is a participation-driven and active learning tool that can create an enriched learning experience for the user.

In this context, Twitter is a tool that can support all areas of the library community. However, in recent times “new professionals” – typically library and information studies (LIS) professionals who have graduated within the past five years – have emerged as a distinct subgroup with a key interest in driving their own professional development in innovative ways. The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) in the UK has run particularly creative events aimed at new professionals for many years as part of the Career Development Group. In the past couple of years, an independent network for recent LIS graduates called Manchester NLPN² was formed in Manchester, and a similar group, New Professionals Day Ireland³, was launched in Ireland. More recently, New Professionals NZ was started in New Zealand⁴. In contrast with some of the more established networks, these groups often organize innovative and atypical activities for CPD, such as unconferences, library camps, game-based learning workshops and other informal and online events. As a virtual social networking tool, Twitter clearly has potential value within this space as a new channel of communication and information exchange.

This article is based on the outcomes of a workshop entitled “Tweet your heart out (Social Media in action)” that I presented at the inaugural New Professionals Day⁵ in Ireland in March 2013 at the Pearse Street Library, Dublin. A brief overview of Twitter as a communication tool for librarians is provided, followed by an analysis of its current usage by the library community. The comments of the participants from the New Professionals Day workshop are presented with a discussion of the future role of Twitter as a CPD tool. Using data gathered from the workshop and selected readings in the library literature, this study will describe:

- the attitudes to and perceptions of Twitter by those new to the field of LIS;
- the main barriers that exist for new LIS professionals with respect to using Twitter;
- the aspects of Twitter that new professionals find most useful or effective for professional development; and

¹ “Librarians” is used as shorthand for all LIS professionals henceforth.

² For more information, see <http://manchesternlpn.wordpress.com/>

³ For more information, see <http://npdireland.wordpress.com/>

⁴ For more information, see <http://newprofessionalsnz.wordpress.com/>

⁵ For more information about New Professionals Day, see <http://npdireland.wordpress.com/>

- suggestions for how to increase the usage and effectiveness of Twitter as a CPD tool for librarians.

Use of Twitter by the LIS Community

Twitter is a social networking tool that enables the sharing of “brief snippets of information to a maximum of 140 characters (about 15 words)” (Giustini & Wright, 2009, p. 11). Unlike many other social media platforms and tools such as Facebook, Twitter’s unique selling point is the speed at which it facilitates the flow of information across distributed social groups and networks (Huberman, Romero, & Wu, 2009).

Consequently, it is a platform that can be used by librarians to communicate rapidly with both users and other LIS professionals across the globe. While there are a handful of studies on how libraries can utilize Twitter to connect with their user communities (Chen, Chu, & Xu, 2012; Stuart, 2010; Cuddy, Graham, & Morton-Owens, 2010; Del Bosque, Leif, & Skarl, 2012), there is little by way of formally published literature on the use of Twitter as a tool for continued professional development by librarians.

Heretofore, much of this discussion has typically been captured via informal channels such as blogs and indeed Twitter itself (e.g., see #uklibchat at <http://uklibchat.wordpress.com/>). This may suggest that many librarians do not perceive Twitter as a valuable tool for professional development. Indeed, a recent study of academic libraries in the United States found that only 34% of the sample had Twitter accounts for their main library (Del Bosque et al., 2012), indicating that libraries are adapting relatively slowly to using the tool, compared to many other sectors, such as the business community, where usage is higher. Furthermore, the literature also reveals that there is substantial variation in terms of the level of engagement and use of Twitter among libraries, with some libraries tweeting relatively frequently and others not at all (Del Bosque et al., 2012).

However, in the past couple of years there appears to be growing engagement with Twitter from the library community. Twitter chats, including #uklibchat (launched in July 2011) and #irelibchat (launched in June 2012), are now popular discussion platforms. These chats provide an innovative opportunity to “connect with and learn from others in your professional sphere” (Lepi, 2012). In an Irish context, as of July 2013 there were over 150 accounts listed in the “Librarians in Ireland” Twitter list compiled by @libfocus⁶.

Librarians can realize benefits by using Twitter. Indeed, Lepi (2012) sees it as “one of the most powerful information tools we have today” (para. 17). These are strong words for what many still perceive to be a resource primarily for recreational use. Cuddy, Graham, and Morton-Owens (2010) argue that it is imperative that librarians are viewed as “technology leaders” (p. 329) and quickly adapting and implementing new technologies like Twitter is one way to achieve this. From the perspective of both professional and library service development, the authors contend that “being able to share knowledge and experience not only keeps a library abreast of what others are doing but also saves time by revealing what has and has not worked for similar institutions” (p. 328).

⁶ For more information, see <https://twitter.com/libfocus/librarians-in-ireland>

More generally, Burkhardt (2011) emphasizes that Twitter can help to foster and build communities when used as a tool to “engage” rather than “bullhorn” users (“Engage Our Users”, para. 5). Moreover, Burkhardt sees Twitter as “a perfect tool to ask for feedback on some service you are thinking about adding or some initiative you recently implemented” (“Solicit Feedback”, para. 7). Twitter’s unique and informal feedback mechanism can offer value to both individual librarians and libraries as institutions.

Notwithstanding these advantages, a level of hesitation from some librarians and libraries in fully embracing Twitter is also evident. A study from 2009 found only one health science library that had a presence on Twitter (Cuddy, 2009). While this number increased to 16 the following year, the figure is still surprisingly low (Cuddy et al., 2010). This may partly reflect a lack of awareness about the tool, however this alone can not explain the situation, as a reluctance to actively engage penetrates even those who are already familiar with Twitter. Del Bosque, Leif and Skarl (2012) note that even the basic question of what to tweet is a common concern and issue for new account owners (p. 210). The content of tweets from libraries typically includes information about library resources, campus and community events, links to external websites, and responses to reference questions. However, there appears to be no one-size-fits-all approach as to how and what libraries are tweeting. For instance, some libraries still perceive Twitter primarily as a broadcast mechanism, when it should really be used as an interactive tool for conversation (Milstein, 2009). This suggests that substantial uncertainty still exists within the LIS community as to how to use the tool to maximum effect.

The potential drawbacks of the tool include the highly restrictive length of tweets as well as the frequently cited feeling of information overload that is experienced by users. In the case of the latter, this can greatly hinder the ability of users to extract useful information efficiently, rendering the tool of little practical value.

Methodology and Results

This study aims to capture the attitudes to and perceptions of Twitter of those new to the field of LIS, including cognitive and affective aspects. Consequently, the study was grounded in a qualitative methodological framework to allow for a deeper level of analysis. The main method of data collection was through a Twitter Temperature activity (Priestner, 2013, p. 101) as part of the workshop I delivered during New Professionals Day Ireland, 2013. The participants of the workshop included recent MLIS graduates, as well as current students, and those with less than five year’s professional experience. Those currently in employment were from a variety of different sectors including academic, special and corporate libraries as well as information centres. At the start of the session participants were requested to select a specific color of sticky note representing their levels of engagement with Twitter (yellow, orange or pink, reflecting cool, warm or hot temperatures respectively; see Figure 1). Once they made their selection, they were asked to explain the reason for their choice by writing it on the sticky note. While the use of the workshop attendees represents convenience sampling, it is assumed to be a reasonably representative sample of new professionals as

Thirty seven sticky notes were received in all, and were then sorted into the three different categories below (see Table 1). There was a reasonable spread of responses across all three categories, indicating that there was no dominant group within the audience and that the attitudes to and perceptions of Twitter remain mixed as suggested by the literature to date (Del Bosque et al., 2012; Hagman, 2012). The reasons identified by individuals for not using it highlight several recurring themes including the perceived time commitment involved in keeping up with the large volume of tweets and a lack of knowledge or feeling “not sure” about how to use the tool.

Table 1. Twitter Temperature Results

Cool	Warm	Hot
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Don't know how to use it effectively 2. What would I tweet? 3. It has just never appealed to me 4. I don't have a Twitter account or follow any accounts 5. I know very little about it 6. Passive user 7. I have had an account for a number of years now but only recently got a smartphone so only thinking of engaging with Twitter in a more focussed way now. 8. Am concerned about “time wasting”! 9. I don't understand how to use it 10. Just started a Twitter account so yet to really get started 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Time pressure 2. Information Overload 3. I follow people and feel it's a really good resource but I don't tweet myself 4. I have an account but don't use it too much professionally at the moment 5. Time 6. Not sure how to use it 7. Not sure if people are interested 8. I check and retweet but want to try harder 9. Building a Twitter family 10. New to it – just exploring 11. Started using it and enjoying the conversation 12. Liking it more and more 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. There's always someone to chat with 2. Always someone who can answer a question 3. Use it all the time now – tweet every day and use links from Twitter a lot 4. Love all the info shared on Twitter 5. Read it last thing at night and first thing in the morning (should maybe ease off!) 6. Love Twitter because it's a 24/7 source of up to the minute info, news, opinions etc. of my interests (libraries, reading, books) 7. Build relationships – lists 8. I use it for professional development

<p>11. Word count – 140 characters</p> <p>12. I get random tweets that are possibly due to the fact that I do not know how to use it properly</p> <p>13. Just never bother with it</p>	<p>13. Joined just to creep on celebrities but ended up finding out what’s going on in the library world e.g. NPD</p>	<p>9. I follow colleagues and people of interest to me in the profession</p> <p>10. Discover, connect and find information</p> <p>11. You can observe a lot just by watching Twitter</p>
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Discussion

The responses from participants show that many of the previously identified concerns regarding Twitter are still relevant, even for new professionals who may be more comfortable with emerging and innovative technologies. One attendee’s uncertainty as to “What would I tweet?” clearly mirrors Del Bosque et al.’s (2012) evidence that many new users are unsure how or what to communicate through Twitter. Information overload and the potentially time-consuming nature of the tool was another difficulty experienced by several participants.

The anxiety that surrounds how to use Twitter effectively could perhaps be reduced by developing active LIS communities of practice on Twitter, promoting the use of the resource at mainstream and traditional library events (such as annual conferences) and continuing to use tweet chats as platforms for sharing ideas. The nature of the latter as a formal and structured discussion with an agenda may help to alleviate some of the uncertainty as to what to tweet. Moreover, following the workshop delivered at New Professionals Day Ireland, more than a dozen of the attendees either registered for Twitter accounts or are now using it more than previously, indicative of the role that training and raising the awareness of the tool can play in increasing its usage. For those who are already familiar with the resource, promoting strategies that specifically address issues of information overload and productivity, such as Twitter pruning (Dalton, 2012) and emphasising quality over quantity when building networks, may reassure users that the tool can be used efficiently to filter and discover content and information, and that it does not have to be a time sponge.

The wide variety of benefits identified by the workshop participants illustrates many of the arguments already presented by the literature in support of Twitter. A number of individuals highlighted its value as a networking tool in building relationships and facilitating conversation and discussion. This resonates with existing studies (Cuddy et al., 2010; Burkhardt, 2011) that emphasize the value of Twitter as a knowledge-sharing and feedback platform. The sense that the tool helps to “keep you in the loop professionally” (Lepi, 2012, para. 8) also emerged from the responses. Fostering such a connection is of particular importance for new professionals who may not yet feel

embedded in the profession. Indeed, the significance of such support is articulated by one participant who notes that there is “always someone who can answer a question”. For those with relatively little professional experience, this kind of assistance can be of real value in reducing feelings of isolation, particularly for those who may be working as solo librarians in an unfamiliar context. That none of the participants highlighted Twitter solely as a personal or recreational tool reinforces the point that it is not just a source of trivial information or celebrity gossip, but rather a very valuable resource for professional learning and development. Whilst the former may initially draw in a certain amount of users to the service, additional uses and benefits soon become clear for many – an aspect that was specifically highlighted by one of the attendees.

Conclusion

Given the relatively small sample size, the results of the study can only serve as an exploratory analysis of the attitudes of new LIS professionals in Ireland towards Twitter. However, it is notable that the study broadly reinforces the trends seen in the existing literature (Del Bosque et al., 2012; Chen et al., 2012; Hagman, 2012). It appears that many librarians have yet to fully embrace Twitter and are still somewhat unsure of how to integrate it fully within their professional workflows. For new professionals, this may partly be due to a lack of understanding as to how the tool really works and how it can be used most effectively. In contrast, those who actively use Twitter are typically very supportive and vocal advocates for the tool as a resource for networking, discovering information and learning. In this context, professional LIS associations can play an important role in helping to raise the awareness of the value of Twitter as an innovative tool for continued professional development to their members. Promoting the platform through traditional channels like formal workshops will provide librarians with the knowledge they need to effectively utilize Twitter. Once librarians integrate it into their personal learning networks, they themselves will harness the benefits of professional development through active learning and participation.

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