

Curation in Public Libraries

Abstract

In chapter 3 of Library Technology Reports (vol. 50, no. 7), “Social Media Curation,” the authors present the results of interviews with three public librarians. The conversations reveal how social media curation, particularly using Pinterest and Instagram, can highlight areas of the collection and engage communities. Both interviews emphasize the role of fun, experimentation, and a bit of quirkiness in public library curation practice.

We encountered a refreshing playfulness and a willingness to experiment and create in our public library conversations. Interviews with Billy Parrott of New York Public Library’s Picture Collection and with Amy Sonnie, Teen Outreach Librarian, and Meredith Sires, Teen Services department intern, of Oakland Public Library, reveal how social media curation, particularly using Pinterest and Instagram, can highlight areas of the collection and engage communities. Billy Parrott’s curation involves items that are not actually in the collection but are related to it and designed to create conversations around it. He demonstrates the role personality plays in social media curation, showing that your brand has the potential to reach well beyond your initially conceived audience. In addition to engaging teens with their creative social media curation efforts, the OPL TeenZone librarians value the professional collaborative efforts they see in the youth services community. They invite and validate the work of young people and connect them to content relating to their reading interests both from and beyond the traditional collection. And they connect young people with career experiences and resources. Both interviews emphasized the role of fun, experimentation, and a bit of quirkiness in public library curation practice.

Billy Parrott, NYPL Picture Collection (April 4, 2014)

Billy Parrott is the Managing Librarian at NYPL’s Mid-Manhattan Library, Art and Picture Collections, a traditional print collection organized by subject headings. Though the collection might be traditional, Billy’s digital curation activities are anything but. He co-runs the NYPL Instagram page, with nearly 47,000 followers. The page recently hosted a #literarymarchmadness campaign. His hugely popular Pinterest boards for the Picture Collection share thematic image boards on such themes as Mad Men, as well as Mad Men on the Menu, Downton Abbey, Billy’s Book Shelf, What Billy Is Listening To, and links to NYPL blogs and its divisions and collections.

Billy began our conversation on April 4, 2014, with some background on the Picture Collection.

BP: The Picture Collection lends itself to social media in a way that other collections at the library don’t. We have a lot of stuff that isn’t digitized for one reason or another. Of the 1.3 million images, only a fraction of them, around 50–80,000, are digitized in the digital gallery. Social media lends itself to making that material more accessible.

The Picture Collection started in 1915. People were going to the Main Library, the Schwarzman Building. When you think of New York City at that time, there was a huge immigrant population explosion. All the advertisers and stores were thinking, “We need to market to this new group of people in town.” Artists and designers who were in charge of doing ads for magazines were going to the Main Library and looking for specific things, like I need a picture of an airplane landing or a picture of a lady with a parasol standing next to a palm tree. They had that kind of stuff, but it was organized by the creator. Unless you knew

the artist, you were out of luck. So the Circulation Department slowly started organizing materials by subject heading, and that's when the collection started. The collection is organized in a way similar to Instagram or Pinterest with simple subject headings, different from the metadata assigned to images in the digital gallery. For the Picture Collection, we don't worry about medium. You can pick up one folder, for instance, "New York City—1860," and there might be a clipping from a book, a postcard, a 8 × 10 silver gelatin photograph, a clipping from a magazine, and a print. The medium doesn't matter. The subject is the important part, because that's what people use here. Set designers, artists, researchers still use the collection today for very specific things—like, I need a picture of what this restaurant looked like in 1970 or what a shopping bag from Bergdorf Goodman looked like in 1970. So, in our folders, we have headings like "New York City/stores/shopping bags." Sometimes the subject headings can be a challenge in terms of finding where images might be, but that is the way people share on social media. It's not the controlled vocabulary we'd like. On Pinterest, you might enter #tbt for throwback Thursday.

JV: It seems to be that what you put up on Pinterest and Instagram is not intended for targeted retrieval. It's almost like "Hey, look at us." Your *Mad Men* boards create deep rabbit holes for us.

BP: From a curatorial standpoint, it's not our materials. I am collecting stuff from all over the place for engagement, for people to look at and then have a conversation happen. So in one part, it is promoting our materials. For instance, all those pictures on the *Mad Men* Reading List link back to the library, but the idea is more of an engagement with the public as opposed to "Look what we own or what we have or what you can use here at the library." It's more like "We're all fans of this thing, let's talk about it."

JV: I keep thinking about how clever it was to question what Sally Draper was reading. It's exactly what I was reading back then, and it brought back a flood of memories.

BP: A lot of it is about connections. You can watch the show, and there might be nothing spoken, but the look on somebody's face or what they were doing might resonate. People think, "I did that in 1963." Or "I had that same outfit," or "I had those shoes," or "My mom made me do that." It relates easily to what Sally would be reading at that time—a girl of that age, with that personality, with that kind of family life. A lot of people can relate to that. They think, "I was like that at that time, and this is what I read."

JV: How do you define curation?

BP: Ideally, it's collecting items around a similar theme. Going back to *Mad Men*, if you take the theme 1969, this season, there's so much you can do with that as far as curating. There are the books that came out and what people were reading, the historical events—the moon landing, Woodstock, the Mets winning the World Series, Rolling Stones at Altamont, the Sharon Tate/Charles Manson story. Ideally, a curator would tie in things from different divisions to tell the story.

It reminds me of one of my projects from library school—I went to Pratt. I had to go to the Main Library—the Schwarzman Building—and pick one topic, but I had to research it throughout the divisions. So I picked Jacob Riis. They had the original manuscript for *How the Other Half Lives*. I went to the Map Division and found maps from the Lower East Side. I went to the Photography Division to find some of his actual photographs. So, from a curatorial standpoint, taking one subject and seeing it through different divisions, looking at books and music and films, rounds out a subject and gives you a more detailed picture.

I like defining curation as the retelling of a story, maybe a visual story. Like we can have a display here in the Picture Collection, and if I put up pictures of the moon landing, the *Brady Bunch* or the *Scooby Doo* premiere, the Beatles *White Album*, with no text, people would know I am representing 1969. You don't have to hit them over the head. I like keeping stuff as simple as possible. The materials speak for themselves. People like that. They think, "What would I add to it?" and they make their own connections as they add stuff to the story.

JV: So who is your audience?

BP: At NYPL we have our own patron base. Mid-Manhattan has between 3,800 and 5,000 people a day coming through its doors, but NYPL as a brand is far-reaching. There are people on the other side of the world who follow what we do. They read our blogs; they go to our website; they use our resources, but they will never be in the library. So our audience may be the *Mad Men* fans who live in California who have never been to New York to visit the library, but they can still connect to the library through the things we do. So, as far as audience, I am always thinking big picture. At the same time, if we do something like a *Mad Men* reading list or a Pinterest board, there could be something relating to that in the branch—a book display. So people come into the branch who may not know about the Pinterest board, see a great display of *Mad Men* materials, and see a link or a QR code or something that will take them to a blog post or the Pinterest page. People who are aware of our social media platforms may not be aware of our collections.

So it's making connections among our resources on multiple platforms.

New York Public Library Pinterest Page
www.pinterest.com/nypl

JV: Can you tell me about how you make your platform choices?

BP: Well there are the big ones—Facebook and Twitter. The level of engagement happening on Instagram blows away any of the other platforms on Mid-Manhattan's page. I co-run the Instagram page [figure 3.1] with Morgan Holzer, and the level of engagement there makes my job fun. As soon as I post a picture, I get 20 comments. If you are targeting a younger crowd, they're not on Facebook anymore because they don't want to be in the same room with their parents. So certain content works really well on Instagram. Some works well on Twitter or Facebook. Pinterest is obviously visual. So your intended audience dictates where you host the conversation. I use my personal Twitter account for work-related things.

JV: What is your process? How do you make the decisions you make?

BP: The most important thing is that the user needs to see there is a person behind the effort. There's nothing wrong with scheduling tweets, but no one wants to be talked at with a robotic feed of information. It doesn't take a whole lot of effort to add a little personality to a tweet to make it seem more personal and you are talking *with* somebody, rather than at them. So when it comes to Pinterest and board choices, you can treat them as your own personal board. I've got some like "Billy Parrott Is Reading," "Billy Parrott Is Listening To." I suspect people think if this guy likes the same kind of images I like, I may very well like the same kind of books he's reading or music he's listening to. If someone whose movie taste I admired told me he also liked a book, I would trust his judgment. People look for those kinds of things. The comments make it a little more personal. I'll walk down the street and see something interesting. When I take a picture, the caption is already there. Sometimes you just know it's a gold mine and it's going to engage people. And sometimes it's like that French phrase, *l'esprit de l'escalier*, or thinking of the perfect retort too late. I also like that you can have a picture and it means one thing, and a caption that may mean something else, and when you put them together they make this $A + B = C$ formula, or this third thing that creates engagement. It's the kind of thing that makes a great tweet, or pin, or Instagram post.

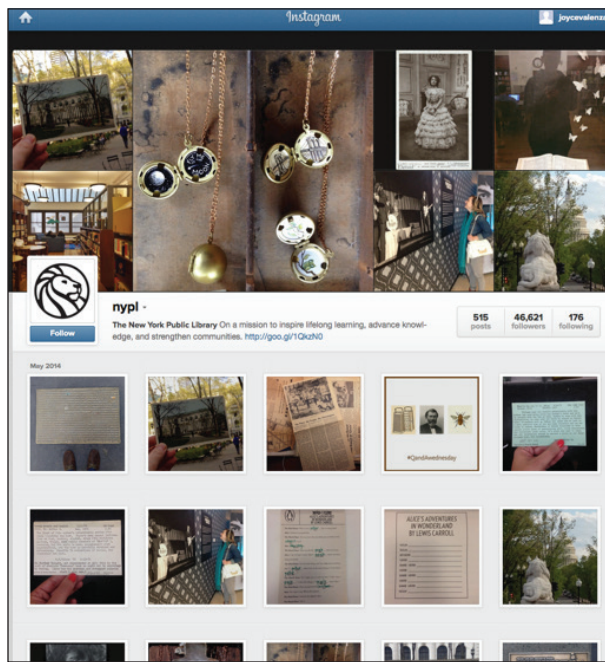


Figure 3.1
New York Public Library on Instagram

JV: So is engagement your number one purpose?

BP: Well, you want to promote the library and its services. January 22 was Museum Shelfie Day. So Morgan said we should do something like this for libraries. On January 29, we hosted Library Shelfie Day.

I think it was a local market that came up with the phrase "Nobody will care until you do." If you engage, it makes the job fun. Engagement is connecting with people who use the library, or might not use the library but are aware of the library. Connecting to them allows you to promote the collections.

JV: Aren't you still doing a service for your customers or members even if they're not engaging with the collection?

BP: With the *Mad Men* reading list, within a month of its coming out, it had tens of thousands of hits. There may have been two dozen comments, but I'd like to think that those thousands of people who read the blog thought about it, smiled, maybe paid more attention to details in the show; they were engaged.

JV: So what are you proudest of?

BP: I consider some of the blog posts a digital curation effort—they curate information. I like the quirkiest ones. I did a blog post on Dan Smith, the guy who teaches everyone guitar, and linked it to all those things in the catalog. I like this because it's different from what most traditional blogs are. Most people are thinking,

here's this collection or here's this reading list, but I am thinking, why can't I interview Dan Smith? Or why can't I interview the Canadian actor Billy Parrott, who shares my name? Readers like it because it's funny and it connects back to the library and they see the library is doing fun things. So it's a kind of different curation. I guess the curation is in the materials that are mentioned in the interviews or blog posts.

The Pinterest boards I like doing most are those that are ongoing—like the *Mad Men* board and the *Downton Abbey* board. The *Downton Abbey* board is fun because every season it's a new year and you think to yourself, what's happening that year, and it's a whole new collection of historical artifacts and books and lots of new stuff to work with. The idea of doing a list that can grow continually as the show goes on is truly fun.

JV: What kind of skills did you need?

BP: There are the technical skills, but most people don't realize that if they're walking around and they see something interesting, they can take a picture of it and tie it back to the library collection. It's about retraining people to become more aware. I was always like that. I have an art background. But there's a designer inside everyone. People overthink too much. I'd like to see them be more aware of the possibilities for what can be done.

JV: So you're always thinking outside the box, looking at different angles.

BP: People love quirky things like cookbooks all with the same color cover. That's not hard. People are afraid that their ideas will fail. I have those conversations all day. "Nobody wants to hear my story about X, Y, or Z," but I say, "Are you kidding? I'd buy the book." There's this Steve Jobs quote, "A lot of times, people don't know what they want until you show it to them." Don't worry. If you do it, they'll ask for more.

JV: What have you learned?

BP: Some of the boards are collections-based, and when you put them up you get dozens of repins and likes. So I am thinking, if I put in details of 1970s fashion drawings, I know the audience that's going to like that. They might not even follow me. That's one of the things you learn. You try to get new followers by putting out content you know other people will find, like the fashion stuff. None of those people followed the library, but when they realized, "Wow, they have those kind of drawings at the library," hundreds of thousands of fashion illustrators and designers are now following because of that one board. These tools make you more aware of the *possible* audience.

JV: Can you talk about the library cards board?

BP: I had an idea for that. Over the years, NYPL had lots of different library cards. I was thinking, that would be a great board, but another library created that board. It's one of the shared boards. I am glad someone else came up with the idea of library cards from around the world. I was going to do one for NYPL, but this person found me and asked me to contribute. There's also one about libraries and film and another about library architecture. There are people who don't follow me but follow that board, so anything I post to it, they'll see—a good way to engage with people who wouldn't ordinarily follow you.

It's nice to collaborate with a team of colleagues. It's hard when you are the only person doing it. At Mid-Manhattan, we have about 100 on staff, so we have a team of people who can tweet and Facebook. There are only two of us working on Pinterest.

JV: So when do you curate?

BP: One of the hard parts is finding the time to do this. I have a full-time job. 90% of the Pinterest content, and pretty much all of my blogging, is done at home on my own time. Not everybody can afford that luxury. The only time they can blog or create content is on library time. But the problem is, on library time, you might have X amount of desks of public service and collection maintenance and other administrative duties, and you definitely have to love it to spend a lot of your free time doing this stuff for a place where you love to work. So it helps to have a team. It helps that program-related tweets are scheduled. We try not to program any of the more fluid stuff. So if we find a great article, that goes out right away, and you are aware that there's an individual behind the account. Time can be a challenge.

JV: Any advice for others?

BP: Do what you love. We have five librarians in the Picture Collection, and they all have different subject specialties. If you bring what you love to the library it makes everything better. There are other people who like the same things you do, and social media is a way to connect with people worldwide.

If it's your interest, it's not hard work. It's not like someone is making you read a book and do a book report on something you have no interest in. If you write about what you like, it's not really work. It's easier to keep it going. You gain followers. It makes you feel better. There's a chain reaction effect and you see results. Followers are something concrete you can point to.

NYPL Instagram page
<http://instagram.com/nypl>

NYPL Picture Collection on Pinterest
www.pinterest.com/ArtPictureNYPL

NYPL YouTube Channel
<https://www.youtube.com/user/NewYorkPublicLibrary>

Billy Parrott's NYPL blog
www.nypl.org/blog/author/billy-parrott

Billy Parrott and NYPL on Twitter
@midmanhattanlib
@artpicturenypl
@billyparrott

programs, and collaborate with colleagues.

According to Amy, the library's social media policy prioritizes "experimentation and thoughtful evaluation of new technologies that we think will help inform our practice and reach new audiences." She adds, "Digital curation and seeking innovative ways to engage teen audiences online is an official part of my job." In our discussion on February 24, 2014, the librarians shared that curation allows them to share materials in a more immediate, interactive, and visually appealing way.

Among the most popular of the platforms is its impressive collection of Pinterest boards that began over two years ago as an opportunity to approach readers' advisory. The librarians were looking for a strategy to update their reading lists and engage readers while waiting for a Drupal migration to be completed. Pinterest offered a convenient solution for highlighting services and the collection without the need for formal, bureaucratic web updates. (See figure 3.2.)

Amy Sonnie and Meredith Sires, Oakland Public Library TeenZone (February 24, 2014)

Amy Sonnie, teen outreach librarian, and Meredith Sires, teen services intern, manage the social media presence for the Oakland Public Library's TeenZone. The award-winning TeenZone leverages a variety of social media and curation platforms to engage readers, communicate with young stakeholders, highlight

OPL TeenZone Pinterest
www.pinterest.com/oplteenzone

During its first year, Oakland's TeenZone on Pinterest audience exceeded its Facebook audience.

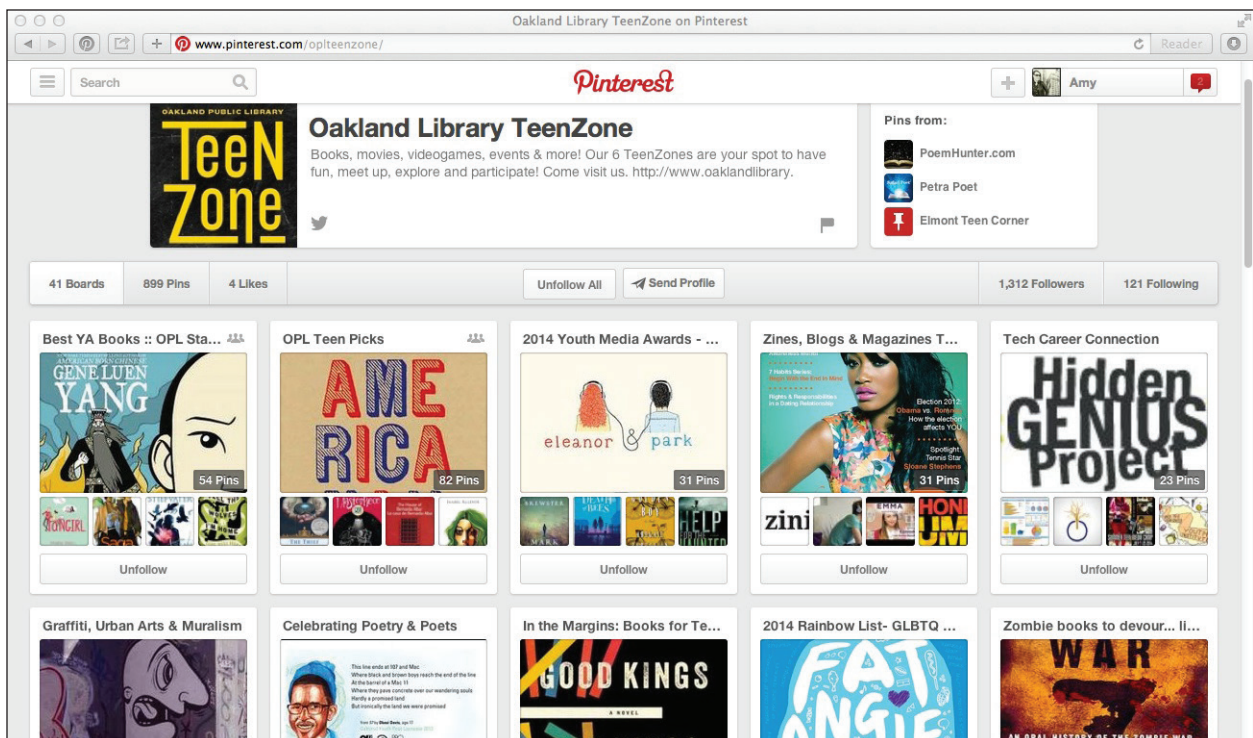


Figure 3.2
Oakland Public Library's TeenZone Pinterest boards

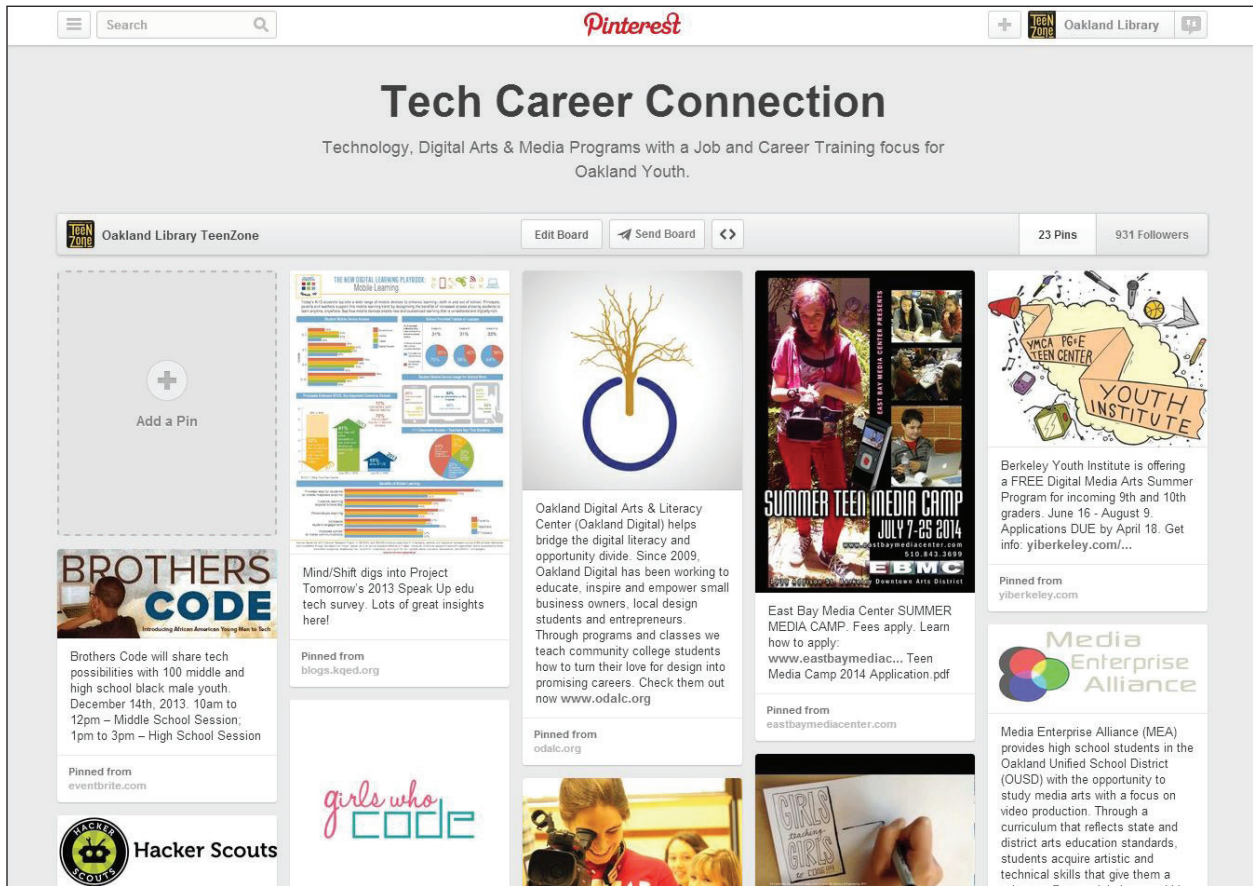


Figure 3.3
Oakland Public Library's Tech Career Connection Pinterest board

JV: Why do you think the boards took off?

AS: Pinterest allows us to more than quadruple the content that we could realistically display on a website, and it's more efficient. We can manage them ourselves, without the added bureaucracy of having to put a list together in the right format, send it to our web administrator, have them post and edit it and make sure everything is linking correctly. All our web administrators need to do is add a button or a link to the boards. It's really a more efficient way to add dynamic content, unless you work in a library system where all staff have permission to edit. Very few libraries I found do that. You do need some oversight. Pinterest allows us to be fun and fresh.

JV: How do you define social media curation?

AS: Digital curation is the process of selecting and showcasing digital resources to promote discovery, collaboration, and sharing. Oakland Public Library's [OPL] Teen Services librarians curate digital representations of many types of resources including physical materials, online multimedia content, and

newly created assets. Our approach is a hybrid of curation and creation; we combine and aggregate existing digital assets and create or remix new content. Whether on Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, Pinterest, or the library website, we focus on content directly tied into our programs, collections, partnerships, and community interests. Our approach is less focused on preservation and archiving and more focused on dynamic content exchange.

In short, we

- aggregate digital representations to promote programs, services, and collections and enable discovery in ways a static website or a catalog does not
- ensure more visually engaging, current, and shareable content for our visitors
- expand and diversify library resources on a budget by curating lists of authoritative and interesting materials available digitally

Amy shared specific examples of curation strategies that engage the community and promote discovery to meet community interests.



Figure 3.4
Oakland Public Library's TeenZone Facebook page



Figure 3.5
Sample posts on Oakland Public Library's TeenZone Facebook page

AS: Our Teen Services program areas include workforce development, youth leadership, and creative expression. So we curate an online “teen opportunities” board using Facebook status updates. This mirrors and expands the physical bulletin boards in our teen spaces. Similarly, when we launched Ready, Set, Connect—our professional development program for youth interested in technology and graphic design—we created a Pinterest board with dynamic posts linking youth to similar programs. We’re showcasing opportunity pathways. (See figure 3.3.)

We created a graffiti board on Pinterest that highlights urban arts organizations, books, videos, magazines, and blogs. This was directly tied into a yearlong series of programs and exhibits at the library. Our staff used the Pinterest board as a source to create displays at branches, and the outreach librarian used

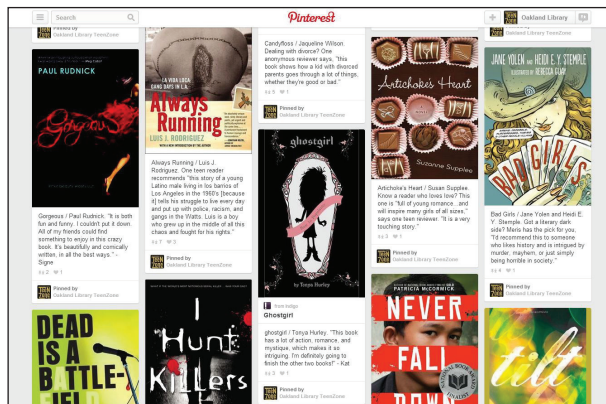


Figure 3.6
Sample posts on Oakland Public Library's Teen Picks Pinterest board



Figure 3.7
OPL TeenZone Twitter posts

it to select books for the launch of the Oakland Mobile Bike Library at a local urban arts festival. People were surprised and excited to learn the library has so many books and videos on these topics. Staff were excited to share and use Pinterest to highlight our collections.

Amy shared that displays are now a hybrid content activity.

AS: In partnership with a local teaching organization, OPL Teen Services shared digital representations of

Sampling of the OPL TeenZone Pinterest boards

Best YA Books: OPL Staff Picks

www.pinterest.com/oplteenzone/best-ya-books-opl-staff-picks

OPL Teen Picks

www.pinterest.com/oplteenzone/opl-teen-picks

Tech Career Connection

www.pinterest.com/oplteenzone/tech-career-connection

2014 Rainbow List—GLBTQ Books for Children and Teens

www.pinterest.com/oplteenzone/2014-rainbow-list-glbtc-books-for-children-teens

2014 Youth Media Awards—Check Them Out!

www.pinterest.com/oplteenzone/2014-youth-media-awards-check-them-out

Zombie Books to Devour . . . Like Brains

www.pinterest.com/oplteenzone/zombie-books-to-devour-like-brains

Zines, Blogs, and Magazines Teens Love

www.pinterest.com/oplteenzone/zines-blogs-magazines-teens-love

Hungry for More Hunger Games?

www.pinterest.com/oplteenzone/hungry-for-more-hunger-games

Graffiti, Urban Arts, and Muralism

www.pinterest.com/oplteenzone/graffiti-urban-arts-muralism

Better Than the Movie

www.pinterest.com/oplteenzone/better-than-the-movie

Collaborative board

YA Chatter (great fodder for YA Librarians)

www.pinterest.com/oplteenzone/ya-chatter

poetry from Oakland's annual Youth Poet Laureate program. These digital resources tied into a public poetry campaign that installed poetry posters in public spaces citywide. The online campaign included Twitter and Facebook posts [figures 3.4, 3.5, and 3.7] and the online *510 Journal*, publishing kids' poems in full for the first time.

Pinterest allows us to be both dynamic and responsive to new ideas—new book awards lists, programs that we want to highlight. It allows us to share more dynamically, more visually, and to drive traffic back to our events pages, our library catalog, other posts on our library's website or our Facebook page.

We get to curate and pull out our resources. Without doing a display in the library, we're creating a virtual display that accompanies programs. So we're dragging traffic to Pinterest and using Pinterest to bring traffic into the library to check out items they didn't know we had. It's a more dynamic way to explore the catalog.

Curation allows the OPL TeenZone librarians to expand their collections to meet community interests.

AS: When we noticed some of our most popular teen magazines were going out of print, we created a Pinterest board that showcases Zines, Magazines, and Blogs that meet the interests of urban youth, including both print mags and online-only publications.

The librarians wanted their efforts to include youth voices. The Teen Picks Pinterest board shares reviews and points to teen preferences. (See figure 3.6.)

AS: We collect a lot during summer. It's great to see what kids are choosing to read outside of school hours, not just what they've been assigned. We discovered they are reading and writing positive reviews of authors like Isabel Allende and Julia Alvarez, and it gives us a pulse on what to keep in the collection. Whenever we post their reviews, we let them know. They get to see their review, though we respect their privacy and don't use their names.

The OPL Teen Services also see their curation efforts as a strategy for scaling their services and allow them to support librarians who are not teen specialists.

AS: Any of our librarians know, if you have a teen who likes zombies, we have a board for that. We use the Pinterest boards for training when there's no teen librarian on hand.

Meredith sees Pinterest and other curation platforms as tools for making professional connections and sharing with other YA librarians.

MS: I love that the librarians are collaborating online to create boards, to share what they're reading and what their patrons are reading. I think it's great that librarians are using Pinterest to pull together the annual Youth Media Awards. We don't have to do it all ourselves. Boards like the YA Chatter Board keep us up-to-date as a staff. These tools promote a form

of collaborative curation, allowing librarians to help each other out, inform each other's displays, and in general, to learn from each other.

JV: What's next?

AS: We are thinking about moving on to Instagram and maybe Tumblr. For Instagram, we are thinking of asking teens to reflect on what they see and love about their library. It could have to do with their summer programs or what they see around town, as part of our teen Summer Passport Program or other library programs.

OPL TeenZone Facebook page
<https://www.facebook.com/MainTeenZone>

OPL TeenZone on Pinterest
www.pinterest.com/oplteenzone

510 Journal
www.510journal.org

OPL TeenZone on Twitter
[@OPLTeenZone](https://twitter.com/OPLTeenZone)

Beyond the Conversations

Other public libraries, like Multnomah Public Library (OR), are using social media in innovative ways for community outreach, such as homework help, through an array of subject-specific curated digital resources, popular reference topics, live reference chat, blogs, and even love letters to the library—a gathering of stories from the community about what the library means to the people it serves. Baltimore County Public Library offers 24/7 teen online homework chat with a tutor, engaging summer reading programs for all, and a digitized collection of local historical places and people (Legacy Web). Topeka and Shawnee County

Public Library (KS) creatively uses Pinterest to share “stories you want, information you need, connections you seek.”¹

Multnomah Public Library

Library home page
<https://multcolib.org>

Homework Center
<https://multcolib.org/homework-center>

Baltimore County Public Library

Library home page
www.bcpl.info

Legacy Web
http://catalog.bcpl.lib.md.us/polaris/search/searchresults.aspx?ctx=1.1033.0.0.6&type=Keyword&term=*&by=KW&sort=RELEVANCE&limit=TOM=dmc&query=&page=0&searchid=7

Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library

Library home page
<https://tscpl.org>

Pinterest boards
www.pinterest.com/topekalibrary

Note

1. “About the Library,” Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library, accessed July 2, 2014, <https://tscpl.org/about>.