
Social Media and Readers' Advisory

A Win-Win Combination?

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Guest Columnists**

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The first of a two-part series examining the use of social media for readers' advisory (RA) services, this column summarizes recent literature on the topic, and identifies the social media services most commonly used in New Zealand public libraries for RA services. Anwyll and Chawner present the findings of a small-scale research project examining the use of social media in New Zealand public libraries, with a focus on RA activities and practices. In the next issue, this column will be continued, with Anwyll and Chawner discussing the results of this research in more detail and identifying good practices for using social media in RA services.—*Editor*

Readers' advisory (RA), also called readers' development, involves promoting materials to readers and library patrons through indirect and direct means. Social media can be defined as a group of Internet based applications that allow the exchange of user generated content.¹ The research project that forms the basis of these columns explored ways in which social media and RA can work together to create an active and useful tool in the online library environment.

In this digital information age, it is increasingly important for public libraries to adopt new technologies to deliver services such as RA to reach users who have become accustomed to interacting with other people through digital channels. The goal of this column is to examine the potential of social media tools such as blogs, Twitter, and Facebook to extend the scope of RA services to the digital environment.

READERS' ADVISORY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Existing advice on the provision of effective RA services in the professional literature ranges from identifying the conditions necessary to establish an RA program, to discussing techniques and resources that can be used in RA programs.

Nielsen identified the traditional aims of a reader development program as "to increase reading choice and the enjoyment of reading."² George, McGraw, and Nagle identified two key steps for providing a successful RA service, beginning with understanding the importance of the service to the library patrons.³ Their next step involves providing training and support for staff so they can provide the best RA service possible. This advice applies not only to traditional RA services, but also to services provided using online tools.

The use of online resources and services for RA has been discussed since roughly the mid-2000s. In 2006, Kuzyk discussed strategies and tools that would allow librarians to

offer RA services in the online world, noting that a library's website can be a hub for a wider range of RA features such as readalikes, annotated lists, staff written reviews and discussion forums.⁴ Others have discussed how traditional library resources, such as online catalogs, can be modified to provide better support for RA services. Spiteri suggested that allowing users to add their own subject tags to catalog records could lead to the formation of informal reading communities, which could be the basis of "user-driven readers' advisory services."⁵ Her subsequent examination of sixteen social cataloging sites identified other features, such as client reviews or ratings or online book clubs, which could be used to add a social dimension to library catalogs.⁶ Tarulli noted that this type of catalog enhancement is likely to require collaboration between technical and public services staff.⁷ She suggested that one possible side effect of this might be increased awareness of RA needs by catalogers, which could encourage them to supplement catalog records with additional genre or other descriptive terms. Tarulli and Spiteri extended this concept by suggesting that catalog enhancements could also include recorded book discussions, perhaps led by a RA specialist.⁸

Some of the discussion about using online tools for RA has focused on nonlibrary sites. Trott discussed the implementation of RA in the digital world, noting that online RA sites typically involved "online book recommendations and had a live chat and email based readers' advisory service."⁹ Wyatt discussed the ways in which traditional annotations, or brief notes about the content of a title, are being adapted for use on the web, using LibraryThing as an example.¹⁰ Book-oriented social networking sites are often recommended as good resources for RA. Porter and King suggested the use of Amazon.com reviews, LibraryThing, and GoodReads as sources of book recommendations for RA librarians,¹¹ and in a similar vein, Vnuk identified sites containing useful resources for RA librarians, such as Book Group Buzz, Children's Literature Network, Fantastic Fiction, and Reading Group Guides.¹² Naik examined Goodreads features that could be useful for RA work.¹³ One of her conclusions was that this type of service provided opportunities for readers to be more involved in discussions about books and reading. This aspect appears to be an important difference between RA services that use digital services and the traditional face-to-face approach.

SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS AND THE RA SERVICE

This section examines the main social media genres and tools that are currently being used for RA services, and identifies selected examples of libraries using each genre.

The term "Blog" is short for "weblog," usually defined as a "frequently updated website consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order so the most recent post appears first."¹⁴ There has been considerable discussion of the potential of blogging for RA. Farkas suggested that "readers' advisory blogs highlight books that patrons might otherwise miss by posting book reviews and best seller lists."¹⁵ Zellers

discussed a similar concept, where "each week a different librarian volunteers to compose reviews of any five items in the library, be they new, popular, books or movies."¹⁶ Kuzyk noted that the Santa Fe Public library used their blog to draw attention to "wall flower" titles.¹⁷ This was done by using cover images from the catalog in the blog posts to add visual appeal to the blog post. Gosling, Harper, and McLean noted that Australian RA blogs used a range of techniques, including staff reviews, author month, and Australian author promotions.¹⁸

Many libraries have started to use blogs to deliver services to their communities. In the United States, the Seattle Public Library publishes the "Shelf Talk" blog to highlight books and literary events of interest to readers. In New Zealand, Wellington Public Library publishes six individual blogs aimed at different audiences, ranging from teens to people in business, complemented by a news blog providing more general information about library services. Each blog provides posts about new books and gives short reviews of existing material relevant to the target audience.

Microblogging involves posting short (typically 140-character) status updates, usually broadcast via a website. One of the most popular microblogging sites is Twitter, which provides "real time" updates from people anywhere in the world. Krabill and Milstein discussed how and why public libraries should use Twitter.¹⁹ They suggested that the main reason libraries adopt Twitter is to share news and updates with their patrons. These short messages (tweets) inform readers about library events, book sales, and libraries' newly acquired resources. Le Gac looked at how and why New Zealand public libraries used microblogging. Her research results identified four main advantages of using Twitter: "it is free, easy to use, it takes little staff time and information travels fast."²⁰

Some writers have discussed good practice for using microblogging services such as Twitter. Porter & King, Calderone, Krabill, and Cole all emphasised the importance of posting a link at the end of a tweet.²¹ Porter and King suggested that public libraries' Twitter accounts could link to events, blog posts, and particular titles in their collection.²² Krabill said that "if a tweet is about something the library owns, it will include a link to the item in our catalogue."²³ This allows a library patron who reads a tweet that interests them to go directly into the library's catalog and reserve the item.

Calderone described the use of Twitter to provide RA services, noting that tweets could include information about readalikes, announcements of reading-related events, and segments of booklists.²⁴ Cole identified "20 ways for librarians to use Twitter" which included recommending a book, a product, or service that the library's followers might be interested in.²⁵ Stuart noted that libraries using Twitter "usually broadcast news and information about the library and it is a chance to tell users about its resources."²⁶ All of this literature is enthusiastic about the possibilities of using Twitter in a library context, however, to date no one has addressed its effectiveness and the benefits it has for libraries and readers.

Social networking sites such as Facebook also have the potential to be a platform for a library's RA services. Kastner

described a six-hour experiment carried out by Multnomah County Library which asked readers to tell them the last five titles they'd read, so that RA staff could offer suggestions for their next book.²⁷ *NovelList* was used to provide summaries of recommended titles, and *bit.ly* (a URL shortening service) was used to provide links to the catalog record to make it easy for readers to see if the book was available or place a hold. Roughly one hundred readers participated, and feedback was very positive.

While it is possible to use other types of social media, such as wikis and social bookmarking tools to provide RA services, these appear to have been to be less successful than blogs and microblogging. A wiki is a "server-based collaborative tool that allows any authorized user to edit Web pages and create new ones using nothing more than a Web browser and a text entry form on a Web page."²⁸ In contrast to blogs, which are usually presented in chronological order, making it difficult to group related posts together unless posts are tagged with subject keywords, the structure of a wiki is determined by its authors. This means that an RA wiki could be organized by genre or author, to make it easy for readers to identify material that matches their interests. Despite this apparent advantage, it has proven difficult to find a current example of a wiki used for RA purposes. The Colorado Association of Libraries Readers' Advisory Interest Group wiki was created to provide a web-based RA resource (<http://coloradoradiora.pbworks.com/w/page/16150918/FrontPage>). It lists resources on a range of themes, such as Arthurian Fiction and Denver Fiction, but has not been updated since mid-2010.

Social bookmarking tools, such as *Delicious* and *Diigo* allow users to save URLs and tag them with keywords. Green suggested that *Delicious* provides an easy way for librarians to share web resources with readers.²⁹ However, Cahill noted that unannounced changes to the *Delicious* URL and API in 2008 caused Vancouver Public Library's *Delicious*-based links to stop working, and required eight hours of programming to restore the previous functionality.³⁰

More imaginative suggestions for using social media services for RA include Ellie's discussion of creating video "book trailers" in a multimedia approach to RA.³¹ She recommends hosting these on YouTube to expose them to a wider audience.

EFFECT OF SOCIAL MEDIA-BASED RA

Much of the literature about using social media for RA simply describes an individual library's practices, with little assessment of its effect. However, several people have noted that recommending a book on a social media site raises its profile with potential readers. Wyatt described a librarian at Ann Arbor District library who tracked reader involvement through following the holds activity of the books she had written blog posts about, noting that one item went from one to fifteen requests.³² Le Gac noted similar effects, finding that some librarians saw their book recommendations followed by a reserve when posted in a "tweet."³³

ISSUES USING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR RA

Some public libraries encounter technological or organizational constraints when trying to implement social media-based RA services. Rutherford noted that local government often imposed security related barriers to the implementation of social media within libraries.³⁴ Because of these barriers, libraries tended to give up at the first hurdle and focus on more traditional methods of interacting with their users. Peterson and McGlenn found that only members of the library's web services team could contribute content to or update sections on its website, as there were restrictions on access to the edit tools.³⁵ This library created a staff and user-friendly RA service website to solve this problem.

In addition to these organizational constraints, there is also a risk that an externally hosted service may change its terms of use, or modify its site without warning. Cahill's description of the disruption to the Vancouver Public Library's website caused by changes to the *Delicious* URL and API is a good example of what can happen when an essential component of a library's services relies on a free external service.³⁶

Calderone noted that "we are in the early stages and are still figuring out how to use the new social tools for readers' advisory."³⁷ Much of the literature about using social media for RA work focuses on the practices within a single library, and there has been little research comparing the use of social media between different libraries. The main goal of the research project discussed in these two columns was to identify how social media tools are being used by New Zealand public library social media and readers' advisory librarians. The remainder of this column provides a brief overview of the research design and research setting, and identifies the most common social media services used for RA purposes by the study's participants.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research project used a qualitative approach involving semistructured interviews. Twenty-two New Zealand public libraries that were found to be using social media were used as the population for this study. Because the Christchurch earthquake on February 22, 2011, caused serious disruption to library service in the city, this library was removed from the population. Staff in the other twenty-one libraries were sent an email invitation to be interviewed. Fifteen agreed to participate in this study, resulting in three face-to-face and twelve email interviews. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data.

Eleven interviewees were female and four were male. Interviewees worked in a range of public libraries, including small, medium, and large, and represented both urban and rural settings. All had broadband access to the Internet. Because the sample was limited to fifteen interviewees, the results are unlikely to be generalizable to all New Zealand public libraries, to other types of libraries, or to other locations.

However, they provide a useful snapshot that can be used for comparisons with other settings.

USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS

The most common social media tool used by interviewees was Facebook, used by twelve interviewees. Nine used Facebook with an RA purpose. Other social media tools used by interviewees included Twitter and library blogs, each used by ten librarians. Eight of the Twitter users and seven of the blog users used them for RA. Other social media tools used by more than one library were Flickr, YouTube, and LibraryThing. However, none of these had an explicit RA objective of promoting new materials or discussing book titles.

Interviewees were asked how long they had been using social networking and social media tools. Their responses ranged from using a blog for four years to starting to use the tools three months ago.

Twitter was first launched in 2006 and as Le Gac noted,³⁸ many libraries worldwide began using it soon after. Twitter was adopted by the public libraries in the sample from 2008 through to the beginning of 2011.

Facebook adoption appeared to be more recent than Twitter. Most interviewees said that they had been using Facebook since the beginning of 2011. They considered the security and privacy issues surrounding Facebook to have been a barrier to earlier adoption.

CONCLUSION

As shown by previous literature, social media services provide a wealth of opportunities for RA librarians to reach out to their communities. Using social media for RA seems to be a win-win combination, since it allows RA librarians to interact directly with interested readers. However, the libraries in the sample used only a small number of the available options, and what is particularly noticeable is their reliance on mainstream social media services, such as blogs, microblogs, and social media sites, rather than sites oriented more specifically to books and readers, such as GoodReads or LibraryThing.

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