

Creating a Safe Social Media Community for School Libraries

Christine Gable

Emporia State University

Author Note

Christine Gable is a student in the Master of Library Science degree program in the School of Library and Information Management, Emporia State University. Correspondence about this article may be addressed to Christine Gable at [cgable@g.emporia.edu](mailto:cgable@g.emporia.edu)

### **Abstract**

Educators today overlook the use of social media in library instruction based on their understandings of compliance with the Children's Internet Protection Act (2011). Research-based evidence is identified and used to support the claim that school library communities should be extended with use of social media, and school librarians are perfectly situated to instruct students in best practices when using social media. A four-step action plan is suggested to improve student and teacher access to digital information with the goal of providing worthwhile learning experiences for a broader population of young adults served by school libraries.

*Keywords:* school libraries; young adults; social media; digital literacy; evidence-based research

### **Creating a Safe Social Media Community for School Libraries**

Libraries are central to school communities by providing a place to find information, receive help, and to pick up the latest books. Through the school library community, school librarians have opportunities to interact with students. Using social media to extend a library community has become common-place in academic and public libraries, but it typically remains a futuristic idea, if an idea at all, in school libraries. Why should school librarians engage students through the school library's social media platform? Research indicates there are many benefits when libraries use social media to market libraries' resources and services, including increased patron usage, opportunities to announce library services, and building a community to engage students in skills that help them succeed in school. Despite the beneficial uses, countless schools have procedures that block or prohibit the use of social media with districts' filters.

Today, many children use social media. According to the Pew Research Center (2017), young adults are among the earliest social media adopters with 56% of high school and middle school students using Facebook as a social media platform. In a recent study by Phillips (2015), “. . . 67% of young adults visit social media networking sites daily with an additional 21% visiting weekly” (p. 178). With today's young adults preferring to use social media, how can school librarians become involved in teaching and using social media in today's schools? Social media platforms have the potential to extend and expand the school community. With so many students already using social media, school librarians need to develop ways to incorporate best practices for accessing and using digital information and improving communication skills in online environments.

The challenge is to create a social media community that extends beyond the traditional views of community as one common, interactive location to a new view of community that

includes use of the Internet and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or Snapchat. School librarians with information and technology expertise are well-positioned to teach digital literacy skills based on the abilities and experiences elementary through high school students have acquired while using social media. By utilizing social media platforms, librarians can help strengthen the sense of community already found in schools while embedding the tools to help students become successful adults who pursue college, jobs, and careers.

### **Impact of CIPA on School Internet Access**

Librarians in all publicly funded institutions encounter the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA), which was enacted by Congress in 2000 and updated again in 2011. CIPA requires school and public libraries to implement an Internet safety policy that includes filtering, or blocking, pictures deemed "1) obscene, 2) child pornography, or 3) harmful to minors" (Federal Communication Commission, 2015, p. 1). For schools and public libraries to receive discounts through the federally funded E-Rate program that provides affordable Internet access and other communication services, they must meet two requirements: "1) their Internet safety policies must include monitoring the online activities of minors; and 2) as required by the Protecting Children in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Act, they must provide for educating minors about appropriate online behavior, including interacting with other individuals on social networking websites and in chat rooms, and cyberbullying awareness and response" (Federal Communication Commission, 2015, p. 1). With these few mandates, the federal government intends to protect children by denying access to information on the Internet that is deemed to be harmful.

To comply with CIPA, many schools use filters that restrict access to some, or all, Internet-based information. Many educators argue that these filters block more content than necessary and potentially violate the intellectual freedom right of students and teachers. In

schools, librarians have responsibilities, along with classroom teachers, to provide resources that support the curriculum of the school. However, it is very difficult to preclude children and youth from encountering harmful media. Yan (2009) points out that students can be exposed to “harmful media through diverse mass media (e.g. TV, movies, cell phones, and magazines) in diverse locations (e.g. their own homes, neighborhoods, friends’ homes, grandma’s house, cyber café, and community centers) rather than merely in public schools or public libraries” (p. 216). On the basis of a quasi-experimental study, Yan (2009) further asserted that because of the internet filters schools use to comply with CIPA, high school students are less inclined to use the Internet at school, thus missing out on valuable opportunities to learn how to minimize their risks when on the Internet. Yan (2009) further advocated for Internet safety programs in schools to help students learn best practices for navigating the Internet safely.

There is evidence-based research that supports and further suggests how librarians may positively contribute to reducing the risk of exposing students to harmful media by instructing children and youth about Internet safety. One possible way to help support Internet safety is by creating an online library community wherein students, their teachers, and librarians engage in learning to navigate the Internet. To support this claim, several recent studies were selected that focus on building a community through social media. Because best practices flow across various library types, the selected studies address use of social media in public, and school libraries.

### **Evidence-based Research about Building a Community through Social Media**

Phillips (2015), a researcher at Florida State University School of Information, emphasized that librarians must be knowledgeable about social media and its impact on young adults. During the mixed-method research Phillips (2015) collected data from an online survey resulting in sixty-eight (68) responses from various librarians around the world. The survey was

followed with in-depth interviews of the responding librarians. Feedback from the survey concluded that 88% of librarians thought social media was valuable to libraries. Phillips (2015) noted that librarians provide a support system for students and serve in non-threatening roles within the schools allowing students to feel comfortable “expressing fears, frustrations, doubts, and uncertainties” (p. 184). In her conclusions, Phillips (2015) indicates that social media is “one way to promote library services directly to young adults instead of ‘waiting for users to seek out the library’” (p. 194). Phillips (2015) also realizes that more research is needed to determine the role social media can have, but overall, “social media offers librarians a way to promote and demonstrate the relevance of libraries in young adult lives” (p. 194).

Mon and Phillips (2015), of Florida State University, explored libraries serving teens in social spaces such as Facebook, Twitter, and other social media sites. Through their literature review, they determined that by “fall 2011, at least 3,266 public libraries had established a social networking presence, but there was still an ongoing challenge on how to use social media to connect and engage young adults and provide adequate services within the social space” (p. 243). This research points out that social media sites are becoming the public face of the library, and with so many teens using social media, many libraries have set up separate social spaces online to specifically serve the teen population. The library’s social media profile can act much like the physical space of the library providing a safe place for teens to come and “find relief in the neutral supportive space of the library” (Mon & Phillips, 2015, p. 251). Mon and Phillips (2015) concluded that “the library will continue to evolve with social media, and find innovative ways to connect and engage with users on whatever technologies they are using at the time” (p. 263).

In the research conducted by Agosto, Purcell, Magee, and Forte (2015), it was determined that the “widespread negative perceptions of libraries and librarians result in reduced

library use” (p. 319) for teens. Agosto, et al. (2015), also identified other barriers to teen library use, which includes, “lack of awareness of available services..., lack of awareness of Internet-related services and other resources..., and teens still equate ‘libraries’ with books” (p. 319). This information sheds light on how teens view libraries. Despite these barriers, Agosto, et al. (2015) found almost 70% of U.S. teens use the library in varying degrees. Agosto, et al. (2015) also discusses five myths related to teens and social media use, which include posting their life on social media; using it for frivolous entertainment; dangerous interactions with adults; and school libraries are just for information. While some of these myths are reality for some teens, many teens are responsible when it comes to how they present themselves online. Teens use social media to engage with others, as a place to learn and gather information, and contribute to discussions. If librarians recognize teens’ interest in using social media, then librarians have a chance to change the perceptions of the library. Changed perceptions will potentially draw more students to the library.

According to the quantitative analysis conducted by Young and Rossmann (2015) at Montana State University, it is possible to build a community through social media. Young and Rossmann (2015) use the theory of digital dualism to argue that “communities built through social media do not reside in a separate ‘online’ space, but rather are one element of a much more significant and valuable form of holistic connectedness” (p. 22). Through eight principles that include audience focus, goals, values, activity focus, tone and tenor, posting frequency, posting categories, and posting personnel, libraries constructed social media posts that engaged and targeted student users. The student community grew 366% and interactions with the community grew 275% over the year and a half the analysis was conducted. Young and Rossmann (2015) “realized an intentional and strategic social media program...transformed our

social media activity from personality-devoid one-way broadcasting to personality-rich two-way interacting” (p. 32).

At Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), Peacemaker, Robins, and Hurst (2016) conducted and analyzed a survey to determine how to manage, grow and maintain the social media channels effectively and efficiently for the university library. An e-mail was distributed to library professional in management or communications containing a survey; 240 responses were received with 200 associated with academic libraries, which is where the analysis concentrated. The survey found that 85% of media posted on social media accounts were for events, with the other 72% dedicated to news and announcements. The survey also revealed that only 33% have written policy for social media accounts, 34% define tone in a post, only 30% define the audience and purpose, and 25% define content and identity for each platform. They also found that only 27% of respondents have a system of evaluation and measurement to determine effectiveness and time invested in media management and posting. Peacemaker, et al. (2016) then created a strategy for content that “defines: key themes and messages, recommended topics, content purpose...content gap analysis, metadata framework and related content attributes, Search Engine Optimization (SEO), and...strategic recommendations on content creation, publication, and governance” (p. 106) to evaluate the postings in the future. They established several recommendations based on their finding, including best practices in public relations to maintain effective and efficient management, creating content strategies that articulate goals and intent for each platform and maintaining an evaluation process.

### **Leading Change to Implement Social Media in School Libraries**

For the library, change inevitably allows libraries to stay innovating and relevant to the users. Much of the research included notes on how public libraries and academic libraries have



evolved to incorporate the use of social media as ways to draw in patrons. The ideas used to make social media platforms successful in public and academic libraries can be translated to school libraries. For school libraries to take the leap into social media, there are a few changes that will need to occur to ensure a successful transition. The following outline the suggestions for change in helping school libraries form successful online social media communities.

### **Step One: Access for 7<sup>th</sup> -12<sup>th</sup> Grade**

**Opening access to social media sites to encourage involvement.** One of the biggest problems with social media use in schools is the lack of access. According to Batch, Magi, and Luhtala (2015), many schools filter more than just images that the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) recommends and block "swaths of information that all users are entitled to view" (p. 61). School librarians need to advocate for student access to social media sites, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter because this will allow students to have access to library-related social media. Since safety is the overwhelming concern in schools, librarians can provide classes to help students learn to navigate the Internet and social media sites safely. Through the lessons, student can learn how to conduct searches, learn what to do if they encounter something that is questionable, and how to protect themselves against online predators.

### **Step Two: Choose Platforms**

**Choose the appropriate social media platforms.** This may seem like a step that should not be addresses because it is so simple, but it is important to choose the right social media platforms. The most common are school content-related blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube. Pick what works for the students and the library. Remember the purpose is to engage with the students and build a library community. Take advantage of mobile technology and go to where the users are. Many libraries have several platforms they use to

connect with as many patrons as possible. This may be good for larger libraries, but school libraries may want to choose one to begin with and branch out after learning and building a following for one platform.

### **Step Three: Remember the Three R's**

**Make the content relevant, reliable, and relatable.** According to King (2015), “the content you present under the moniker of the library will make or break your social media channel” (p. 16). To utilize a social media account to its fullest, the librarian must make relevant posts to the community they are serving. For example, if the students are working on database searches, create a YouTube video that explains how to search and what types of information to look for in a valuable resource. The librarians also should be reliable and relatable. This does not only mean that the content posted is accurate, but posts need to be made in a consistent, concise manner that speaks to the audience. Each post should be deliberately produced to ensure the effectiveness of what is being posted. If students are expecting a post on Monday morning, make sure it is out on Monday morning. The more consistent the posts, the more users will find them and engage with them.

### **Step 4: Evaluate and Tweak**

**Continue to evaluate and tweak the social media channels.** Librarians should monitor the social media channels to determine which ones are meeting the needs of the students and the library. If the social media channels are not being used, or has no traffic, then determine if it is worth keeping. Periodically purging old accounts not used will help streamline how much time is spent on social media. Remember to go where the users are, and keeping the same social media account because it is the one known best by the librarian may not be best practice for the library or the students. Set up a timetable to evaluate the social media channels. Create a checklist to

help evaluate its effectiveness and critically evaluate the site. If it does not meet the criteria, discontinue the use, and concentrate on what is effective for the library.

### **Conclusion and Suggestions for Practice**

Building an online community is not a simple thing, but it is worth the time. It provides students with a community where they can feel safe and provides the necessary tools to become responsible adults. Even though the most available research is focused on academic and public libraries, it provided guidance to setting up social media accounts. Since librarians are central to the school community, establishing a social media community should be central to the library especially since students are increasing their time spent on social media. Following the four steps of the action plan will likely give librarians a good start, but it is up to school librarians to maintain the school's social media community and to apply the three R's: relevant, reliable, and relatable.

Social media is still evolving. School librarians should take advantage of the space most of their population uses regularly. The use of social media in school provides librarians with an effective way to reach out to students. It also provided the students with a sense of community that builds on the one that already established in the school physical space. Librarians should advocate for students to be able to use social media in schools by establishing a library community on various social media platforms and engaging and guiding students in using those platforms. Social media has grown and developed making it achievable for all librarians, including school librarians, to engage with patrons. Engagement equals success in schools and should be encouraged.

## Reference

- Agosto, D. E., Purcell, M., Magee, R. M., & Forte, H. (2015). Teens, libraries, and social media: Myths and reality. *Public Quarterly*, *34*(4), 318-327.
- Batch, K. R., Magi, T., Luhtala, M. (2015). Filtering beyond CIPA: Consequences of and alternatives to overfiltering in schools. *Knowledge Quest*, *44*(1), 60-66.
- Federal Communication Commission. (2015, November 3). *Children's Internet Protection Act*. Retrieved November 8, 2017, from Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau: <http://transitions.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/cipa.pdf>
- King, D. L. (2015). How to connect and communicate with customers. *Library Technology Reports*, *51*(1), 16-21.
- Mon, L. & Phillips, A. (2015). The social library in the virtual branch: Serving adults and teens in social spaces. *Advances in Librarianship*, *39*, 241-267.
- Peacemaker, B. R., Robinson, S., & Hurst, E. (2016). Connecting best practices in public relations to social media strategies for academic libraries. *Colleges & Undergraduates Libraries*, *23*(1), 101-108.
- Pew Research Center & Internet Technology (2017). *Social media use by age*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/chart/social-media-use-by-age/>
- Phillips, A. (2015). Facebooking it: Promoting library science to young adults through social media. *Public Library Quarterly*, *34*(2), 178-197.
- Yan, Z. (2009). Difference in high school and college students' basic knowledge and perceived education of internet safety: Do high school students really benefit from the children's internet protection act? *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, *30*(3), 209-217.
- Young, S. & Rossmann, D. (2015). Building library community through social media. *Information Technology & Libraries*, *34*(1), 20-37.