Ethical risks of social media use by academic libraries

Shana Ponelis

Shana Ponelis
ponelis@uwm.edu; shana.ponelis@up.ac.za
School of Information Studies, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, USA,
Department of Information Science, University of Pretoria, South Africa,

Abstract

With the rapid advances in information and communication technologies (ICT) societies and communities are changing and with them the role of libraries and how they interact with their communities are also changing. Social media is increasingly popular because it enables patrons' interaction and sharing of information not only with the library but also with each other. However, the introduction of an ICT such as social media requires ethical reflection since there are a number of ethical risks relating to privacy, accuracy, access and intellectual property. The purpose of this paper is to outline the range of ethical risks that can arise as a result of social media use by academic libraries, to consider the implications thereof and to make recommendations to help academic libraries use social media in an ethically responsible manner.

Introduction

The rapid increase in mainstream technological advances raises expectations from library system users (Iglesias 2010). According to Leadbeater (2010:195) the "library of the future will be a platform for participation and collaboration, with users increasingly sharing information among themselves as well as drawing on the library's resources." Social media comprise web-based platforms that allow people to interact freely, to share and discuss information about each other and their lives using a mixture of text, images, videos and audio. As such social media can play an integral role in this library of the future by enabling users' interaction and sharing of information not only with the library but also with each other.

The introduction of any new information and communication technology (ICT) such as social media comes with an associated obligation that is also applicable

to libraries and librarians. As Mason (1986:10) cogently states: "our moral imperative is clear. We must ensure that information technology, and the information it handles, are used to enhance the dignity of mankind." Furthermore, the continually evolving information formats and changing and growing information needs require the continual reconsideration of ethical principles, codes of ethics and how codes of ethics are applied (Floridi 2008). According to the *IFLA Code of Ethics for Librarians and Other Information Workers* engaging in ethical reflection is a necessity for all professionals (Garcia-Febo *et al*. 2012).

The purpose of this paper is to outline the range of ethical risks that can arise as a result of social media use by academic libraries using an accessible analytical framework, to consider the implications thereof and to make recommendations to help academic libraries use social media in an ethically responsible manner to stimulate ethical reflection in order to enhance human dignity. To this end the paper is structured as follows: first, the reasons why a library might use social media together with specific examples of how it can be used are discussed together with concerns about and barriers to social media use. The ethical risks of social media use by libraries are then discussed using Mason's (1986) PAPA model as conceptual framework. The paper concludes with a discussion of the broad implications and recommendations for librarians and libraries when using social media.

Potential of social media in a library

With the rapid advances in ICT societies and communities are changing and with it the role of libraries in these societies and their communities and how they interact with their patrons and other stakeholders. Emerging technologies constantly modify the identity and role of the library (Erlandson 2010) since the "technological expectations of library users are evolving based on the increasingly social, mobile, interactive and collaborative information environment" (Carlucci 2010:111).

Social media is increasing in popularity because it offers an efficient means of communication that allows libraries to meet users where they are. It increases libraries' reach and at the same time offers richness beyond that of newsletters, brochures and e-mail at a relatively affordable cost. It makes it easier to establish and maintain relationships because of the interactivity and immediacy. Patrons have the ability to respond and provide feedback and libraries can increase their understanding of users' needs and frustrations. It also supports

collaboration and expands authorship where users can create content individually, for example, by reviewing an item or writing a blog, or co-operatively, for example through wikis. In short, social media is a unique channel through which libraries can engage their user communities.

The use of social media can deepen the relationship between a library and its patrons, which represents valuable social capital. Libraries can use social media to be where their patrons—and potential patrons—are, to promote their services, workshops and other events, to improve access to information, to interact with users and collect feedback from them and generate patron ideas whether as formal and informal market research, to enhance instruction, to allow collaboration (library to patron (L2P) or library to library (L2L)), to communicate with friends of the library, to connect with alumni to raise funds or issue a call to action in support of the libraries' strategy and objectives, for co-creation, for collective sense-making. Many patrons have become accustomed to sharing their reading with others and expect similar services from their libraries. In short, social media can enable the library of the future as envisioned by Leadbeater (2010) where its patrons play an active role in creating and consuming information sources.

So how can libraries use social media platforms to accomplish all this? The social media landscape is rapidly changing with changes to existing platforms as well as new platforms being launched on a regular basis. However, a range of categories of social media tools can be identified:
- Blogs and microblogs (for example, *Twitter*);
- Collaborative projects (for example, *Wikipedia*);
- Content communities (for example, *YouTube* and *Reddit*);
- Social bookmarking and cataloging sites (for example, *Delicious*);
- Social networking sites (for example, *LinkedIn* and *Facebook*);
- Social and virtual gaming (for example, *SCVNGR*, *World of Warcraft*); and Virtual social worlds (e.g. *Second Life*).

The different categories of social media tools can be used by libraries in a variety of ways. Zimmer (2012) discusses several examples:

- Social networking sites can be used to create online connections to patrons and enable online communication and service delivery online;
- Patrons can evaluate and comment on particular items in a library's collection through rating systems, discussion forums, or comment threads;

- A dynamic and personalized recommendation system can be created similar to that of the online bookseller *Amazo*n ("other patrons who checked out this book also borrowed these items"); and
- Users can create personalized subject headings for library materials using social bookmarking such as *Delicious* or social cataloging such as *LibraryThings* and *GoodReads*. (Such social bookmarking and social cataloging can be particularly valuable for libraries situated in communities where existing classification systems are limited and insufficient.).

Other examples include using a location-based gaming tool such as *SCVNGR* to familiarise users with the library and its services using a treasure hunt and the use of the micro-blogging tool such as *Twitter* to market unique materials such as the *Massachusetts Historical Society* is doing with daily tweets of excerpts from diaries of a past US president held in their collection (@JQAdams_MHS). Harvard Library, however, suspended broadcasting of titles of books being checked out from their campus libraries on their Twitter feed after privacy concerns were raised. Even randomized checkout times and non-disclosure of borrowers' identities were not sufficient to allay patrons' privacy concerns (Parry 2012).

Although social media offer powerful channels to connect and interact with patrons and other stakeholders it is by no means without risk as illustrated by the case at Harvard Library. Librarians and libraries may also be concerned about the potential risks, harm and liability that may arise from using social media, particularly around information security and how this corresponds with the library's and librarian's duty of confidentiality and tradition of patron privacy. Apart from ethical risks there are a number of barriers: restrictive internal organisational policies, low staff interest and lack of time. Restrictive internal organisational policies can prevent uptake with management concerned about a loss of control and reputation. There may also be low interest from staff due to the large number of social media platforms, each with many features that take time to learn to set up and use properly and that take significant time to monitor and maintain. These are valid concerns and whilst barriers may be real, a better understanding of what the ethical risks of social media use are can contribute to allaying concerns, removing barriers and enabling informed decisions and responsible use. Instead of avoiding these technologies altogether, the risks should be identified and proactively managed. The next section discusses the conceptual framework that is used to discuss potential ethical issues.

Conceptual framework

Many frameworks and models exist that can be used to frame information-related and technology-related ethical issues but Mason's PAPA model (Mason 1986) is simple and straightforward to present to management and thus increases the relevance for practitioners. The PAPA model derives its name from what Mason termed the "four ethical issues of the information age," namely, privacy, accuracy, property, and accessibility. (Although Mason uses the term 'issue' the author prefers the term 'risk' to denote an unplanned or unintended event that has not happened yet as opposed to an issue that arises when such an event does happen.) Table 1 summarises the four ethical issues identified by Mason (1986).

Table 1: PAPA model based on Mason (1986)

Privacy "What information about one's self or one's associations must a person *reveal* to others, under what conditions and with what *safeguards*? What things can people keep to themselves [*conceal*] and not be forced to reveal to others? [emphasis added]" (Mason 1986:5).	**Accuracy** "Who is responsible for the *authenticity, fidelity and accuracy* of information? Similarly, who is to be held *accountable* for errors in information and how is the injured party to be made whole? [emphasis added]" (Mason 1986:5).
Property "Who *owns information*? What are the just and fair prices for its exchange? Who *owns the channels*, especially the airways, through which information is transmitted? How should access to this scarce resource be allocated? [emphasis added]" (Mason 1986:5).	**Accessibility** "What information does a person or an organization have a *right or a privilege to obtain*, under what conditions and with what safeguards? [emphasis added]" (Mason 1986:5).

Whilst many frameworks and models have been developed since Mason's framework was published it is still widely used. In 2006 Peslak (2006) surveyed more than 200 individuals and confirmed that the four original ethical issues Mason proposed in 1986 were still viewed as timely. The drawback of the PAPA model's simplicity is the fact that it may not capture all possible ethical issues and that not all "moral issues in information technology can be put under the PAPA headings" Fairweather (2003:143). Parrish (2010) argues, however, that the PAPA model is indeed a relevant foundation for discussion of ethical principles that relate to information sharing on social networking sites since the model focuses on "the more stable nature of the qualities of information, rather

than the dynamic nature of technology itself or those who interact with it" (Parrish, 2010:189). The four ethical "issues" of Mason (1986) can thus be seen as broad categories onto which a multiplicity of often overlapping risks can be mapped. The next section discusses some of the ethical risks that may arise in each of the four categories.

Application of PAPA model to ethical risks of social media use in academic libraries

The following sections discuss some of the ethical risks that may arise in each of the four categories of Mason's PAPA model, namely, privacy, accuracy, property and accessibility.

Privacy

Social media has the potential to reveal information about oneself and about one's associations with others. Revealing associations with others also has implications for those with whom one is associated. Using social media for communication with patrons can have privacy implications for both the library and patrons. Whilst some social media platform(s) do offer safeguards to protect information by, for example, allowing the user to limit the audience with whom information is shared or the terms of service allows the creator to retain ownership, these safeguards are mostly not under the control of the library. Whilst patrons may choose not to participate the library can still be seen as a responsible party if it is used as an official communication channel.

Whilst it can encourage participation and community social media sites that use location-based data such as *FourSquare* can also expose users in ways they may not have foreseen. For example, if it was publically visible that a person was at a library it can potentially expose the person to theft at his/her residence. Preferences can also be unintentionally revealed through social graph data and used for mining and analytics. Furthermore, the increasing interconnection between different platforms can result in a feeling that the user loses control over what s/he reveals or conceals and to whom. There are also concerns about the security of information and the possibility of identity theft.

Using social media exclusively as communication channel can remove the patrons' choice to opt-out and increase the perception that their "private" space is being intruded upon. Whilst many higher education institutions are attempting to connect with their students on the popular Facebook platform, some students

may prefer to keep a clear separation between their studies and personal, social lives and do not want that intruded upon by their institutions.

Accuracy

The accuracy of information posted on social media by the library should always be verified and accurate. But in some instances the lack of sufficient context can potentially lead to misinterpretation and unintended meaning. Whilst the former is unintentional there are also risks related to intentional defamation and harassment. The speed and reach of social media increases the damage manifold. Flaming wars, hate speech and rumour-mongering are real risks where inaccurate, unreliable and false information is spread using the library's official channel as platform, whether by library staff or patrons. Because academic institutions do not control social media platforms and there is very little possibility of an institutional service level agreement (SLA) it is challenging to hold the platforms accountable for incorrect information. Even so libraries should consider their liability with respect to user-created content. Again, if a library uses it as an official communication channel the patrons may not separate responsibilities and perceive the library to be responsible. This can reflect negatively on the library's reputation and result in a loss of patrons' trust. Libraries therefore need to tread a fine line between curation and censorship and consider carefully whether their curation on social network sites restricts freedom of speech.

Property

With respect to property, intellectual property is a major consideration. Ownership of data is another consideration. Whilst legislation differs between countries, social media platforms often claim ownership of content distributed through them. As discussed with respect to privacy and accuracy the ownership of the channel or medium does not reside with the library or academic institution and this complicates matters. Apart from claiming ownership of user-created content, the social media organisations themselves or other parties designated by them may collect and claim ownership of patrons' usage data. This is a particular problem for libraries that traditionally not only respect and actively protect patrons' usage data with respect to circulation of items. Libraries should be liable if they posted patrons' copyrighted material. Last, the permanence of social media participation is a consideration. Whilst a particular post may be deleted after posting it may already have been copied and the post

may be indelible greatly increasing libraries' exposure in terms of liability and reputation.

Accessibility

One reason for not relying solely on social media as communication channel is that it removes the possibility for patrons to opt-out as discussed under privacy. Another reason is that it may exclude patrons. Patrons may not have access to the necessary tools (for example, a smartphone to use QR codes) or be able to afford the necessary bandwidth. Users also should not be required to create accounts on social media platforms if they do not wish to do so. Social media platforms may also present language barriers and not support the official language(s) of the institution. Other considerations are the extent to which assistive technologies for the disabled are supported adequately to allow accessibility for the entire user population (staff and patrons) and the impact on service delivery when a social media platform outside of the library or institution's control is unavailable.

Table 2: Ethical risks of social media use in academic libraries using the PAPA model

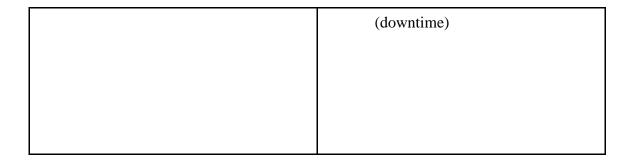| Privacy	Accuracy

• Exposure
  o Location-based data
  o Preferences revealed through social graph data
• Loss of control
  o interconnection between different platforms
• Invasion of "private" space, perception of being intrusive
• No possibility to opt-out
• Information security
• Identity theft
	• Restrictions to free speech: censorship vs. curation
	• Lack of sufficient context can lead to misinterpretation and unintended meaning
	• Liability for defamation and harassment in user created content:
	  o Flaming wars
	  o Hate speech
	  o Rumors
	• Loss of library's reputation
	• Loss of patrons' trust

Property
• Ownership of user created content
• Third party data collection and ownership of patrons' usage data
• Ownership of channel/medium
• Copyright infringement
• Permanence
	Accessibility
	• Exclusion
	  o ICT tools, bandwidth, platform
	  o Requiring users to create social media accounts
	  o Language barriers
	• Assistive technologies for disabled
	• Availability of network

	(downtime)

Given the number of ethical risks outlined in this section (summarized in Table 2) the question for libraries is, how to avoid or at least minimise the likelihood of the risks becoming issues? The next section provides recommendations that can assist libraries to embrace social media in an ethically responsible manner.

Discussion, conclusions and recommendations

Libraries can take a compliance approach or an integrity approach to ethical matters (Ponelis and Britz 2012). A compliance approach attempts to prevent self-interested behavior by employees, violation of laws and other government and industry regulations and criminal conduct by imposing standards of conduct. An integrity approach, on the other hand, goes beyond compliance by attempting to create the conditions that support right action by communicating the values and vision of the organization, aligning the standards of employees with those of the organization. As such it relies on the entire management team, not just legal and/or compliance personnel. The legislative process in many countries is slow to incorporate emerging technologies such as social media and thus a compliance approach will not provide adequate guidance with respect to emerging technologies. An integrity approach that incorporates legislation as it is introduced is therefore the recommended approach in such unchartered territory.

Stuaert and Moran (2007) advocate an integrity approach in all ethical matters by stating that library managers and administrators should demonstrate the importance of ethics by their own behaviour, they should be certain that appropriate ethical framework and/or codes of behaviour are in place and that employees are informed of them, and should monitor the behaviour of employees to be sure that they comply. It is vitally important to ensure that all employees, including part-time temporary employees such as students, are not only aware of the ethical framework and/or codes of behaviour but are also able to apply them in practical situations. Such training is even more important as organisations employ a greater diversity of employees, since different cultures often have different beliefs about what is acceptable ethical beaviour. It cannot

simply be assumed that all employees understand the ethical expectations of their library without training. Ethics training can reinforce the institution's standards and remind employees what standards are important to the institutions (Stueart and Moran 2007). With respect to social media in particular Blanchard (2011:84) summarises what policy and guidelines should accomplish:

- Define a framework of both sanctioned and responsible social media usage for employees of the organization, both internally [employees] and externally [patrons].
- Clarify expectation of employee behavior, both personal and professional, on the social web.
- Be a resource for best practices, employee safety, conflict resolution, and even training as it pertains to both official and personal social media usage.

The question arises, what should the "framework of both sanctioned and responsible social media usage" entail? Within the context of the PAPA analytical framework Parrish (2010) proposed principles for the ethical sharing of information on social networking sites (SNS), listed in Table 3 that apply equally to all social media platforms.

Table 3: Parrish's proposed ethical principles for social networking sites based on the PAPA model

Privacy "When sharing information on SNS [social networking sites], it is not only necessary to consider the privacy of one's personal information, but the privacy of the information of others who may be tied to the information being shared" (Parrish 2010:190).	**Accuracy** "When sharing information on SNS, it is the responsibility of the one desiring to share information to verify the accuracy of the information before sharing it" (Parrish 2010:190).
Property "A user of SNS should not post information about themselves that they feel they may want to retract at some future date. Furthermore, users of SNS should not post information that is the product of the mind of another individual unless they are given consent by that individual. In both cases, once the information is shared, it may be impossible to retract" (Parrish 2010:191).	**Access** "It is the responsibility of the SNS user to determine the authenticity of a person or program before allowing the person or program access to shared information" (Parrish 2010:192).

Social media platform(s) should be chosen based on patrons' needs and wants and to minimise exclusion, providing equal coverage of content (Collins and Quan-Haase 2012; Dickson and Holley 2010). Students are increasingly dispersed over numerous disparate social media platforms and it is necessary to realise that the library cannot meet all students where they are (Mangan 2012) and need to select the most common and appropriate platforms. Popularity of social media sites can change quickly and therefore patron use should be monitored on an ongoing basis to determine whether to continue the library's presence on a particular platform. At the same time students should not be coerced into using social media if they prefer not to and therefore traditional channels should not be neglected or eliminated.

Once selected adequate resources, including human resources, should be committed to ensure training on policy and guidelines is provided. Different levels of training can be mandated for employees based on their responsibilities with respect to social media. Whilst all employees should understand their responsibilities toward their institutions when engaging in personal use of social media platforms, those who post on behalf of the institution may need further training (Fiander 2012). Libraries should also consider educating their patrons according to the general principles of social media use to reduce the ethical risks discussed above. One possibility is to incorporate such social media use training into existing information and/or digital literacy courses.

Even with a clear and unambiguous policy and guidelines for use, and adequate training on both the chosen platforms and policy and guidelines, the institution should be prepared to react quickly if the unexpected occurs to minimise any negative impact. This implies that all social media platforms chosen must be monitored on a constant basis. Continuity should be planned when employees usually responsible are unavailable (for example, attending conferences, on vacation or due to illness). No matter how exhaustive, policy and guidelines cannot stipulate responses and decisions in specific situations. Employees need to know not only the policy and guidelines, but also how to apply them.

Although it may be impossible to avoid ethical issues arising from social media use entirely, it is possible to minimise ethical risks, demonstrate ethical responsibility, and to enhance human dignity as called for by, amongst others, Mason (1986), Floridi (2008) and the *IFLA Code of Ethics for Librarians and Other Information Workers* (Garcia-Febo *et al*. 2012). This paper provides readers with an overview of ethical risks and serves a point of departure for academic libraries to incorporate ethical concerns relating to social media use

into their policies, procedures and practice. Using the PAPA model of Mason (1986) academic libraries can map ethical risks of social media use to privacy, accuracy, property, and access and accessibility and use an integrity approach to select social media platforms, develop social media policies, training programs and teaching material based on the principles and recommendations discussed.

Endnotes

This paper is based on a presentation at the Third International African Network of Information Ethics Conference (ANIE 2012) held at Kieviets Kroon, 5-7 September 2012.

References

Blanchard, O. 2011. *Social media ROI: managing and measuring social media efforts in your organization*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education.

Carlucci Thomas, L. 2010. Doing more with more: systems, services and emerging technologies. In Iglesias, E. (ed.) *An overview of the changing role of the systems librarian: systemic shifts*. Oxford, UK: Chandos. pp. 105-114.

Collins, G. and Quan-Haase, A. 2012. Social media and academic libraries: Current trends and future challenges. *Proceedings of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 49(1): 1–4.

Dickson, A. and Holley, R. P. 2010. Social networking in academic libraries: the possibilities and the concerns. *New Library World*, 111(11/12): 468-479.

Erlandson, R.J. 2010. Digital culture: the shifting paradigm of systems librarians and systems departments. In Iglesias, E. (ed.) *An overview of the changing role of the systems librarian: systemic shifts*. Oxford, UK: Chandos. pp. 1-14.

Fairweather, N.B. 2003. No PAPA: why incomplete codes of ethics are worse than none at all. In T. W. Bynum *et al* (eds.) *Computer ethics and professional responsibility: introductory text and readings*. WileyBlackwell. pp. 142-156.

Fiander, D.J. 2012. Social media for academic libraries. In Rasmussen Neal, D. (ed.) *Social media for academics: a practical guide*. Oxford, UK: Chandos. pp. 193-210.

Floridi, L. 2008. Information ethics, its nature and scope. In Van den Hoven, J. and Weckert, J. (eds.) *Information technology and moral philosophy* (Cambridge studies in philosophy and public policy). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 40-65.

Garcia-Febo, L. Hustad, A., Rösch, H. Sturges, P. and Vallotton, A. 2012. *IFLA code of ethics for librarians and other information workers (full version)*. http://www.ifla.org/news/ifla-code-of-ethics-for-librarians-and-other-information-workers-full-version Accessed 13 May 2013.

Iglesias, E. 2010. The status of the field. In Iglesias, E. (ed.) *An overview of the changing role of the systems librarian: systemic shifts*. Oxford, UK: Chandos. pp. 65-79.

Leadbeater, C. 2010. *We-think: mass innovation not mass production*. London, England: Profile.

Mangan, K. 2012. As Students Scatter Online, Colleges Try to Keep Up. *The chronicle of higher education*. http://chronicle.com/article/Digitally-Savvy-Students-Play/134224/ Accessed 24 March 2013.

Mason, R.O. 1986. Four ethical issues of the information age. *MIS Quarterly*, 10(1): 5-12.

Parrish, J.L. 2010. PAPA knows best: principles for the ethical sharing of information on social networking sites. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 12(2): 187-193.

Parry, M. 2012. As libraries go digital, sharing of data is at odds with rradition of privacy. *The chronicle of higher education*. http://chronicle.com/article/As-Libraries-Go-Digital/135514/ Accessed 22 January 2013.

Peslak, A. 2006. PAPA revisited: a current empirical study of the Mason framework. *Journal of Computer Information Systems*, 46(3): 117-123.

Ponelis, S.R. and Britz, J.J. 2012. The elephant in the server room: confronting the need for an ethics officer in the IT function. *Journal of Information Ethics*, 21(1): 27-39.

Stueart, R.D. and Moran, B.B. 2007. *Library and information center management*. 7th ed. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.

Zimmer, M. 2013. Patron privacy in the "2.0" era: avoiding the Faustian bargain of library 2.0. *Journal of Information Ethics*, 22(1): 44-59. Social