



Idea Lab: on Library Social Media Ethics

REPORT FROM THE FIELD

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Introduction

by Stephanie Diaz and Jenna Freedman

In recent years, social media companies like Twitter (or “X”) and Meta have come under scrutiny. These companies face data leaks, provide platforms for hate speech and disinformation, promote unchecked echo chambers, and are becoming increasingly predatory. Still, many libraries continue to use these platforms as a convenient tool to reach their users. Considering these ethical challenges, we sent out a call for contributions targeted to LIS professionals and students that asked, “should librarians and libraries walk our digital footprints away from exploitative platforms?” Potential authors were encouraged to consider the following topics and questions:

- As information professionals, do we have a responsibility to our users to lead by example and stop lending our credibility to troubling products?
- What other platforms (Mastodon, post.com, Bluesky, etc.) are you using or considering as Twitter alternatives and why? How effective are they?

Following are responses from individuals managing social media for a public, an academic, and a law library, and a library school professor. You may observe that the JLOE editors do not necessarily agree with all the points of view.

Responses

Dorothea Salo, University of Wisconsin-Madison Information School:

How it started: When I was a new librarian, “Library 2.0” – applying pre-social media web tools in libraries – pervaded professional discourse. Amid the excitement and experimentation was an undercurrent of existential threats and bullyragging. Stephen Abram insisted (2005), “It is essential that we start preparing to become Librarian 2.0 now... and guarantee the future of our profession.” So, we started blogs, gardened wikis, tagged everything in sight, and kept current with newsreaders, alongside quite a few “power patrons.” Mostly it was good fun while helping keep library web presences fresh and inviting. Essential, certainly not – worth the trouble, absolutely.

But the 2.0 learning curve proved too much for many. Into this adoption breach leapt ambitious startup companies hoping to connect people in a 2.0-ish fashion without the 2.0-ish hassle. Not every startup survived, but a few prospered, attracting billions of users and becoming today’s social media platforms. Many of those users were our patrons, so we librarians and our libraries followed them onto social media platforms, often from simple “it’s where the patrons are” strategy.

How it’s going: Facebook has been credibly accused of fomenting genocide (Amnesty International 2022), losing track of user data (Biddle 2022), lying to researchers (Lyons 2021) and shutting down legitimate research (Brandom 2021), manipulating teens into allowing Facebook to surveil their web use (Constone 2019), and claiming to Congress that the service would dampen the spread of conspiracy theories while actually juicing that spread (Shephard 2018).

Yet libraries and librarians remain on Facebook.

Instagram has been credibly accused of worsening body-image issues among teenaged girls and then trying to cover it up (Mak 2021); algorithmically suppressing images of fat people (Richman 2019); and harboring harassers, hatemongers, cryptocurrency scammers, pedophiles, and identity thieves (Das and White 2023; Sharma 2022; Frenkel, Isaac, and Conger 2018).

Yet libraries and librarians remain on Instagram and flock to Threads.

TikTok has been credibly accused of stalking journalists (Belanger 2022; Criddle 2023), data-profiling children (Vaas 2019), suppressing posts from poor and “ugly” people (Dias 2020), and drowning its human moderators in the dregs of human expression (McIntyre, Bradbury, and Perrigo 2022).

Yet libraries and librarians remain on TikTok (Bogan 2021), in part because of BookTok.

Before Elon Musk took over Twitter in 2022, Twitter was credibly accused of helping police locate protestors for arrest (Biddle 2020) and creating new features that were inaccessible (Katz 2020). Since Musk’s takeover, the service has been credibly accused of damaging user-account security to save money (Mondello 2023); facilitating impersonation of celebrities or government officials (Vyas and Dang 2023); and harboring hate (Steele 2022), especially hate from paying users (Muldowney 2023).

Yet libraries remain on Twitter. Some librarians remain as well, though many have moved on – and I find hope in that.

What now?: Philosopher S. Matthew Liao wrote in 2018 – and I agree – that there is little ethical justification for remaining on Facebook. When do we admit that by interacting on these platforms, we have made ourselves complicit in the crimes and senselessly destructive behavior committed by and on them? We have credibility in our communities. Why lend that credibility to such horrors?

The likeliest successor to the giant amoral platforms is the still-small but growing Fediverse. While Twitter lookalike Mastodon is probably the best-known Fediverse service, the Fediverse also boasts the image-sharing system PixelFed, the video-sharing system PeerTube, and the book-review system BookWorm.

The Fediverse is not a polished experience, nor is it free of serious problems such as widespread racism (Hendrix 2022). Still, we can help shape the Fediverse into something better than it is, and more civic-minded than corporate social media was or ever can be. It’s not too late to stop bullyragging our colleagues into joining and staying on platforms as deadly as whirling buzzsaws. It’s not too late to lead our patrons toward something that could be better, rather than yet again following them into perdition. It’s definitely not too late to start making considered decisions about where and to whom we lend our credibility.

“As information professionals, do we have a responsibility to our users to lead by example and stop lending our credibility to troubling products? What other platforms (Mastodon, post.com, Bluesky, etc.) are you using or considering as Twitter alternatives and why? How effective are they?”

Elizabeth Portelli, Maurice M. Pine Library, Fair Lawn, NJ:

I started full-time at the Maurice M. Pine Free Public Library in Fair Lawn, NJ in July of 2011. At that time, I was personally on Facebook, but our library was on no social media channels. I’ve been lucky to have supportive directors during my time here, and they have allowed me to do as a saw fit, social media-wise. I started with a library Facebook, then Instagram, Twitter, during Covid we began using Tik Tok and YouTube as well, and most recently Bluesky. We have the most engagement with our Facebook and Instagram accounts.

My main reason for wanting the library to have as many social media accounts as we can, is to connect with as many people as we can. There have been many instances over the years, where patrons will say to us, "I didn't know that you have or do" X, Y, Z. Patrons want and need to know what the library can offer them in terms of materials and services. For example, we have been lending out museum passes and hotspots for 5+ years at this point, and when we share this information on social media, we are able to cast a much wider net. It's important to reach as many people as possible so that the people that want or need to are able to take full advantage of the library, and for us to continue to prove to the public how vital we are in this community.

While we are very active across our social media accounts, I understand the downsides of social media - the data mining, lack of privacy, addictiveness, just to name a few. I also recognize that quite a few people are adamant that they do not want to be on any type of social media. In order for them to stay updated with library news and programs we also send out semi-weekly email blasts. We also still supply paper flyers as well that people browse and take at the library itself. We will continue to meet the public where they are and will connect with them in any way we can. As long as the public chooses to use social media, so will we.

Misty Trunnell, Research Services Librarian, The George Washington University, Washington, DC:

No! Libraries and librarians should not end their use of exploitative platforms. In doing so libraries will be exhibiting the same exploitative behavior it seeks to prohibit. The opening paragraph of the ALA document *Politics in American Libraries: Interpretations of the Library Bill of Rights* states:

"All people" and "all points of view" should be included in library materials and information. There are no limiting qualifiers for viewpoint, origin, or politics. Thus, there is no justification for the exclusion of opinions deemed to be unpopular or offensive by some segments of society no matter how vocal or influential their opponents may be at any particular time in any particular place." (ALA, 2017)

My opinion is that libraries would be regressing away from the current interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights and first amendment of the United States Bill of Rights. Libraries have to ensure that they do not engage in the censorship of citizens' viewpoints and opinions because it has to conform to the politically correct discourse of the time. Doing so, by default, makes libraries participants in movements focused on suppressing free speech.

Libraries have to consider if the decision to end use of the most popular social media platforms would limit communication and impact library services to users who frequent those platforms. How likely is it that users would follow libraries to less popular platforms just to stay connected? Is that type of resistance worth leaving a segment of users behind? Consideration also has to be given to the unfavorable decision libraries made during other historical shifts in this nation's society. Jean L. Preer (2004) and Karen Cook (2013) provide historical accounts of the 1936 and 1962 ALA conferences where differing ideological perspectives of those eras created conflicts among the ALA executive councils, membership, and practices for providing service. For example, libraries in the South adhered to their state laws and continued to practice segregation policies in libraries after *Brown v. The Board of Education*. That decision forced those state library associations and members to withdraw their ALA membership, cut them off from professional development and federal funding, and continued to restrict literacy development of African Americans in those states. African American librarians were also impacted and aggrieved by those decisions.

Information professionals do have a responsibility to lead by example. A more effective way to lead might be to teach users ethical and appropriate ways to engage in political discourse using these platforms. Librarians have taught users information literacy skills and how to use social media. Now is the time for libraries to utilize frameworks such as Metaliteracy to impart critical thinking skills and ethical participation in these environments. I acknowledge this type of instruction would require investment in training and resources to be successful, and that it would take time to become efficient. However, under no circumstances can we promote censorship as a solution! To do so would be succumbing to dangerous policies that threaten our basic democratic and constitutional rights.

Meredith Weston Kostek, J.D., M.L.I.S., Research, Instruction & Engagement Librarian and Robert Truman, J.D., M.L.S., Associate Dean and Director, Paul L. Boley Law Library, Lewis & Clark Law School:

Lewis & Clark Law School's Boley Law Library looked at its social media offerings in 2019 and realized it didn't have an understanding of who was using what and why. So the social media team looked at the platforms we had, examined who was using those platforms nationally (Perrin 2019), and created a voice and content strategy for each platform (Forbes Agency Council 2019).

Instagram (Boley Law Library Instagram, n.d.) is our most used social media platform by our students, so our content focuses on student-centric ideas with a conversational tone. We often feature "day in the life" types of posts that feature the help the library can give to students through services, studying, and materials. The conversational tone, widespread use by students, and immediacy with which we handled national and local topics of interest helped establish the use of the account. Because of these practices we have seen our following triple in the past three years.

The other thing we specifically tried to achieve was an accurate reflection of our student population. Lewis & Clark is considered a progressive law school with many of our students entering the practice of law as environmental, animal, and public interest law attorneys. We try to reflect our general student population with our social media posts. This includes an ongoing series of #walkingpdx in which we feature BIPOC painted murals, found sayings, and protests throughout the Portland area. We find that the reflection of our student body allows us to be an authentic voice for our students and our followers.

To maintain this authenticity, we work hard to be a voice that our followers are interested in hearing. This means using Facebook in a different way than we use Instagram. Instead of a day in the life we focus on articles about the practice of law and legal research because we found that our Facebook users are typically alumni, potential students and families, and public patrons.

When it came to removing our Twitter platform from our library's homepage and moving to Mastodon, this decision was again a reflection of our users, community values, and maintaining the library's authentic voice. Boley Law Library was a very early adopter of Twitter, grabbing the @lawlib handle that matched our website URL and posting legal news and updates pretty much daily since 2009. As Twitter grew we gained followers and interaction, and found that though our students were never heavy users it was an effective means to reach our alums, provide a service to the greater community, and expand awareness of the legal research expertise of the school itself.

Over time, growth on Twitter peaked and began to rapidly decrease. Twitter more and more focused on interactions and virality, neither of which were areas we chose to emphasize. The tipping point was when Twitter was taken private by Elon Musk. Since then, the platform has reintroduced and even emphasized

what may be described as extremist accounts, allowing language and messaging that goes against what we stand for as a school and that is actively offensive to much of our community (Warzel 2023). The recently monetized “blue check” system further enables those accounts, decreases trust and authenticity, and lowers our visibility to interested followers (Sottek 2023).

There is a place for going where your users are, but between Twitter’s changing ecosystem and our user base likewise abandoning that platform we decided to move to Mastodon relatively early (Truman 2022). In this way we could help offer a safer alternative to members of our community likewise alienated from Twitter, one that is not built on a privately-owned service subject to sudden changes (Masnick 2022). Thanks to the good folks providing the glammr.us server (Galleries, Libraries, Archives, Museums, Memory Work and Records), we found a home on Mastodon that even included our favorite username: @lawlib@glammr.us.

Similar arguments could be made for leaving the Meta platforms, Facebook and Instagram. Facebook especially has provided many ethical (Marantz 2021), privacy (Brenner and Hoekstra 2022), and engagement-related reasons (Morris 2021) to leave. Instagram certainly raises similar issues. How to decide whether to join, remain, or to move on from a social media platform? It can be an easy decision when a platform neither fulfills any of our social media outreach goals, has limited uptake within our community, and does not reflect our shared values. Thus we are quite unlikely to be establishing accounts on Truth Social and the like anytime soon. Twitter was a more difficult decision, but as discussed presented us with multiple reasons to explore alternatives. Meta is a mix and for the moment we have chosen to remain on its platforms, as has much of our core constituency. As decentralized alternatives such as Friendica (Facebook), PixelFed (Instagram), and PeerTube (YouTube) (Jerska, n.d.) continue to develop and expand, we may consider moving to those or others.

For now, this new space on Mastodon well reflects our values, connects us to the greater library community, and allows us to invite along our own community of students, faculty, staff, and alums to a social media platform that enables us to maintain our authenticity and provide a valuable service for years to come.

Conclusion

The responses we received from contributors provide evidence that there is not a strong consensus among library professionals about whether libraries should maintain a presence on popular social media platforms. In some cases, librarians find the business practices and lack of accountability of popular platforms so unethical that maintaining an affiliation with them does not align with their professional and institutional values. Yet others feel very strongly that engaging on Twitter and Meta continues to be one of the best ways to reach their users and promote awareness of their services and events; and some believe that libraries should continue to use popular platforms, no matter their practices, due to their interpretation of the first amendment.

If you are interested in learning more about social media ethics and alternative platforms, we encourage you to read the resources cited by our contributors. In the spirit of healthy dialogue and debate, we encourage readers to join the conversation by sharing your comments on this topic, on the platform of your choice, with the hashtag #lloeidealab where possible.

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